IPS

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What do Jeremy Corbyn and Elon Musk have in common?

Answer: they both support a universal basic income

The concept of a 'universal basic income' (UBI) has gained the support of a surprisingly diverse bunch, for leftists like Jeremy Corbyn to tech giants Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg. As the name suggests, UBI involves handing out a fixed sum every week or month to the entire population – no strings attached. It's probably the first revolutionary idea of the 21st century that's shown any sticking power.

In many ways, UBI is an attempt to find an answer to the most pressing questions plaguing politicians and economists: What do we mean by 'work' in a world full of machines? What is the state's role in shaping our financial future, and how much should be left to the market? How can we create social cohesion in a society that is increasingly unequal?

Reaching a coherent position on these issues will help social democrats define their role in digital capitalism – and do something towards ensuring their own political survival.

There's a certain amount of confusion in public discourse around UBI. The term means different things to different people. UBI can refer to a minimum income which covers only the most basic of needs, through to sums great enough to allow recipients to quit working entirely.

There's also disagreement on how UBI should be funded. Should a few very rich people foot the bill, or should it be financed through general taxation? Should UBI run parallel to countries' existing benefits systems, or replace them?

Universal basic income is creating some eyebrow-

As mentioned above, UBI is creating some eyebrow-raising political alliances. Advocates range from digital entrepreneurs looking to

raising political alliances

ensure continued consumer demand in a 'world without work' through to old-school Marxists dreaming of an end to 'alienated labour'; from neo-liberal anti-corruption activists who believe unconditional direct payments will undermine a benefits culture that breeds dependency, through to staunch defenders of the welfare state.

In demanding a guaranteed minimum for everyone, liberal-left cosmopolitans line up alongside socially-conservative communitarians, the former looking to increase the individual's bargaining power on the labour market, the latter to strengthen social cohesion.

Opponents of a universal basic income include trade unionists, many of whom see it as an attempt to dismantle what remains of the welfare state. They are joined by deficit hawks with a fetish for balanced budgets, who see UBI as a flimsy excuse to expand inefficient redistribution.

Then there are socialists who, while favouring income redistribution, believe the money could be better spent elsewhere.

The thought that both the 'strivers' and the 'skivers' should receive the same sum of money is an affront to the basic values of classic social conservatives, liberal high-performers, and proud skilled workers alike.

In classic left-right debates, a key point of discord was how to distribute material goods. The left believed it was the state's role to foster equality and social justice, while the right saw market forces as the expression of a social justice linked to individual merit. The two sides fought over wages, workers' rights, and welfare payments.

During the neoliberal hegemony of financial capitalism, these questions of material distribution were more or less ignored, with libertarians agitating for the emancipation of the individual while authoritarians worrying about the erosion of traditional values. This led to clashes on cultural issues such as equal marriage, abortion, and headscarf bans.

You might expect material questions to be at the forefront of a debate about redistribution. Yet advocates and opponents of the concept tend to split on cultural lines, with cosmopolitans pitted against communitarians, modernisers against traditionalists, and 'anywheres' against 'somewheres'.

But the UBI debate is more than just a continuation of the cultural

debates mentioned above. The first political skirmishes of the age of digital capitalism have been characterised by a return of material conflicts, but in the guise of cultural issues.

The blending of cultural and material motivations is also a feature of other important debates in today's society, from the refugee crisis through to questions of gender and Europe; in all of these conflicts, there are arguments about how to distribute material resources, only the opponents are no longer 'the capitalists' but rather 'the others'.

It is almost as if those who have lost out in the capitalist system have given up all hope of the system actually changing, and are now just fighting it out with people they see as culturally different for a slice of the ever-shrinking pie.

The initial winners are right-wing populists, skilled as they are at playing identity-politics. On the left, the same old factional warfare starts up again and results in a stalemate.

On the left, some see the legitimate claims of globalisation's losers as the ingrained racism/sexism of 'old white men'. Others reject struggles for emancipation and the recognition of other cultural identities as a post-modern distraction from the 'genuine interests of the working classes'.

This either-or approach leads to no-where. Rather, the fact that redistribution is now being discussed in terms of culture is a characteristic marker of political formations in the age of digital capitalism. Anyone who does not grasp this premise will either lose touch with today's culturally coded discourse or, even worse, end up trying to out-authoritarian the right-wing populists.

If social democrats want to survive in the age of robots and algorithms, they will have to review their definition of work

Yet those at the extremes of the political spectrum should not be surprised when their tone-deaf positions fail to gain traction. Indeed, the role of social democracy is to advance progressive projects without resorting to playing a fair redistribution of resources off against equitable recognition of different groups. It is not about either equality or emancipation, but about how to bring these two progressive core values together.

In order to secure themselves a political future, social democrats will have to define their role in digital capitalism as fast as possible, and the debate around a universal basic income could be a way of learning an awful lot

about how politics is shaping up this time round.

Questions which need answering include: why does this concept in which so many people place so much hope draw such vehement opposition from traditionally social-democratic spheres? Much points towards an issue of cultural values: a universal basic income runs contrary to ideas of fairness and to the identity of the workers' rights movement, predicated on the idea that working should pay more than not working.

Whilst UBI may be unpalatable to many, a modified version of the scheme, whereby income is paid out to those who contribute to the 'public good', might be a goer. Those who actively contribute to society - by caring for elderly parents or creating cultural output, for example - would receive a stipend above and beyond what is needed to cover their basic needs.

Of course, convincing everyone that these kinds of contribution are 'work' in the same way as having a standard full-time job will not be easy. But if social democrats want to survive in the age of robots and algorithms, they will have to review their definition of work. A *conditional* basic income shows, therefore, not only how embedding a concept for redistribution in the cultural values of its core supporters can help the centre-left to create an attractive policy platform, but also how redefining what is considered work can help social democrats to remain relevant in the political discourse of digital capitalism.



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