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A Future for the Graduate without a Future

Luke Martell

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The 'graduate without a future'¹ is part of a wider precariat, poorer and with less life chances than their parents. The affluence and welfare state that benefited cohorts post-1945 is being replaced by unemployment and the reduction and marketisation of public services.

But in their involuntary free time some of the graduates make art, blog, protest and find other ways to be creative. There is a non-economy of non-work, often consisting of activity more fulfilling than a job would be. They are also finding cracks in the economy where they make work chances for themselves².

This is an unprecedentedly knowledge-rich generation. More than ever have been to university and they live in the networks of an information-drenched social media. They are the first to have the internet, facebook and twitter, educating themselves, producing content and communicating.

They are believers in what is free. This is partly about liberty and the resources needed for that. But also what they can get without payment in an era of debt and unemployment - from news to music to swishing. The free university is an increasing possibility³.

But this economy does not work. Beyond the cracks it offers declining chances. What changes provide a route forward for the graduate without a future?

This generation peer review by sharing on social media, rather than relying on recommendations from above. They can organize rapidly through networks, without leaders, on smartphones. But what happens if someone turns the network off, as occurred temporarily in Iran and Egypt, something that raises the issue of corporate and state power.

One answer is a bigger decentralized co-operative sector, beyond the state and corporations. This can provide alternative producers and providers and independent institutional power. It's not immune to government shutdown, but would at least be outside the state and big business.

Swathes of the graduates without a future are unemployed. But why not solve the problem of work by redistributing it - so everyone has work and the employed have more free time to be the creative information-intensive people the young have become⁴. A basic income can underpin this. It's not surprising there have been a spate of advocacies of non-work⁵ in recent weeks⁶.

Less work overall would mean reduced production, consumption, and so lower⁷ and selective growth⁸. This is good for averting environmental catastrophe, something else new generations face in a way their parents and grandparents did not. Climate change has almost disappeared off the agenda in the era of economic crisis. The failure of Rio+20⁹ hardly made the headlines. But the consequences of climate

change will be fundamental for humanity. Less work and consumption in rich countries can help with this.

Mobility is a solution to worklessness but in an era of globalization we restrict people movements. Politicians appeal to anti-immigration sentiment to win votes, on the flawed basis¹⁰ it's economically harmful for the working class. This promotes hostility to outsiders. But mobility provides more opportunities than problems. If people move freely they can find work; supply can meet demand and unproductive workers become productive. Far from causing unemployment human mobility helps people find jobs.

The evidence is that migration leads to productivity, tax revenue to support public services and the needs of the elderly, and migrant workers spend their wages, which creates other jobs and growth. The graduate with no future can move to find work and those in countries of immigration benefit from the growth and jobs this creates.

Regulation is needed to control finance and banks and prevent self-interested risk-taking at the root of the financial crisis, itself behind the loss of opportunities for this generation.

The costs of the crisis should be shared so the poor don't take the hit and the rich take more responsibility. Current inequalities aren't just generational but also of class¹¹. This means redistribution is required. Fairer taxes - on wealth, finance, loopholes and havens - can fund investment for growth and a strong welfare state, in place of austerity.

The new left of the 1960s and '70s shared similarities with the social movements of the 2010s. They were horizontal, a mixture of libertarian and revolutionary, plural and international, like the protests of today kicking off from the Indignados to Tahir Square and Occupy.

But the previous new left criticised the welfare state for being paternalistic, bureaucratic and constraining freedom. They had rising economic opportunities but feared monopolization, standardisation and the big state. The 2010s new left, facing worse prospects, call for public services to be protected and free state provision of welfare and higher education. They want the welfare state saved as a basis for freedom rather than a threat to it.

The best ideas in politics have come from social movements – gender equality, peace, environmentalism, development, civil rights, freedom in the sphere of sexuality, and workers rights. This has been repeated in the protests of the graduate without a future and the global precariat. They challenge the values of capitalism, corporate behaviour and hierarchy.

But ideas are not enough. A new economic model needs political and structural change as well as protest. This has to come through politics¹². Despite the dangers of co-option and compromise protest movements need to link with political parties which are green and left, from Syriza, to Mélenchon and Hollande. The far left can maintain their principles but have less chance of power. The centre-left are likely to compromise on their promises but have the best prospects of winning office. Both kinds of party provide possibilities.

We have an innovative generation of graduates without a future. They make opportunities, work and non-work, creativity and protest, using their unprecedented information-richness. But we need a new economy. This can involve a redistribution of work so the unemployed become employed. For everyone this means rethinking the importance of income, consumption and growth, with positive effects for the climate change crisis. Mobility is a human right, more restricted than other types of globalization. It can match people to opportunities and boost growth and jobs.

Alongside non-work and mobility are traditional left elements: investment over austerity, fairer taxes and distribution, regulation of the economy, an expanded alternative co-operative sector, and the foundations that a basic income and welfare state can provide for security and freedom.

Today's graduate has a future in an economy of redistributed work, mobility, public services and economic equality - its ideas fired by social movements and implemented via political ones.

Thanks to Matt Dawson, Jake Martell and Charlie Masquelier for their advice

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/series/the-graduate-without-a-future>

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jul/01/graduates-2012-survive-in-cracks-economy>

³ http://twitter.com/free_uni_uk

⁴ <http://liberalconspiracy.org/2012/07/28/do-we-need-freedom-from-work/>

⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jul/01/why-are-we-working-so-hard>

⁶ <http://chronicle.com/article/In-Praise-of-Leisure/132251/>

⁷ <http://www.social-europe.eu/2012/06/economic-growth-after-financial-capitalism/>

⁸ <http://www.social-europe.eu/2012/05/22821/>

⁹ <http://www.nelemarien.info/the-future-we-want-a-rio20-outcome-that-doesnt-provide-hope-for-the-future/>

¹⁰ <http://notthetreasuryview.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/why-ed-miliband-shouldnt-apologise-for.html>

¹¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/owen-jones-the-war-isnt-between-young-and-old--its-the-rich-versus-the-rest-of-us-7583986.html>

¹² <http://www.organizedrage.com/2012/08/party-politics-radical-lefts-missing.html>