Routes out of crisis: the A, B and C of the present conjecture

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Since its election in May 2010, Britain’s Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government has committed itself to reducing the country’s sovereign debt through a programme of swingeing public spending cuts – £130 billion over five years. Despite rising unemployment, plummeting financial wellbeing of the average family and widespread criticism from economists and others – ‘an act of economic sadomasochism’ (Compass), ‘fiscal policy set on kamikaze tightening’ (Martin Wolf), ‘austerity in the UK has failed’ (David Blanchflower) – government ministers have consistently insisted that they ‘have got a plan A’, that ‘the plan [they] have is the right plan’ and that there is ‘no “plan B”’.

In this climate of austerity and government intransigence, it is not surprising that ‘plan A’ has been contested. In the past 18 months we have witnessed rising social unrest and the emergence of a variety of struggles – increasingly militant student demonstrations, widespread rioting, the ‘occupy’ movement, various strikes including a one-day public sector workers’ strike. We have also seen a variety of alternative policy proposals, with a number of think-tanks and publications presenting their own version of a ‘plan B’.

In this presentation, we explore the potential and the limits, first, of the emerging anti-austerity struggles and, second, of the various plan Bs. We suggest that an important weakness of both emerging struggles and ‘plan B’ is their failure to account for either the problem of agency or the related problem of the changed composition of society. In the final part of the presentation, we introduce the concept of social reproduction and propose a general framework, which we call plan C, that might help us overcome the limitations of both present struggles and existing plan Bs. We illustrate our plan C proposal with concrete examples of tactics that might overcome the limitations highlighted.