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Article (Published Version)

Martell, Luke (2015) Alternative societies in Cameron's Britain. *Hard Times*, 98 (2). ISSN 0171-1695

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Alternative Societies in Cameron's Britain

Luke Martell

Published in *Hard Times* 2016

<http://www.hard-times-magazine.org/>

The Conservative Party's victory in the 2015 UK election didn't match the close result polls had predicted. In the immediate aftermath most candidates for the Labour Party leadership vacancy moved further to the right, leading to a situation where there seemed even less of an alternative to neoliberal policy than already the case. The situation became complicated when, to everyone's surprise, the runaway winner was the left-wing candidate, Jeremy Corbyn. Despite this, alternatives outside party politics, as well as within it, need to be explored.

The UK election and party politics

After the general election most candidates in the Labour leadership contest retreated from the minimally left positions the party had stood on, such as a tax on expensive properties to pay for health spending. These, it was alleged, had led electors to see them as not business-friendly. But polling suggested it was not so much being left that had put voters off Labour, as Conservative campaign themes of Labour's economic competence and their leader's suitability (Cruddas, Green and Prosser). In Scotland the Scottish National Party (SNP) swept the board, even though politically to the left of Labour. Labour had been arguing for less austerity more slowly, rather than anti-austerity, since the financial crisis. Since the 1990s it had been operating within the neo-liberal paradigm Margaret Thatcher left behind, but with a more human face. But Jeremy Corbyn argues for change in a more anti-austerity direction.

An alternative to Cameron under Corbyn is worth pursuing. But whether Corbyn can keep the support of Labour MPs most of whom are sceptical about him – his victory was based on the votes of party members more than MPs – and win over the electorate in the face of media hostility, will be a challenge. The left can also look outside Labour. This means the Green Party, currently a left party in the UK, and in Scotland the social democratic SNP. The Greens and SNP could keep Labour to the left in coalition. But under Britain's electoral system the Greens can't get enough seats to be a coalition partner. And Labour are unlikely to ally with a party that represents only Scotland and is for separation from the UK. Furthermore, neither of these are inherently left parties and haven't historically always been so. So people looking to them for an alternative to neoliberalism should proceed with caution. We may need to look not only outside Labour but also outside parties for building alternatives.

Alternatives and choice

What do I mean by alternatives? Society is increasingly pervaded by private ownership, for-profit motivations, money-making, markets and consumerism, and these are spreading into the public sector where the opposite logic used to rule. The situation has been exacerbated recently. The left that Thatcher attacked was militant trade union leaders and radicals in local government. But Cameron is going further by overturning the achievements of mainstream social democracy in the welfare state and public sector. The areas of the economy that Thatcher privatised have not uncommonly been private in capitalist countries. But Cameron has continued the expansion of private ownership and for-profit motivations into the welfare and public sectors, historically collectively funded, delivered for free and aimed at the common good.

So when arguing for alternatives I mean where non-profit goals, such as human happiness, the social good and education, govern, and there are non-commodified ends.

One possible response is that this is a matter of individual choice. If people don't like capitalist profit-making they can just choose another way for their life. But my argument is that individual choice is

less and less available. Universities are an example. I chose to work in this sector because it was about education and the wider social good, not profit and private gain for one company against others. Yet university education in England is increasingly about maximising income and competitive gain, over providing what is educationally good and for society as a whole. Universities provide less of a choice beyond private interest and competition for money. Marketization is done in the name of choice but with the consequence that choice is reduced. High student-paid fees have been introduced in England, and I will return to this shortly.

Because individual choice is diminished we need greater collective self-determination – collective in expanding public institutions which are not about money and private gain; self-determination through creating structures that allow us to have more choice to pursue either profit and private gain or the social good and collective welfare. Collective institutions created and maintained through collective agency provide an alternative to capitalism and profit in society. They provide possibilities of choice that a system of individual choice by itself cannot provide. They ensure pluralism in society.

Alternatives via who?

If not only through party politics what other channels can we do this through? One is NGOs, although many of these increasingly imitate the structures and behaviour of the private corporate sector. Another is more informal social movements and protest. But I want to talk about movements that are not just means for change, the channels through which politics can occur, but are actually creating alternative forms of living and working. These forms are a means to wider change, but also ends in themselves, creating alternatives within Cameron's Britain.

Co-ops and collective ownership

There is public support for renationalising the railways and the Labour leader supports this. But there are other ways of achieving collective ownership and control in the economy, and some of these are facilitated by outsourcing, because employee ownership groups can bid to run services. There is mixed evidence on how far co-ops build a space in society with an alternative logic. The degeneration thesis predicts that co-ops in competition with capitalist enterprises, in order to succeed and if they expand, introduce traditional hierarchies (Cornforth). Companies are under collective ownership but are run by managers much like any other company. However there is also evidence that co-ops facing degeneration in this way can turn it around and re-establish their democratic mission by, for instance, implementing a system of manager rotation.

Co-ops needn't be not-for-profit just because they're worker owned. In fact many co-ops are for-profit companies. In some ways the profit/not-for-profit distinction is more important than the privately owned/co-operative one, although they can be linked. The latter concerns who runs the show; the former concerns what the show is about. A social enterprise run not-for-profit by an individual owner may be more of an alternative to capitalism than a co-operative run for-profit. And co-ops are still a form of sectional ownership, owned by a particular group pursuing their interests, rather than collectively for society as a whole.

The spillover thesis is that participation in co-ops facilitates wider civic activity, but evidence is that co-ops don't necessarily increase democratic participation in society (Carter). In fact they may decrease it, because members are disillusioned by the frustration of participation in the workplace, or too worn out from participating to do more of it outside. But democratic participation in the co-op is itself an achievement.

So, in a number of ways, co-ops are not enough, especially if they reproduce for-profit motivations. But they get rid of the wage-labour relationship and the boss, in a situation where for many the boss and loss of control at work is more of a problem than hours worked. Degeneration can be countered and participation in the co-op itself can be an achievement. Furthermore, co-ops in the UK have a political form in the shape of the Co-operative Party.

Alternative free education

English university education has become the most expensive for students in Europe. With the replacement of state-funded courses with student-paid fees up to £9000 a year, students incur decades of debt. Universities have responded by becoming more like businesses oriented to raising income from consumers, pushed through by corporate-style authoritarian managers. Education and the social good have become subordinate goals. Academics are passive, pursuing their own individual goals, or even complicit. They participate in this process in their everyday work, rather than pushing for education as the priority, so leaving that to activists and unions. More students pick and choose during their course, in attendance and engagement, to get assessment grades and buy a degree, rather than viewing themselves as committed participants in collective education with tutors and other students. One aim, therefore, is to get back the collectively funded public university geared around education and the public good, unequal and undemocratic as that itself was.

Another is to create alternative universities, free of cost and therefore accessible to all, co-operatively run by tutors and maybe even their students. These can have an alternative pedagogy: about education, the social good, critical thinking, curiosity and confidence; not what will increase university or student income, or consumerism in buying a degree as an individual rather than pursuing education collectively. Free universities can facilitate the extension of education beyond institutions and the certificated, as advocated by Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich. You can learn in networks in society from anyone who can teach, regardless of formal qualifications. Students playing a part in leading the curriculum, proposed by the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire, gives them power through democracy rather than consumerism. Alternative education can fit the structure to happiness and the human good, as advocated by A.S. Neill, head of Summerhill, rather than fit humans to the structure.

Freeganism and need

As a result of welfare cuts under Cameron, food banks have proliferated across the UK, giving away donated food for free. Freegans raid skips where supermarkets have thrown away produce beyond its use-by or sell-by date, but usable. This is illegal and freegans and the needy at the receiving end of welfare cuts have ended up in court for taking edible food about to be destroyed. Supermarkets could give it away but they don't because they think it would harm their profits if people waited for the free stuff instead of buying the priced goods. So profit comes before welfare. That may be logical for a business but leaves space for an alternative that is for human welfare and beyond profit.

Freegans are highlighting gluttony, the creation of waste where there is want, irrationality in terms of human need, and the consequences of the commodification of products that people require to live. Freegans orient the distribution of food around need, not profit. They de-commodify food by taking it out of the market and giving it away for free. So freeganism and skip diving are not just about saving waste for the poor; they also carry a set of meanings about need and de-marketisation as alternatives to current practices (Edwards and Mercer). As the marketisation of the public sector and of more and more parts of society increases, this creates space for non-commodified society. Governments putting pressure on supermarkets to give waste food to charities is in part a result of informal activity in society on this issue (Chrisafis).

The welfare state as an alternative

Some might find it strange to see the welfare state equated with co-ops, freeganism, and alternative education. It is a state institution, paternalistic and top-down. But the public welfare state is an alternative society. It is collectively funded, not for profit, and free. It has come about, in part, through social democratic parties, who now often seem willing to deviate from these principles; social democrats who are abandoning social democracy. Nevertheless this is an alternative introduced by political parties operating through state institutions. This brings us back to party politics.

There is a social basis for a politics of the welfare state. Support for welfare is complex in the UK. While it held up in the Thatcher years it has declined under Cameron. However it declined while under attack through a discourse that set hard-working families up against welfare scroungers and immigrants, here, it is claimed, to get benefits for free. Rather than capitulate to this discourse the left can develop

its own framework of explanation (New Economics Foundation), something Stuart Hall called for under Thatcherism. There is a basis for this in popular concern about the future of the National Health Service, student opposition to fees of £9000 a year, and in the election of anti-austerity Corbyn as Labour leader.

After the 2015 election, it seemed the next step for the Labour Party was going to be to appeal to anti-immigration voters, the Southern middle classes, affluent working class, and its core working class vote in the north. But this would have sent mixed, incompatible and incoherent messages. Under Corbyn, Labour can follow a simpler alternative discourse that tries to mould opinions and lead the way rather than adapt to the mixture of them. This can be about openness and collectivity, the institutions and benefits of these, against intolerance, privilege and inequality.

Anti-capitalism

One criticism of the alternatives sketched out so far is that what's proposed are institutions within capitalism, collaboration with capitalism, the pacification of the working class with small benefits that stop more transformative change; that they involve stepping aside from capitalism rather than changing it.

It's true I'm not proposing the abolition of capitalist ownership, the market and profit, but the development of alternatives to these; and I would prefer a society where capitalist and market elements exist but in a subordinate not a dominant role. You can't get rid of pluralism even if you try. In so-called communist societies black markets and religion survived despite propaganda and repression. In neoliberal capitalist societies – based on money and consumerism – altruism, collectivism and co-operative values proliferate. Societies should allow alternatives to their dominant logic because the other possibility is a more monolithic society or repression. (If capitalist alternatives wither because no-one chooses them that's a different thing.)

Reforms within capitalism can be rolled back by subsequent governments, as we've been seeing with the welfare state. Capitalist institutions allowed to continue in a subordinate role can be a basis for them expanding and becoming dominant. But people have agency and can resist this. And the abolition of private ownership and markets can also be reversed, and has been.

The likes of co-ops and free education give material experience of non-privatised non-profit living that propaganda and education can't match. Living material experience of alternatives is a means for persuasion and social change, in a way that critiquing and imagining alone cannot be. The alternatives I've outlined reach beyond the materially comfortable to the working class, unemployed and poor. Co-ops are not all organic food shops run by the middle classes for each other. Many are set up by working class people facing unemployment who want to have a job and try doing it without an exploitative boss. Free education can reach out to communities where people's families have not been in higher education and who feel the debt puts it out of their reach. Many freegans may be middle-class but freeganism addresses inequality and delivers food to the poor.

These alternatives are also about change founded on experiment and trial, rather than total transformation based on an untested idea. They can be means for wider social change, informed by practice and not just theory, but also they are change in themselves. To be consistent, anti-capitalist objections to alternatives within capitalism imply politically that you should not join a demonstration to support free education or support the setting up of free universities. You should oppose workers setting up a co-op within capitalism because it is reactionary and not in the interests of long-term social change. But radical protestors, whose predecessors may have been sceptical about the paternalistic social democratic welfare state, fight for free public education and welfare support. They recognise the alternative logic of the public good and collective provision in institutions like free education and state welfare.

Cracks in capitalism, and the state

The sociologist John Holloway looks beyond the state at cracks in capitalism – non-capitalist spaces, ways of living and activities – as a basis for change. Given problems in pursuing alternatives via mainstream politics it makes sense to look at cracks in society for alternatives. But Holloway is wrong to say you should avoid the state. For some, alternatives are outside the state, but they need not always be, just as social movements and protest need not exclude participation in parties or attempts to build links between movements and parties. The Latin American left and movements like Podemos combine these forms of politics. Pursuing alternatives within society does not exclude change through government. It's through government and mainstream party politics that an alternative within society, the welfare state, was achieved. We need to pursue alternatives through party politics and the state again. We should also look at the variety of parties, social movements, forms of protest, and alternatives to profit, money and competition being built in society, for the collective good and human need.

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