

Corbyn's delusional realists versus washed-up utopians

I HAVE NO DOUBT AT ALL that rapidly developing automation, the proliferation of robots and robotic systems, and the creation of entirely new materials, and novel uses for old ones will create a host of new occupations and new jobs to meet as yet unimagined needs and desires.

However, I also believe that we will struggle to find ways to transfer the wealth created in largely workerless enterprises to splendidly labour intensive ones like care for the elderly and the very young, or to teaching, scholarship, scientific research, writing, theatre, dance, painting, sculpture, and ceramics. All these creative activities are, by and large profitless – of course, writing gaming software, some sports, garden centres, some fine art, some publishing, and making some movies and popular musical theatre, can be immensely lucrative – but for the most part recreational, creative, and caring activities, cannot survive very well within the capitalist marketplace. This is because, they are not good at generating profits and consequently attract very little private investment – by and large the state, charitable institutions, and crowd funding, has to step in. All these essential activities exist somehow outside or beyond the self-expansion of capital – they are not suitable for capitalist enterprise – they do not generate sufficient profits to be self-sustaining.

Consequently, as increasing numbers of jobs are abolished by automation we need to find ways in which people can be retrained and reemployed to ensure that we have much better childcare, better care for the elderly, many more teachers at all levels –

much smaller classes and seminars – more music and dance, more gardening, more scientific research, more conjecturing, more fiction and photography – more profitless activities that enhance human lives but do not contribute to the self-expansion of capital.

None of this can happen, of course, while the social production of wealth is resolutely held in private hands. As long as private property, private interest, and private profit, determine the distribution of investment, there are few ways in which we can transfer the wealth generated by newly automated systems and technologies from areas of shrinking employment to those activities where we need more and more human labour, initiative, and creativity. Some of this transfer is already achieved by fiscal means, but taxation cannot be on a large enough scale to cope with the level and density of automation coming down the track without resulting in confiscatory tax hikes that would effectively unravel the capitalist mode of production

This is why, despite being personally prosperous (although not “rich” according to John McDonnell), and coming from a political tradition that has undoubtedly washed-up dead on the shore, I continue to call myself a communist. Why? The reason is that I can see no way forward for our society, which does not involve the extension of democracy from political regulation into the sphere of economic life. Only communism – a way of life that replaces private profit and investment with public goods and public purposes – can meet the challenges of the marvellous new technologies created by capitalist development and enterprise.

It will be immediately apparent to anybody with the slightest acquaintance with history that my frankly utopian outlook has nothing at all to do with the Labour Party, with Jeremy Corbyn, or any of the neo-Trotskyists, Stalinists, Maoists, Castro-lovers, Bolivarians, social justice wallahs, or friends of the poor, who have so recently crowded into the British Labour Party.

The prime objective of this ragtag and bobtail army known colloquially as “the left” is to take over the Labour Party, lock-stock-and-barrel in order to be able to form a government capable of running capitalism on behalf of the working class – at least this is the economic and social prospectus offered by John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn. They are less explicit about their rejection of Marxist solutions than France’s Jean-Luc Mélenchon but, like him, do not call for the end of capitalism; that would be a step too far. Instead, they call for a caring version of capitalism in which social justice, an economically active state, and the “redistribution of wealth and power”, would result in a fairer more caring kind of market economy.

“The left” and the activists of Momentum, unlike me, refuse utopian communist aspirations in favour of a version of realism and practical politics in which they imagine that the Labour Party under Corbyn can, if not win power, then at least prepare for power, in which it is imagined that the working class will be won over to some variant of socialism, which the mass of working people know full well, has failed everywhere and every time it has ever been put to the test.

Bearing this in mind it is certainly worth looking at the ten “pledges” with which Corbyn promises to transform life in Britain:

- ❖ Full employment and an economy that works for all
- ❖ A secure home guarantee
- ❖ Security at work
- ❖ Secure our NHS and social care
- ❖ A national education system, open to all
- ❖ Action to secure the environment
- ❖ Put the public back into our economy and services
- ❖ Cut income and wealth inequality
- ❖ Action to secure an equal society
- ❖ Peace and justice at the heart of foreign policy

And, last but not least, Motherhood and Apple Pie, together with bank holidays for each of the UK's patron saints: Patrick, Andrew, David, and George! But, this catalogue of good things is not greatly dissimilar from that offered by Teresa May. True more bank holidays will not be in her manifesto, and she might not know what "A secure home guarantee" could mean. Presumably, better arrangements for private tenants and more money for councils and housing associations to build homes for rent. I imagine that these ten pledges cover the abolition of zero-hours contracts, suitable tax hikes for the well-off, more state investment and participation in the economy, attempts to limit executive pay by imposing procurement compliance on government contracts, state seed-funding of new technologies and start-ups, and as Teresa May says, "an economy that works for all, not just the few."

Labour's prospectus is not radically different from that of the Tories. True there are flag-waving issues like Teresa's endorsement of private investment in the NHS – in complete contrast Corbyn has not-for-profit firms like Bupa and Nuffield, in his sights (rather than Pfizer or AstraZeneca), but to hear the Corbynistas huff and puff about this, one could be forgiven for not realising that General Practice, dentistry, opticians, dispensing pharmacies, and most chiropody, has been provided by privately run practices and businesses for the last seventy years. However, Teresa May, no matter how irate the left gets, continues to support universal health insurance and treatment free at the point of need. Although, of course, we must remember that she does make the case for selective education, and the retention of nuclear weapons – both tricky questions for the Labour Party, not least because it was Labour's Clement Attlee that gave Britain her independent nuclear deterrent, and many of the left's leading members to this day insist upon educating their own children in extremely selective fee-paying schools.

If one looks carefully at ideas like Mariana Mazzucato's 'entrepreneurial state' and at May's policy pronouncements it is not clear to me what the decisive differences are between the Tories and Corbyn's Labour Party, apart from the important point that May believes that more cuts rather than more borrowing will be necessary to stabilize the economy.

Corbyn's "10 pledges to rebuild and transform Britain" are startlingly vague and reveal the poverty of Labour's ambition, together with the manner in which the Party is evidently in hock to parameters set by Teresa May's Tories.

By and large Corbyn, McDonnell and their supporters are delusional. Unlike those of us who remain communists and frankly utopian, they appear to believe that some form of resolute social democracy can deal with global free trade and automation. It is this delusional aspect of their politics that leads to endless repetition of the need for nationalization, expanded welfare, enhanced public borrowing, and more public spending. It is the same impulse that leads transport workers and many public employees to oppose the introduction of new technologies and new job descriptions in doomed attempts to defeat capitalist innovation. Joined at the hip with public sector and transport unions this kind of Labourism is simply incapable of devising a way forward for working people which in any way provides a plausible response to our present circumstances. This is why the delusional so often takes over.

Teresa May is behaving like Erdogan. In language bizarrely reminiscent of the *Daily Mail*, she is according to many on the left a tyrant, setting out to crush all opposition. Despite the fact that unlike Erdogan, Teresa May has not flung tens of thousands of her opponents in gaol, nor has she waged war on the Scots by shelling and bombing the centres of Dundee or Paisley as if they were Kurdish towns and cities in Eastern Turkey. Despite these manifest differences the Corbynistas have slipped effortlessly into depicting the Tories as lying, dishonest, tyrants.

The fact that Teresa May has jumped at the chance of defeating both the Labour Party and the right-wing hooligans on her own back benches, makes her a perfectly normal Prime Minister – she thinks she's got the opposition over a barrel, and the opportunity of silencing the Tory right, why wouldn't she seek her own mandate? There is nothing tyrannical or unusual about any of this. The fact that the Corbynistas, in preparation for their own defeat, are prepared to depict the Tories and their support in the country as the product of tyranny and media manipulation, is a clear indication of the delusional character of their thinking.

I hope that May fails to do more than double her majority. A landslide in which the Tories gained a majority of ninety or a hundred seats would be a disaster for the country. It would destroy the prospects of the mainstream Labour Party for a generation, and entrench the idea that there can never be an alternative to the pursuit of private interests.

Clearly, nothing will go right until anti-capitalists stop rushing about engaging in fruitless activity, until they stop conniving with left wing trade union and Labour Party bureaucrats, until they stop dishing up the past as if it were the future. We need to start thinking our way out from our utopian aspirations in order to devise ways in which we can develop a politics suitable for the present conditions – a politics which takes people's real everyday concerns and works out how they can be addressed in a manner that builds the confidence and capacity to widen, rather than restrict, the remit of social solidarity. The mainstream Labour Party has invariably been worth voting for within the context of bourgeois society, and there can be little doubt that even a Corbyn victory would deliver better results on housing and welfare, but to imagine the Party can be made a vehicle for a revolutionary or anti-capitalist movement is not as realistic as my utopianism, it is quite simply delusional.