

# Common-sense neoliberalism

Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea

The battle over common sense is a central part of our  
political life.

---

And let this be our message - common sense for the common good.

David Cameron, 24.4.11

**W**hen politicians try to win consent or mobilise support for their policies, they frequently assert that these are endorsed by 'hard-working families up and down the country'. Their policies cannot be impractical, unreasonable or extreme, they imply, because they are solidly in the groove of popular thinking - 'what everybody knows', takes-for-granted and agrees with - the folk wisdom of the age. This claim by the politicians, if correct, confers on their policies popular legitimacy.

In fact, what they are really doing is not just invoking popular opinion but *shaping and influencing* it so they can harness it in their favour. By asserting that popular opinion *already agrees*, they hope to produce agreement *as an effect*. This is the circular strategy of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

But what exactly is common sense? It is a form of 'everyday thinking' which offers us frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world. It is a form of popular, easily-available knowledge which contains no complicated ideas, requires no sophisticated argument and does not depend on deep thought or wide reading. It works intuitively, without forethought or reflection. It is pragmatic and empirical, giving the illusion of arising directly from experience, reflecting only the

## Common-sense neoliberalism

realities of daily life and answering the needs of 'the common people' for practical guidance and advice.

It is not the property of the rich, the well-educated or the powerful, but is shared to some extent by everybody, regardless of class, status, creed, income or wealth. Typically, it expresses itself in the vernacular, the familiar language of the street, the home, the pub, the workplace and the terraces. The popularity and influence of the tabloid press - one of its main repositories - depends on how well it imitates, or better, ventriloquises the language and gnomic speech patterns of 'ordinary folk'. In the now-famous example, it must say not 'British Navy Sinks Argentinean Cruiser' but, simply, 'Gotcha'.

According to Antonio Gramsci, the Italian political philosopher who has written perceptively on this subject, common sense 'is not critical and coherent but disjointed and episodic'.<sup>1</sup> However, it *does* have a 'logic' and a history. It is always, Gramsci argues, 'a response to certain problems posed by reality which are quite specific and "original" in their relevance'. It draws on past ideas and traditions; but it also keeps evolving to give meaning to new developments, solve new problems, unravel new dilemmas. 'Common sense', as Gramsci argued, 'is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself'.

It also has a content. It is a compendium of well-tryed knowledge, customary beliefs, wise sayings, popular nostrums and prejudices, some of which - like 'a little of what you fancy does you good' - seem eminently sensible, others wildly inaccurate. Its virtue is that it is obvious. Its watchword is, 'Of course!'. It seems to be outside time. Indeed it may be persuasive precisely because we think of it as a product of Nature rather than of history.

Common sense tends to be socially conservative, leaning towards tradition (even if, as Eric Hobsbawm argued, much tradition was only 'invented' yesterday!). Its pace of change seems glacial. In fact, it is constantly being reconstructed and refashioned by external pressures and influences.

Common sense feels coherent. But Gramsci argues that, like the personality, it is 'strangely composite'. 'It contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history ... and intuitions of a future philosophy'. For these and other reasons, it is fundamentally contradictory. It tells not one narrative, but several conflicting 'stories' stitched together - while

# Soundings

failing to resolve the differences between them. Bits and pieces of ideas from many sources - what Gramsci calls 'stratified deposits' - have slowly settled or sedimented, in truncated and simplified forms, into 'popular philosophy', without leaving behind an inventory of their sources. The *Soundings* Manifesto 'Framing Statement' argues that, for example, contemporary neoliberal ideas about 'free markets' derive from and are consistent with the eighteenth-century theories of Adam Smith and the early political economists, though most people have never heard of, let alone read them.<sup>2</sup> Many common-sense moral judgements - for example about sexuality - have a Judeo-Christian lineage, though we do not know where in the Bible they are to be found.

Many people intuitively favour 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' conception of justice - while at the same time believing that Muslim Sharia Law is a barbarous form of law. Some who depend on benefits to survive believe all the other claimants are 'scroungers'. Some who hold that unbridled competition driven by self-interest is the only way to succeed also believe 'we should love our neighbours as ourselves'. Margaret Thatcher, the mistress of common-sense language, and of squaring circles, supported both the 'free market' (i.e. one without much state regulation) and a 'strong state'.

However, as well as being conservative in outlook, common sense also contains critical or utopian elements, which Gramsci calls 'the healthy nucleus ... which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent'. He is referring to the apparently obvious taken-for granted understandings that express a sense of unfairness and injustice about 'how the world works': landlords tend to exploit tenants, banks responsible for the 'credit crunch' expect to be bailed out by taxpayers rather than take the crunch themselves. CEOs receive immense bonuses even when their companies perform badly; profitable businesses will avoid paying tax if they can; and companies profiting from a fall in commodity prices will not pass the gains on to consumers.

Gramsci called these apparently 'natural' insights into the wicked ways of the world 'good sense'. And good sense provides a basis on which the left could develop a popular strategy for radical change - if it takes on board the idea that common sense is a site of political struggle. Common sense and 'good sense' co-exist. Our ability to live with this incoherent structure may be due to the fact that the 'stratified deposits' of common sense represent the outlook

## Common-sense neoliberalism

and interests of very different social groups: 'Every philosophical current leaves behind a sedimentation of "common sense": this is the document of its historical effectiveness'. It is this that allows us to hold contradictory opinions simultaneously, and to take up contradictory subject-positions.

As citizens, we expect public services in return for paying taxes. But as 'taxpayers' we are invited to think that we should pay as few taxes as possible, whatever the social consequences. Margaret Thatcher exploited such contradictions, arguing that, as workers, we have sectional interests, 'but we are all consumers and as consumers we want a choice. We want the best value for money'. Hence: 'the same trade unionists, as consumers, want an open market'. The difficulty is that most of us are simultaneously citizens, taxpayers and workers. So discourses which try to win us over must privilege one way of positioning ourselves over others. Common sense thus becomes a contested arena. As Doreen Massey argued in 'Vocabularies of the Economy', we know that doctor/patient, teacher/student, citizen/state, client/provider, shopper/supermarket relationships all have specific, and very different, social contents.<sup>3</sup> However, if we can be persuaded to see ourselves simply as 'customers', then all the other relationships are reduced to one common denominator: the fact that we are consuming a product [sic] in a market [sic] which only has value because we pay for it [sic]. Everything becomes a commodity, and this aspect of our activities over-rides everything. In this way a whole new way of seeing society (as a market) is coming into play. If developed, it could provide the cornerstone for a new kind of (neoliberal) common sense.

'After Neoliberalism' argues that this is indeed what is happening. Slowly but surely, neoliberal ideas have permeated society and are transforming what passes as common sense. The broadly egalitarian and collectivist attitudes that underpinned the welfare state era are giving way to a more competitive, individualistic market-driven, entrepreneurial, profit-oriented outlook. There is no proof as to how far this process has gone: the evidence is hard to 'read', and the trend is certainly not one-way. However, after forty years of a concerted neoliberal ideological assault, this new version of common sense is fast becoming the dominant one.

One common-sense assertion that has become widely acceptable is: 'You can't solve a problem just by throwing money at it' - often aimed at Labour's 'tax and spend' policies. True, perhaps. But there are very few problems which would not be considerably alleviated by being better funded rather than having their budgets

## Soundings

savagely cut. The right's use of this slogan is of course highly selective: they have no qualms about money being 'thrown' at the banks or at the economy via quantitative easing.

Taxpayers, it is said, want 'value for money' and 'greater efficiency'. Citizens certainly have a right to see their money well spent. But are the fire service, the police, ambulance crews, youth and community workers, mental health staff, or child-minders *necessarily* more efficient because there are fewer of them? Can their benefit to society be measured exclusively in terms of their exchange value? If policing is more efficient when information-led, how come the 'backroom' staff who provide the information are seen as dispensable, on the grounds that they are 'not front-line staff'? More and more, these common-sense 'truths' serve as a cover-up for savaging the public sector in line with the dominant neoliberal, anti-state ideology.

These days, we are told, we all want greater freedom and personal choice. Indeed, not only are we given 'freedom to choose', we are *required* to choose: which hospital to be ill in, which life-style to adopt, which identity to fashion, which celebrity role-model to imitate. Certainly, there is no reason why only the well-off should exercise choice. However, there is also strong evidence that the responsibility which comes with so much choice can create unfulfillable expectations, anxiety and a sense of the precariousness of life.<sup>4</sup> This sense of insecurity is then further exacerbated by the increasing introduction in the workplace of personal targets, appraisals and performance-related pay, to keep staff up to the mark. Michael Gove now plans to introduce the latter into the teaching profession. But 'it's all down to us' - apart from being untrue - is a hard 'truth' to live with. What if we make the wrong choice?

The *structural* consequences of neoliberalism - the individualisation of everyone, the privatisation of public troubles and the requirement to make competitive choices at every turn - has been paralleled by an upsurge in feelings of insecurity, anxiety, stress and depression. These are now responsible for one in every three days sick leave from work.<sup>5</sup> We need to acknowledge these *affective* dimensions that are in play, and which underpin common sense.

How then does common sense make sense of these changes in lived experience? Have most people accepted that it is inevitable and natural to understand most of our life as consumers and market competitors?

## Common-sense neoliberalism

There are in fact many signs of resistance to be found. These include older forms of political protest, such as the trade unions, and newer, emerging, forms such as Occupy, UK Uncut or 38 Degrees. However these do not in any way constitute a single social force, as happened to some extent with the GLC in the 1980s, when, although the traditional left and the new social movements did not always agree - and certainly were not unified - they did occupy the same space, and struggle over the same budget, and together offered a broader and more effective political force than we have seen since then.

There is also much individualised disaffection. To fall ill with anxiety is itself a symptom that some people are finding it difficult to live with neoliberal culture. Another is a marked retreat, in popular culture, to an isolated self-sufficiency. There is unfocused anger, a grudging, grumbling resentment at one's lot, and a troubled uncertainty about what to do next. There is a sense of being abandoned by the political class and widespread cynicism, disaffiliation and de-politicisation.

Many groups, of course, do have cultural resources to resist these trends - and these include historic working-class solidarities, defensive organisations, strong local loyalties and a culture of mutual support. Others have insight into new processes, such as digital technologies and communication, which are changing the shape of society. But these have not resulted in any coming together in a vigorous, effective response.

### Fairness

The resistance which lies in the 'good sense' components of common sense is more elusive, but still possible to illustrate. To attempt this, and to demonstrate why this understanding of common sense is valuable for fighting the spread of neoliberal discourse, we will now focus on one pivotal element - the idea of 'fairness' and its role in popular discourse during the winter of 2012/13. We have selected 'fairness' as our instance because no one is *against* it. It is a term that the whole political spectrum struggles to inflect to their own project.

First we outline the role of fairness in recent political history; then we look at material from readers' comments attached to one news report in the *Sun*. We draw on this, first, to give an indication of the range of appropriations which are in play in popular discourse at any one moment, and, second, to take a more detailed look at the ways in which one particular commenter 'cuts and pastes' various beliefs, terms

## Soundings

and political positions into what Gramsci calls a 'strangely composite' common sense - one which combines its elements differently and flexibly to address different contexts and topics. In the course of this we point up the danger of politicians getting too fixated on the 'public opinion' provided by polls.

What counts as fair has been pivotal to our political history. The welfare state was set up in the 1940s as a collective contract between all members of the society to guarantee a fairer distribution of wealth, and a chance for everyone to flourish and make a useful contribution. These aspirations were supported by a broad consensus across the population.

The neoliberal right has been working hard to undermine and trans-code this inclusive meaning of 'fairness' since the 1970s. Margaret Thatcher made it her project to break up the consensus and substitute a market approach. But she also validated this by a common sense appeal to 'what we all already think':

A great number of people in Britain are becoming increasingly alarmed about a society which depends on the state's help - on entitlement. What has happened is that so many of the people who have done everything right and saved for their old age and put a bit by, seem to have had a raw deal. Some of those who have done only too little and have not done it very well have been on the beneficial end of what has been going ... You can't have welfare before someone else has created national wealth.

Speech to party workers, Berwick, 30.8.78

Two decades later, David Cameron echoed the same sentiment:

For too long we've lived in an upside down world where people who do the right thing, the responsible thing, are taxed and punished, whereas those who do the wrong thing are rewarded ... And for that person intent on ripping off the system, we are saying - we will not let you live off the hard work of others. Tough sanctions. Tougher limits. In short we're building a system that matches effort with reward ... instead of a system that rewards those who make no effort.

Speech, 23.05.11<sup>6</sup>

## Common-sense neoliberalism

Here 'fairness' is a quasi-market relation, a reward for personal effort - a long way from the collectivism of the 1940s.

Recent attitude surveys (from the Joseph Rowntree and Resolution Foundations) suggest that the decades of playing off 'hard-working families' against those who for one reason or another are unable to find work have achieved the intended result. The surveys found a decline in sympathy for the poor and those on benefits. The concept of fairness was generally disconnected from any notion of rights ('No-one is owed a living'), and seen simply in terms of fair rewards for effort.

The 2012-13 fairness debate focused on George Osborne's decision to cap benefit payments below the rate of inflation, and Iain Duncan Smith's welfare reforms, which were accompanied by the launch of a large-scale 'moral panic' demonising claimants, which was amplified enthusiastically by the press, and not strongly resisted by broadcasters (including the BBC).

In his now notorious contribution, Osborne asked:

Where is the fairness, we ask, for the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of their next door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits? When we say we're all in this together, we speak for that worker. We speak for all those who want to work hard and get on.

Conservative Party Conference, 8.10.12

This vivid image has been amplified by personal stories, and profiles of specific out-of-work families on benefits greater than the average wage (with no reference to the fact that a very large chunk of this is housing benefit paid directly to profiteering landlords). A YouGov poll found that people on average thought that 41 per cent of the welfare budget went on benefits to the unemployed, while the true figure is 3 per cent; and that 27 per cent of the welfare budget was claimed fraudulently, while the government's own figure is 0.7 per cent.<sup>7</sup> This suggests that the 'folk devil' figure of the 'scrounger'/'skiver'/'shirker'/'fraudster' living a life of idle luxury has resonated with many people's concerns, resentments and insecurities.

This is the ideological climate in which both polling and online responses have to be understood. The debate has been conducted within a neoliberal framing of the

## Soundings

agenda across most of the political spectrum and media output. This frame takes for granted that the market relation is central (you can only have what you pay for), the deficit is the problem, and cutting public expenditure is the only solution; and, within this, cutting welfare benefits is the priority - and it's all a result of 'Labour's mess'. (The Labour Party itself hasn't strongly challenged this!) In the context of this closing down of the debate, along with the onslaught of propaganda and misinformation, it is not surprising that polls show that support for capping benefits below the rate of inflation can be rallied.

But we have to beware taking poll findings as the unquestionable truth, or as reflecting deeply held political positions. The YouGov poll also showed that when respondents were given the correct figures, their views changed and they became more sympathetic towards benefit claimants. This demonstrates that the earlier responses were a result of an effective misinformation campaign by the government and the press, and not of some 'uncontaminated' opinion of those polled. As David Stuckler has recently pointed out:

People's support for welfare depends greatly on how the question is framed. When the question links taxes to specific programmes and recipients, the young tend to express stronger support. For example, only 20 per cent of British youth agree with the very broad idea of giving more money to the poor, but when asked about support for specific vulnerable groups, such as the disabled or working parents, more than 90 per cent would like to increase or maintain existing levels of support.<sup>8</sup>

Opinion polls are taken - especially by the media - as objective fixities, as an indisputable tide against which politicians turn at their peril - rather than as yes/no answers to questions framed from within the dominant agenda of the moment. They are a tool in the struggle over common sense, rather than an objective reflection of it.

People are less decided about issues than polls suggest. To get a better sense of the way discourse works, and of how people are engaging with neoliberal frames and agendas and reworking their common sense in response, we need to do more than work with simple answers to questions commissioned by vested interests. We have to capture discourse which is volunteered, which arises from the writer's own

## Common-sense neoliberalism

set of concerns, and is as spontaneous and unfettered by what others may think as possible. Online comments are rather like this, especially as everyone contributes under a pseudonym.

Online responses to newspaper articles are often very thin, and dominated by egotists and spoilers, but the *Sun's* blogs are voluminous and richly varied, with an energy that comes from genuine anger, irony, moving accounts of people's own difficulties, unashamed prejudice, etc. This is why we've chosen to use material from the 158 comments in response to the *Sun's* report (8.1.13) of Iain Duncan Smith's introduction of the bill to cap benefits below the rate of inflation as an indication of how notions of 'fairness' are currently being contested. The contributors are, of course, in no way 'representative' of any social group. The analysis of 'common sense' isn't about representativeness; it is about how the field of discourse is constituted at any particular moment in time. Each contribution is unique to the speaker - their own specific inflection of elements from within that field. As Gramsci said, there are as many Catholicisms as there are Catholics - each one appropriates, inflects and deploys their Catholicism differently.

It should also be noted that some of the contributors are fairly obviously not even regular readers of the *Sun*, and are intervening from 'outside'. This includes those who are consciously trying to shift the discourse for political reasons, and even the newspaper proprietors themselves. But they all have to address the benefits issue on the terrain of 'common sense' and in everyday language. By looking at the discursive strategies each contribution uses, we can see in greater detail how they establish a field of debate, contend with each other, and privilege particular common-sense framings of an issue.

The following quotations give an indication of some of the different inflections of 'fairness' in play. A good number joined enthusiastically in the demonisation of benefit claimants:

About time these lazy dole lovers got a taste of what everyone else has.

In the coming days we'll hear all the benefit scroungers moaning that it's not fair, blah, blah, blah. The ones I know of can afford 2 holidays a year, a new top of the range phone every year, new TV etc and say it's their right!!! No it's not their right, the benefit system is there for you

## Soundings

to get by, not live the life of two holidays a year, out on the razz every weekend etc. Time to wake up and smell the coffee, about time too.

But one contributor vehemently and wittily challenged these stereotypes:

Thank you to some of the commenters here. With all of your 'scroungers', 'iPhones/iPads', 'Sky subscriptions', 'widescreen TVs', 'backsides', 'lazies', 'work shies', 'immigrants', 'expensive holidays' and 'Jeremy Kyles' I managed to complete my internet idiot bingo card for the day, despite the absence of 'booze and fags'. Seriously, I actually wonder if some of you are even human beings or just a bunch of spambots.

Others openly directed their scorn against the rich - not so surprisingly, since outrage against the bankers' bonuses has become widespread. Iain Duncan Smith was often seen as an agent of the 'toffs' attacking the weak and vulnerable. George Osborne was almost universally condemned as an enemy of the poor. Also many saw MPs in general as a greedy, self-serving section of the wealthy:

The only scroungers are in the GOVERNMENT, they have high wages and claim large amounts in expenses. We are all in this together, Ha Ha Ha.

Could we have 1 per cent cap on MPs expenses too. After all, we're all in this together.

Others, however, echo the distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' unemployed, based on the nineteenth-century Poor Law, which Iain Duncan Smith regularly borrows. Some also used this distinction to attack immigration; and, as is common when immigration is being debated, race and animosity towards foreigners is often implied, though they may not be mentioned explicitly:

While I am of the opinion that no-one who is too lazy to work should be better off on welfare than some working families, I do not think it fair that someone who has worked for many years and then finds themselves out of work through no fault of their own and has

## Common-sense neoliberalism

contributed tax and national insurance, should be getting the same paltry benefit as someone who has never worked a day in their life. I also object to immigrants who have never contributed to our economy being given handouts and for those with large families, being put up in mansions that the general working public could never afford but are expected to subsidise. It is high time that we closed our borders to those who are not able or willing to contribute to our economy.

This contribution accepts Cameron's definition of 'fairness' as a 'system that matches reward with effort', a right to get out only what you put in. The reasonable-sounding nature of this position serves to deflect the criticism one might expect toward the xenophobic undercurrents it relies on. It represents a success for neoliberalism - a dismantling of any collective social responsibility and a reduction of citizens to barterers - 'something for something': worlds away from the collective social model. However the next example reintroduces this into the debate, and also recognises that the attempt to equate benefits with the workshy is deceitful, given that most recipients are in work:

There is a reason for benefits: quite literally no-one knows when they might need the welfare state. This government cannot claim to be on the side of strivers while also taking their benefits away. Every time Iain Duncan Smith portrays benefit cuts as targeted on the workshy, remember: three-quarters of the families getting tax credits are in work. If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.

A few others have an even starker political analysis - a deliberate refusal of the neoliberal frame:

These benefit changes will hit the poor and lowest paid the hardest. But that is what the greed driven and morally corrupt Tories do. They target the weakest in society, to deflect from their own ineptitude and thievery. They have given the rich tax cuts, allowed tax avoidance to continue to the tune of £60+ billion a year, and given £4 billion in bonuses to publicly owned banks since 2010. This is a very horrible Government,

## Soundings

led by people who only know the world of public schools.

We also find an incipient critique of competitive individualism:

The vast majority of people on disability benefits are ... disabled. Many of those go through life suffering and struggling with their afflictions. Making it so they have to struggle to survive financially on top of that is nothing short of cruelty and is the sign of a broken society where people are only out for themselves.

These are just a few of the range of 'fairnesses' currently in play contesting the issue of welfare benefits. We will discuss in the final section how political movements could engage with this material. But first we want to illustrate the 'strangely composite' nature of common sense at the level of the individual - how most (all?) of us articulate together ideological elements from very disparate sources, such that there is an unresolved struggle over common sense *within* the individual as well as between individuals and groups - an instability that can be addressed by the left.

The next contributor demonstrates just this: we find a cluster of very disparate 'common senses' inhabited and held together by the same individual. In her three contributions to the discussion, she draws upon a hotchpotch of different discourses - including the radical insight that the decline in wages is a major cause of rising benefit payments:

Instead of Labour banging on about people losing their tax credits whilst working (their core voters), they should be asking themselves WHY 9 out of 10 people needed tax credits to work for a living in the first place. Minimum wages should have been increased under their watch, but it was more profitable election wise to throw money at people to bribe them to vote for them. Always the party of the gutless, Labour always take the road of least resistance no matter what the cost to the public and the cost now is being born by their grass roots voters - disgraceful performance.

However, in other comments, the same contributor uses the 'shirkers' discourse of the Tory right, echoing the harsh moralism of Margaret Thatcher:

## Common-sense neoliberalism

People moaning about benefit cuts must be benefit claimants. Every time someone moans on here about the amount they receive not being enough according to them it is always to pay for store cards/credit cards, phone bills etc. Benefits are for food and rent - fullstop! If you have anything else you normally pay for whilst working that is your fault, especially items on subscription or contracts or loans, anyone with a brain does not spend money they know they do not have coming in to pay in cash! That is the problem with this country, the people have been living well beyond their means for years.

In yet another contribution she combines her call for a living wage with hostility to immigration:

There are going to be riots in the street before long because even though the benefit system needs reforming, wages are far too low and people IN work cannot survive on what they are being paid, so they will be marching for an increase in the minimum wage and so they should, also for a complete halt in immigration. How can you even begin to consider creating extra jobs when Romanians and Bulgarians in their thousands are panting at the bit to get here for either jobs or benefits. It is a disgrace, something has to be done.

In this sequence, then, on the one hand declining wages are identified as the underlying cause of the rise in benefit bills: everyone, she implies, needs enough to live on and wages should be high enough to deliver this. But on the other hand she makes the argument that benefit claimants should not be able to afford telephones, etc, but only food and rent, and again identifies immigration as a major cause of the present crisis. It's a patchwork of received ideas not yet reconciled into a coherent perspective, and applied selectively and to different effect in different contexts - though it clearly includes elements of 'good sense' alongside the 'othering' of immigrants and benefit claimants.

What can we learn from this material? Firstly that while neoliberal discourse is increasingly hegemonic and setting the agendas for debate, there are other currents in play - empathy for others, a liking for co-operation rather than competition, or a sense of injustice, for example.

## Soundings

We can also learn how people connect together contradictory aspects of their understanding of society - how, for example, they marry class anger with the politics of UKIP or the BNP; what anxieties underpin these links; and how scapegoats are deployed to simultaneously address and disavow underlying social problems.

The left and the Labour Party must take the struggle over common sense seriously. Politics, as Gramsci insisted, is always 'educative'. We must acknowledge the insecurities which underlie common sense's confusions and contradictions, and harness the intensity and anger which comes through in many of the readers' comments. Labour must use every policy issue as an opportunity, not only to examine the pragmatics, but to highlight the underlying principle, slowly building an alternative consensus or 'popular philosophy'. It must harness to this the already strongly existing sense of unfairness and injustice. In other words, it must engage in a two-way learning process, leading to what Gramsci called 'an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding'. This may be complicated in the context of a popular cynicism toward the political class in general, but there is no alternative.

The Labour Party may have been busy developing alternative policies, but, until its autumn 2013 conference there was no sign of a break with the neoliberal framing of debates, of challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions listed earlier. Rather, it has been nervously responding to polls that frame their questions within this neoliberal agenda, and fearful to go against the 'public opinion' derived from it which suggests that the public want benefits to be cut further.

A recent instance of this is Ed Miliband's speech (6.6.13) on his policy for social security reform. He could have begun with a searing critique of the Coalition project and its neoliberal principles, and then marked out a qualitatively different set of values which will inform Labour's project, and the policies which follow from those principles. As it was, he began by stressing how little money there will be to spend, and saying that he'd handle it with 'decent values at the heart of the system' (but only very loosely indicating what these are - 'One Nation' values of greater fairness and co-operation and inclusiveness rather than conflict), before going on to work through the policy areas, arguing for his alternatives. There was no critique of the austerity agenda as a whole.

The detail of the speech proposes that the plan is to achieve this limit through alternative strategies - such as pushing the minimum wage upwards towards a living

## Common-sense neoliberalism

wage; controlling the housing budget by supporting councils to get a better deal from private landlords; subsidising youth employment; and urgent infrastructural spending to create more jobs and build more houses - all measures supported by the left. Such measures would reduce the need for benefits, rather than reducing actual payments.

But the policy which made the headlines in most of the media was that Labour, if elected, will match the Coalition's cap on welfare spending, for the first year at least. This came towards the end of the speech, although it was hinted at earlier. This headline must have been expected and indeed intended. It was a push for the middle ground (and Blairites responded favourably). But it is such a short-term tactic, and one that makes no impact on the neoliberal hegemony. And while many people became aware of the headlines, only a few managed to take in these details - and even if they did, at best the speech reads as a more humane way of realising the austerity agenda. Our local canvassing experience is of traditional Labour voters having taken in the headlines and in response asking 'why bother?' - no-one is offering an alternative to 'austerity'.

These same policies could equally well have been framed within a critique of the Coalition project, and as a campaign for a different kind of society. Far better to recognise the widespread 'good sense' of the anger towards the banks, and at the widespread social injustice in contemporary Britain, the growing support for the living wage, the widespread sense of insecurity, and to frame Labour policies as a crusade for a society which harnesses the market to the needs of its people, rather than letting it dictate how we have to live. Then we might find polls asking 'should someone who does a full-time job be paid enough to live on?' Or 'if someone is made redundant, should the state provide support while he/she is finding a new job?' As David Stuckler argues above, we would then find a public opinion of a different order.

However, in the very week that this analysis was published in its online version, Miliband's conference speech moved precisely in the direction we were proposing - he framed the whole speech around anger at the rich getting richer at the expense of declining living standards for the vast majority, and made a commitment to reverse this process and work towards a decent quality of life for all Britain's citizens, putting forward a list of policies aimed directly at this.

But whether Labour can sustain this more principled and inclusive position remains doubtful. Days later, their pronouncements on immigrants and benefit

# Soundings

claimants had reverted to the punitive populist framing of the Coalition.<sup>9</sup> Labour can only win the battle of ideas if it takes its role as a ‘popular educator’ seriously. Each crisis provides an opportunity to shift the direction of popular thinking, instead of simply mirroring the right’s populist touch or pursuing short-term opportunism. The left, and Labour in particular, must adopt a more courageous, innovative, ‘educative’ and path-breaking strategic approach if they are to gain ground.

**Stuart Hall** is a founding editor of *Soundings*. **Alan O’Shea** is Emeritus Professor of Cultural Studies, University of East London.

---

## Notes

1. All quotations from Gramsci are from *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence and Wishart 1972.
2. Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey, Michael Rustin, ‘After neoliberalism: analysing the present’: [www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/manifesto.html](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/manifesto.html).
3. Doreen Massey, ‘Vocabularies of the Economy’: [www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/manifesto.html](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/manifesto.html).
4. Renata Salecl, *Choice*, Profile Books 2010.
5. The Young Foundation, *Sinking and Swimming*, online report, 2011.
6. [www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/05/David\\_Cameron\\_Building\\_a\\_bigger\\_stronger\\_society.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2011/05/David_Cameron_Building_a_bigger_stronger_society.aspx).
7. [www.tuc.org.uk/social/tuc-21796-f0.cfm](http://www.tuc.org.uk/social/tuc-21796-f0.cfm).
8. David Stuckler and Aaron Reeves, ‘We are told generation Y is hard-hearted but it’s a lie’, *Guardian*, 30.7.13.
9. John Harris, ‘The Tories are creating a hostile environment, not just for immigrants’, *Guardian*, 13.10.13.