Politics in the Age of Austerity: work, migration and counterculture

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I’m going to talk about three things. Hopefully they all relate to being ‘progressive’ and to Labour, the left and Greens working together, themes of tonight. Some of them may sound a bit utopian but I think they’re more practical than they sound.

A society based on less paid work

One thing I want to talk about is work, or less work, or more specifically less paid work. The left has tended to be oriented to work. The group who has traditionally been its agent and who it has represented has been the working class. The aims of the left have been more jobs, higher wages and collective ownership of production, of the workplace. New Labour saw work as the solution to lots of things. Labour more recently have adopted the rhetoric of hard-working families and the idle work shy. Greens have been more disposed to a shorter working week because work is to produce and consume and these are not sustainable at current levels. Although some green utopias, of agricultural self-sufficiency, are quite labour-intensive.

But work at the current levels we do it at is a problem. One reason is control. When people are asked about problems with their work they often don’t mention hours worked, or the nature of their job or their colleagues, but the boss. So an issue is that in large parts of our life we don’t have control. It’s an issue of autonomy. Also for many people the issue is meaningfulness, it doesn’t seem to them that their work is meaningful or has a good purpose or is useful. And also it’s an issue of time. Many of us work long hours and it crowds out time for us to do other things in our lives. If we had more non-work time we would have more autonomy for our own activities, which may be leisure, or work, just not paid or employed work, but our own work. And more time for things like relationships and care. There could be gender equality implications to this, if less paid work meant men had more time to spend in the domestic sphere, although this is not predetermined. It’s also about quality of life.

The progressive element here is that this goes with the development of technology. Technology allows us to produce as much but in less time, so we can cut working hours. But what it’s used for is to increase productivity and profit while we work just as much. There are other ways in which working less is possible. A decent living wage and a universal basic income would allow people to have a good enough income to not have to work so much. The universal basic income is not as utopian as it sounds, it’s been attempted in a few places, it’s supported by people from all sides of the political spectrum, and could be financed by things like a financial transactions tax. We could have better legislation on working hours. In the UK at the moment the maximum legal working hours are 48 hours a week, which is not exactly a small amount.

It may seem strange in a time of austerity to be advocating less work, when so many people need jobs. But we need to keep a long-term perspective, and less work can help solve unemployment by redistribution of work from the employed who work too long to the unemployed who don’t have work, and also from the developed world to developing countries. People this evening, quite reasonably, will be focusing on local and national issues, but we need to think about global issues too.

Migration
Another issue I want to talk about is movement, the free movement of people. The centre-left, social democrats, have been oriented around the national working class, the working class of their own nation, and overseas workers have been seen as a threat, to employment and wages and in other areas. Social democrats have operated through the nation-state, a national institution. Greens have been split between those who are pro-immigration, the UK Greens have pro-immigration policies relatively speaking, and other greens who are negative about it because they see the transport in people movements as causing carbon emissions and migration as breaking up community that’s necessary for an environmental society. The Marxist left are the ones who’ve been more consistently internationalist, seeing class identity as overriding national identity.

There are lots of reasons to open up borders and increase migration. There are principled reasons to do with freedom, self-determination, people escaping from poverty, persecution and other things. There’s a racism dimension to border controls. There are economic and social benefits to international migration. I’m an academic and international migration is unusual in being an area where the research is almost universally on one side, positive about the economic and social benefits of it. International migration promotes economic growth and provides tax revenue to support public services, because migrants are often turned from unemployed to employed workers. Migrants make a net fiscal contribution to societies, they pay more in than they take out in welfare and public services. They add to cultural diversity.

In terms of being progressive, supporting international migration is the way society’s going. This may seem a strange thing to say when UKIP got such a large vote at the last election and anti-immigration seems so rife. In Britain when people are asked if they would like immigration controls to be tightened, in opinion polls and surveys usually over 70% say yes. But in other countries people are more pro-immigration than in the UK, for instance in the USA which has higher immigration, but in many others too. Britain is a bit of an outlier in terms of being so anti-immigration. So there’s hope for more pro-immigration sentiment here. The young in the UK are more pro-immigration than others. I think this is a generational thing that they’ll keep on as they get older rather than a lifecycle thing that they’ll lose as they get older. If you have a university degree you’re more likely to be pro-immigration than if you don’t, and there have been very big increases in the number of people going to university in the UK. Those living in diverse areas are more pro-immigration. So London has the highest amount of pro-immigration sentiment in Britain. If experience of migration leads to more pro-immigration attitudes this is positive for immigration. People are also more positive about some types of migration than others. They’re more positive about skilled worker immigration, temporary migrants, international students and close family immigration. Some of these types are those that have had the most hostile media coverage recently.

There are freedom and egalitarian reasons why we should be supporting more open borders. And there’s more support for immigration than there appears to be. It’s important to keep in mind global issues, and international migration is just one global issue.

**Counter-culture in Society**

The third thing I want to talk about relates to what Neal was saying about not being top-down and about pluralism and networks in society. It also relates to being progressive. Sometimes we may want to be conservative rather than progressive. Tony Blair recently was saying to the think tank called Progress that Corbyn and the SNP are reactionary. If Blair is the progressive and Corbyn and the SNP are the conservatives then maybe being conservative isn’t all bad.
What Cameron has been doing is privatising and marketising the public sector. Thatcher privatised and marketised parts of the economy that it’s not completely unusual to have in the private and market sectors. Cameron is more radical in that he’s been extending this to the public sector where traditionally non-market values and production and distribution for need rather than market demand predominate. We need to rescue the old principles of the welfare state, need and collective provision for free, which is why I’m saying sometimes we need to be conservative.

Some initiatives that rescue these old values are in society, beyond parties and protest. Parties and protest are very important, but sometimes beyond them there are important initiatives going on too. Here it’s possible to go beyond campaigning and being against to being creative and building things even while the Conservatives are in power. The old principles are being kept on in things in society like co-ops, free education and food counter-culture. These are changes in themselves, people just getting on and making alternatives rather than, or as well as, trying to get change through party politics or protest. But they’re also means to social change because they’re experiments that show the possibilities of a non-market non-commodified society.

We have plenty of examples of this sort of thing in Brighton. There are co-ops like Infinity Foods and Magpie and lots of other co-ops like bike co-ops and other types. There’s a Free University in Brighton that is setting up a free degree for students, taught for nothing by staff, and offered for free to students who can do it without a lifetime of debt. And there’s food counter-culture, against waste and giving away food on the basis of need not money, like the Real Junk Food Project, for example.

Counter-culture in these practical areas can also be one place where alternative narratives of collectivism and provision for need are built up. The right have taken over discourses of austerity and the left needs to have its own narrative, that is an alternative, not just a version of the Right’s. This can be a counter-hegemony or alternative set of leading ideas as people like Gramsci and Stuart Hall have argued in the past. The examples I’ve mentioned are left and green counter-cultures; some of them are about sustainability but also about non-market values traditionally of the left. If the left and greens are to build alliances, a big obstacle is going to be the left’s record on green issues, so a basis for fostering co-operation may be practical local campaigns and initiatives on sustainability issues.

I think it’s important that as well as being creative under austerity in these ways we also need to defend people. Trade unions are one way of doing this. Trade unions need not only be defensive, they can also be a positive thing, because when people are helped by their union or participate in it, it can be quite radicalising and get them involved in other things too. So trade unions are another area for activity by the left and greens.

So I’ve been talking about less paid work, open borders and collectivism in society itself. These are areas where left and greens can work together and try to unite around.