

EDITORIAL

Work, autonomy, and community

Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and James Stafford

Since we took on the co-editorship *Renewal* at the start of 2016, we have deliberately focused our efforts on filling in the conceptual gaps between academic analysis and specific policy proposals. The contributions we have sought – on Europe, inequality, community wealth, localism, democratisation and the social composition of the electorate – have been aimed at both raising the ambitions of Labour’s politics and ensuring their relevance to an age of multiple crises. With the left in a strengthened position and the Labour party enjoying something of an internal truce, this issue takes the opportunity to investigate the normative foundations for a twenty-first century social democracy. Beyond the reversal of the damage caused by state austerity and corporate excess, beyond even the construction of new institutions to guarantee economic justice and ecological stability, what kinds of emancipation, what forms of life, should the left promote? Our contributors, in various ways, explore the ultimate purposes of social democracy, alongside the tensions and choices that confront us on the way. Together, they raise fundamental questions about the meaning of ‘work’, the value of place and community, and the realisation of social justice in the fabric of everyday life.

Communists and ‘worker-ists’

Debating ideals across the famously ‘broad church’ of Labour and the left inevitably exposes potential divisions. One of the most fundamental of these is over the place of wage labour in a radically changed society. The conflict between the

desire to improve and humanise work and to eliminate it entirely is one of the oldest fault-lines within the left, dividing socialists and social democrats along multiple axes. The coincidence of the automation revolution with the long tail of the global financial crisis has produced a situation where the nature and limits of work and wages seem like far less abstract questions than they did a decade ago. Summarising the findings of the independent Future of Work Commission he convened last year, Tom Watson MP signals scepticism of popular narratives suggesting that automation and artificial intelligence will render work as we have known it superfluous. Indeed, he defends a traditional labourist conception of work as a uniquely constructive and empowering human activity:

Work isn't something people do to fill their time in between leisure activities, family life, and sleep, or just to pay the bills. Good work is part of our identities. It enriches our lives and enables us to be fuller and better citizens. It reminds us that we – as individuals, communities, and a society – build our own future.

Both Jo Littler and Dan Chandler, however, argue that more fundamental changes are required to ensure that the reality of wage labour can match Watson's aspirations. For Chandler, an agenda focused solely on regulation and skills is unlikely to address the fragmentation, outsourcing, and undermining of legal minimums that define the 'fissured workplaces' of the twenty-first century. Because the bargaining power of labour, as a whole, is so central, 'good work' becomes a question of macroeconomic policy.

For Littler, meanwhile, the transformation of working life will only be possible if it is embedded in an attack on the ideology of 'neoliberal meritocracy'. Frequently drawing on the language of 'diversity', this claims to tackle inequalities based on gender, race, and even (sometimes) class. But it also encourages people to marketise more and more parts of their lives, legitimising ever-rising inequalities of wealth and power. The answer lies not only in supporting and valuing all forms of work, but in developing policies and institutions that consciously work against market individualism, fostering an ethic of 'working, playing and living together, rather than competing alone'.

Thinking about work always requires us to think about gender. As part of her broader critique of a left politics that subsumes the distinctive interests of

women within a homogenised ‘working class’, Charlotte Proudman urges Labour feminists to question the party leadership’s apparent support for decriminalising the purchase of sex. Under conditions of extreme and gendered inequality, some forms of ‘work’ are simply not amenable to being ‘monetised’, still less ‘civilised’, on acceptable terms: the task of politics, she suggests, is to find effective means of placing them out of bounds.

The radical political economist Nick Srnicek, interviewed by Lise Butler in this issue, emphasises the possibility that automation and artificial intelligence create an opportunity to achieve a high level of freedom from the imperatives of market society. His thinking extends beyond mere techno-optimism, reaching back to nineteenth and twentieth century socialist and communist traditions, and encompassing unwaged and reproductive labour as well as the traditional wage relation. The reduction of all forms of labour can ultimately be achieved through a similar ethic of cooperation to that identified by Littler: ‘experiments in collective living, social housing, the collective raising of children’.

Such an all-encompassing vision of collective freedom remains, as Srnicek concedes, a minority position within what remains a *labour* movement, where Watson’s ‘workerist’ attitude will inevitably predominate. Yet consensus over immediate reforms – although not, perhaps, over the fraught question of the Universal Basic Income, addressed again by Malcolm Torry in this issue – remains possible. The broad front of social democrats, socialists and reformist communists assembled under the Corbyn banner can find common ground on the need to manage and contest, rather than simply resist, technological change, and to create new spaces of autonomy and dignity in a fractured and degraded labour market. No-one within the Labour party can be happy with a country where unproductive, monotonous, poorly paid employment eats up ever-more of our fellow citizens’ time and energy.

Locality and the common good

Limiting the incursion of market logics into everyday life is also a focus for our articles on community, locality, and the economy. Reporting on the first phase of the New Economics Foundation’s major project on the narratives we might

employ to contest dominant understandings of ‘the economy’, Christine Berry finds broad resonance for the idea of ‘common ground’:

...the common ground story is essentially a story about priorities. It argues that the economy isn’t meeting our real needs – *anyone’s* real needs; that we need to look not only at how money is distributed but also at what we want that money *for*. We think this story taps into a deep sense that our society has the wrong priorities: that things like community, safety and time to enjoy life are more important than chasing growth and profits.

Like the other narrative mentioned by Berry – the ‘populist story’ of challenging extractive elites – a regard for the value of non-economic goods can be usefully linked to new strategies for municipal socialism and the promotion of ‘community wealth’. These have been extensively outlined in *Renewal* over the past few years. Contributions from Alistair Reid, John Tomaney, and Rachel Reeves MP in this issue explore the history of ‘progressive localism’ as one of a number of ‘alternatives to state socialism’ developed within the British labour movement of the nineteenth and twentieth century. They suggest that the current consensus within Labour on the need for a decentralised political and economic system can claim a heritage within all parts of the party’s diverse tradition.

Reid, in particular, draws attention to the unfairly maligned liberal strand within Labour politics. Critiquing Blue Labour’s ‘traditionalism’ and the idea of a declining, ‘left behind’ working class, he argues that ‘radical localism’ shouldn’t be reduced to ‘tapping into rather fixed, traditional cultural worlds to mobilise them in support of a new national project.’ Reeves, meanwhile, offers a sketch of how a radical Labour localism would break down policy silos and reach across diverse areas of the ‘everyday economy’, from retail and care work to credit unions, energy coops, and neighbourhood networks for the lonely and elderly.

The new spirit of socialism

What all of these writers – regardless of their factional pasts or affiliations – share is an impatience with the vision of society and selfhood implied by the dominant culture of what Littler calls ‘competitive individualism’. In comparison to the party of the 1990s and 2000s, all parts of Labour today are distinctly

uneasy with the idea that consumerism, competition and hyper-mobility are inescapable features of modern life. Nearly everyone also disavows Whitehall and technocracy, emphasising instead the role of local councils, community organisation, and a range of alternatives to ‘state socialism’. Before the Conservatives’ descent into their present confusion, Nick Timothy’s intellectual influence on Theresa May kept a rival version of this story alive on the right. A gently satirical observation made in a 2014 paper by Jeremy Gilbert and the late Mark Fisher still holds true: ‘today ... no mainstream politician can claim to be in favour of state action and nobody can be an avowed individualist’.¹

It is both an irony and a promise of the current moment that so much of the programme of Labour’s radical left leadership dovetails with the ambient ‘neo-communitarianism’ of mainstream policy elites.² The overall direction of this new social-democratic politics should be more radical, and more forward looking, than anything envisaged by the intellectual entrepreneurs of the early 2010s. Yet it will still be able to draw on a growing public rejection of increasingly pathological systems of neoliberal government. Whether or not all this well-intentioned localism and humanity – easy to talk about in opposition, but often difficult to sustain in government – will be able to survive contact with the complex and crisis-ridden world of the 2020s remains, of course, an open question.

Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite is Lecturer in Twentieth Century History at University College, London.

James Stafford is Postdoctoral Research Associate in World Politics at Bielefeld University.

Endnotes

- 1 M. Fisher & J. Gilbert (2014), *Reclaim Modernity: Beyond Markets, Beyond Machines*, (London, Compass).
- 2 W. Davies (2012), ‘The Emerging Neo-Communitarianism’, *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 83, No. 4, pp767-776.

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