

Disaster socialism

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Many who read this blog will be familiar with the idea of disaster capitalism. This, in essence, is the idea that there is always money to be made out of economic mayhem, in which case, to use the vernacular, 'bring disaster on'. I am sure this motivated many who promoted Brexit. Disaster socialism is a less familiar idea but I have little doubt that it is now gaining in popularity on the left, including in Momentum.

Essentially Trotskyist, disaster socialism is based on the idea that revolutionary change is not possible without the collapse of the current order. In that case that collapse has to be encouraged. Brexit provides the perfect opportunity for this in the case of the UK. It is well known that Brexit will precipitate chaos. Lexiteers who subscribe to disaster socialism are as aware of it as anyone. And they see that as the opportunity to create a new socialist order, which they are convinced will happen because people will blame the existing order for the economic chaos that will occur. So, to use the vernacular again, they too are inclined to suggest 'bring disaster on'.

From reviews of twitter, comments now being posted here on occasion and feedback from those I talk to, the idea that disaster socialism is good reason to support Brexit is growing. It would appear that those involved know that they will harm the well-being of very large numbers of people by supporting Brexit. I suspect they know that some will die as a result. And it seems that they do not care. The utilitarian argument that it is all for the greater good prevails, they think. And they appear to have no doubt that it is socialism and not fascism that will follow from this chaos. Why, or how, I have no clue.

How far spread is this thinking? I do not know. That's an honest statement of fact. That it exists within Labour and, it would seem, Momentum (albeit, and I stress it, as a minority view, overall in both cases) seems indisputable. The idea that Brexit is the opportunity to overthrow capitalism and establish what might be termed old-fashioned Clause 4 socialism appears firmly established amongst some now.

I should be clear: such ideas have always existed on the left-wing fringe. I admit I have always treated them dismissively: the reality is that I cannot think of any way that an economy can be organised in accordance with the idealism that underpins this logic,

and I fear that those promoting it cannot either. The consequent alternative might be at least as deeply oppressive as disaster capitalism might be as a result.

Let me also be clear. I would love a world of more opportunity; wider use of co-operative structures; better trade union participation and rights; better pay; more flexible working without loss of employee protection; reduced wage inequality and much more. I think we need all those things, in fact. I do not see them as nice options to afford if and when a land of milk and honey arrives. They are the pre-conditions of a better economy. So I am not going soft on my ambitions here.

But the idea that better outcomes can result from Brexit is absurd. I cannot countenance that there are those on the left who treat their communities with such contempt that they would put the people who live in them through potentially significant unnecessary hardship for a deeply uncertain and candidly improbable supposedly socialist outcome.

And I cannot also imagine those proposing such a change have for a moment wondered how people are going to take to this new world. As I asked one coffee drinking socialist recently, was he going to be happy to find there was just one state run cafe chain in the future? And how was the temporary employee of that chain ever going to associate their work for it with ownership or control? He had no answer.

Now, this may be a caricature, and it was tainted by my genuine recall of the British Rail sandwich, but the point is real: the fact is that there are large sectors of the UK economy where the private sector is undoubtedly better suited to meeting need than the state sector could ever be, just as the reverse is true.

There is no doubt that we have that line wrong now. But even then I cannot see state ownership of railways, water and even power companies radically transforming the well-being of people in this country. I hate to say it, but large organisations will remain slightly dysfunctional large organisations that feel remote from their employees and customers whoever owns them: that's because we as human beings have not yet adapted to embrace their reality even though we have benefited from their existence. That will not change even if we have disaster socialism.

So I remain of the view that a much better regulated mixed economy is, overall, what we need.

Actually, I think it is essential. I cannot see anything else eventually adapting anything like fast enough to climate change. Of course nothing might. And outright capitalism of the sort right-wing Brexiteers want never will, by simply denying the need for change exists. But nor can I see state socialism reacting either: the demand for innovation requires economic diversity of action at present and that appears unlikely in a socialist system. So the biggest challenge we face would not be addressed by disaster socialism, in my opinion.

So why get worried about this? Only because I do not trust the Labour leadership on this issue. I do think those around Jeremy Corbyn, led by Seumas Milne, want a hard Brexit. I do, of course, think they want it to happen on a Tory watch. And I do think they believe it will be good news for the left, embracing in the process at least some of the thinking within disaster socialism. And I think some, at least, are taking part in talks with the Tories right now to tick the clock down, just as May did earlier this year, thinking it suits their agenda, and denies her choice, just as she finally found it did in March. I suspect the aim of some of those involved is to deliver Lexit.

And I think they know this will impose significant cost in the country. And they are indifferent to it. I suspect they are more realistic than those on twitter, and in the grassroots. I would, at least hope so. But do they share a goal? I fear some do. And that is as worrying to me as the knowledge that there are those who undoubtedly want Brexit for the short term profit taking opportunity it creates.

And to those who think this is me moving to the centre? Forget it! I want radical reform. I want a Green New Deal. I want a world better for everyone - including all the 99%. And I think we can deliver this. But not via a politically created disaster. We have one human made disaster to deal with in the form of climate change. We need no more to distract attention from the one core and essential task we have of preserving the chance of life in earth.

Disaster socialism, like disaster capitalism, wholly ignores that risk in the interests of a few and not the planet as a whole. That's why I reject it out of hand. This is no time for 19th century politicking. This is time for real change. And disaster socialism is a million miles from the reform we need.