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CORBYNISM

A Critical Approach

Matt Bolton &
Frederick Harry Pitts

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CORBYNISM: A CRITICAL APPROACH

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2018

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78754-372-0 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-78754-369-0 (E-ISBN)

ISBN: 978-1-78754-371-3 (Epub)



ISOQAR
REGISTERED

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

ISOQAR certified
Management System,
awarded to Emerald
for adherence to
Environmental
standard
ISO 14001:2004.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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First Liberalism is identified with Capitalism;
then Liberalism is made to walk the plank;
but Capitalism is no worse for the dip, and
continues its existence unscathed under a new alias.

—Karl Polanyi

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PREFACE

At the time of writing, this is the first book to set itself the sole task of taking Corbynism seriously and critically as a semi-coherent set of ideas. It has been impossible to keep up with the books on Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party or the wider Labour left published over the course of the period in which we were developing the arguments and analyses presented here. But these books provide somewhat different angles on the topic – placing Corbyn in the context of the longer history of the Labour left, examining the practical political programme or movement attached to him, or casting him as the antihero in the triumph-against-adversity tale of how an unambitious backbencher was thrust into the political limelight – and as such speak for themselves.¹

This book, on the other hand, adds to this existing and still-growing literature a slightly more conceptual, analytical and abstract objective. This is, in short, to provide the reader with a critical orientation towards the foundations and implications of the rapidly germinating but theoretically deep-rooted intellectual world of Corbynism. It does not exhaustively document every aspect of this new, evolving and diverse worldview, but sets out some pointers for debate and critique from a circumspect left perspective. It will be up to others to make claims to give the definitive account of, or have the final word over, what Corbynism is and where it is going. No doubt this book will be joined and possibly

outpaced by others – not to mention events themselves, which is always a danger of writing history on the hoof. Our aim here is simply to generate theoretical resources and create intellectual space for ‘good conversation’ about Corbynism and the consideration of its consequences and alternatives.²

All good intentions aside, at first glance this book may come across as two academics using abstract critiques to browbeat party members from the sidelines. But this does not quite capture where we are coming from. Both of us supported Jeremy Corbyn in the 2015 leadership election. One of us was even involved in setting up and coordinating a local Momentum group. We were both able to set aside our initial reservations about the political milieu Corbyn sprung from, specifically with regard to its positions on foreign policy and the prevalence of conspiracy-theory critiques of capitalism and imperialism.³ We celebrated instead the greater good his leadership election victory represented: a Labour Party finally with the left in the driving seat, and a burgeoning ‘social movement’ sitting behind it, right at the heart of UK politics.

But as that first year went on, Momentum meetings deteriorated into sectarian power struggles, the same faces turned out in the same number to knock doors, and CLP meetings consisted of shell-shocked centrists and little more. There was a growing disconnect between the rhetoric – particularly online – and the reality. We had both been, on and off, active in and around the Labour Party and wider labour movement since the late noughties, playing small roles in party and movement life. We had spent these years wishing for the left to take the reins, and with Corbyn what once felt a generational task seemingly happened overnight. But the impact appeared to be confined to our online lives. In our everyday experience of party activity the ‘movement’ seemed a spectral and largely untransformative presence. By the local elections of 2016, the campaign on the ground was still manned by the very same

older members and ‘moderates’ who elsewhere were being disparaged, ridiculed and sneered at by the increasingly combative social media crowd.

The gap between the grand claims being made by the more vocal Corbyn supporters – that this was an unprecedented ‘social movement’ which was about to reshape British politics forever – and our concrete experience of it grew ever wider. This was exacerbated by Corbyn’s performance in Parliament, the seeming absence of any political strategy beyond abstract moralising, and the general chaos surrounding his leadership. A nadir was reached during the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU. Corbyn followed party policy by campaigning for Remain, but a lack of enthusiasm for the European project was palpable throughout.

The blame for the referendum result cannot be pinned on Corbyn alone. But stacked against him was the fact that voters were unsure of Labour’s stance right up until the day of the vote, and his call for the immediate invocation of Article 50 on the morning of the result.⁴ This proved to be the final straw for the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). Members of Corbyn’s Shadow Cabinet resigned *en masse*, and MPs passed a vote of no confidence in his leadership. The expectation was that Corbyn would resign. Labour’s poll ratings, already shaky, dropped through the floor. Yet Corbyn refused to step down, citing the mandate he had been given the year before from the party membership.

It was at this point that we became convinced enough of our growing doubts about the Corbyn project to voice them in a series of online articles and blogposts.⁵ Here we critiqued some of the claims being made on behalf of the Corbyn movement and compared them to the underwhelming reality we had experienced during the first year of his leadership. We pointed to the emptiness of its pseudo-populist rhetoric, its appeal to a ‘people’ that did not exist, the moralising,

apolitical nature of the platform, the abject failure of the Labour contribution to the Remain campaign, and the seemingly unsurmountable splits both within the PLP and the broader Labour membership. We feared that Brexit heralded the triumph of the Faragean hard-right across Britain, a prospect which was only made more likely by the elevation of the anti-migrant Theresa May to Prime Minister.

We had initially dismissed the question of Corbyn's 'electability' on the grounds that Corbynism was necessarily a long-term project, for which it was worth sacrificing two or even three elections for the sake of some future leftwards 'hegemony'. But at the time we started engaged critically with Corbynism, electability appeared to assume a new urgency owing to the radically changed political stakes of failure. A Labour electoral collapse post-Referendum would allow a Conservative administration high on nativism and authoritarianism to unilaterally redraw the British polity in its own image. We thus – somewhat naively – called for a negotiated settlement in which Corbyn would hand over the reins to a soft-left candidate able to overcome the schisms in the PLP and allow Labour to mount an effective challenge to May's Conservatives. Although opening ourselves up to the inaccurate but amusing accusation of being, as one anonymous Twitter wag had it, 'Marxists4OwenSmith', we were far from alone in our analysis.⁶ Many of those who counted themselves as amongst Corbyn's most enthusiastic supporters reached similar conclusions – most famously Owen Jones, the *Guardian* columnist.⁷

Corbyn triumphed in a second leadership election against Owen Smith in September 2016, and the case seemed closed. Yet there had been something unsettling about the paranoid defensiveness and personalised invective exhibited by some of Corbyn's support during the so-called 'coup.' During this period, virtually the entirety of the PLP were regularly cast as wicked 'Blairite' conspirators, intent on Corbyn's destruction

so as to follow their true ‘Tory-lite’ agenda. At one point Paul Mason, the Corbyn-supporting journalist, argued that Corbyn-critical Labour MPs constituted ‘the final defence line of the 1%,’ apparently the only thing standing between neoliberal capitalism and the emergence of socialism.⁸ The increasingly toxic and divisive atmosphere began to cast a different light on the central tenets of the Corbyn movement itself. Regardless, we continued campaigning for the Labour Party at a local level, our concerns kept largely to ourselves.

Commentary suspended, in the 2017 General Election we pounded pavements door-knocking and delivering leaflets alongside, nationwide, thousands of Corbyn-enthused volunteers working with the ‘moderate’ old guard. This experience conclusively proved that substantial parts of our past critique were wrong. And they were wrong because the two events which we, and many others, thought spelled disaster for the Corbyn project – the Brexit vote and the split in the PLP – proved to be its saving grace. The EU Referendum had polarised the electorate (or revealed its polarisation) in an unprecedented manner. This dichotomy was then intensified by May’s extraordinarily sectarian attitude to the post-referendum period, which saw Remain voters – 48% of the country – labelled ‘citizens of nowhere’ and ‘saboteurs’ conspiring against the ‘will of the people.’ Our assumption was that the irrational populist energies unleashed by the Brexit campaign signalled that the political moment was racing away from Corbynism. In fact, as we shall see, the opposite was the case. The Brexit vote was the making of Corbynism, the necessary precondition of its success. The same is true of the PLP split and the challenge to Corbyn’s leadership. Far from heralding the collapse of Labour as an electoral force, the so-called ‘coup’ against Corbyn activated his slumbering support in a manner that had been utterly absent during the previous twelve months. And even though it ebbed away

in the intervening period, the energy of the second Corbyn leadership campaign reappeared in the General Election campaign.

For other left critics like Owen Jones, the 2017 election result settled any doubts about Corbyn's 'electability,' 'competence' or 'strategy.' Our position, meanwhile, was somewhat different. Our initial criticisms were, like Jones', focused not on disagreements over policy but on the electoral and political risks of sticking with a failing leadership at a time of rising nativism and constitutional crisis. But in the course of making that argument, and in the discussions and debates that followed, these initial doubts developed into a deeper and more fundamental critique of the Corbyn worldview as a whole.

Once we had taken a step back and surveyed the theoretical underpinnings of that worldview, it became clear that the question of its electability was increasingly moot. There were clear resonances between the platform that was gradually being built around Corbyn's leadership – based on a hyper-personalisation of politics and capitalism itself, a sectarian atmosphere of denunciation and delegitimization of internal critics, ambivalence towards the EU and transnational institutions, a tendency towards Manichean conspiratorial thinking, and a programme of economic nationalism – and that of the populist currents gaining prominence across the globe. There was no longer any reason to suspect that Corbynism could not also chime with voters here.

This book picks up this thread and runs with it, exploring how the claims Corbynism's intellectual and political coalition makes about itself conflict with the theoretical and practical consequences of the way it sees the world. What this shows is that rather than embodying a radical challenge to the current trajectory of global capitalism, Corbynism in fact reflects wider societal, ideological and political-economic

shifts that bring it closely in-step with an increasingly ‘post-liberal’ political environment. This, we suggest, is the source of its actual and potential success as a movement today.

In making this argument, the book is therefore the product of a long process of critique and self-criticism. When we have cause to criticise those who focused all their attention on Corbyn’s lack of ‘electability’ rather than analysing the content of his worldview, we are as much admonishing ourselves as anyone else. On the other hand, given that both of us have participated in various parts of the Marxisant left and anti-austerity movements which ended up forming Corbynism’s base, we are arguably more familiar with the theoretical perspectives informing much of the new Labour membership than many critics in the traditional press. This may be news to some on the right, but with a few notable exceptions, most of the Corbyn base and its core of intellectual leading lights are not Militant-esque ‘Trots’ or ‘Stalinists’. Rather what theoretical formation they possess will likely rest in left-ist backgrounds in some respects much like ours, influenced by non-aligned Marxisms, libertarian forms of socialism and communism, Italian autonomism, and the British New Left, as well as newer ideas around so-called ‘accelerationism.’ This is a heady and powerful mix of new thinking that has tremendously reinvigorated the intellectual resources of the UK left. But part of our argument here is that underpinning each of these is a form of rather old-fashioned orthodox Marxism, and it is through this shared inheritance that the connection is made with the more traditional Bennism represented by Corbyn himself.

Our own analysis, meanwhile, draws from a heterodox current of Marxian theory which holds no truck with the teleological economic determinism that characterises so much of even the most sophisticated orthodox theories. Nor does it

proclaim Marx a prophet, or insist that there is a readymade political programme to be cribbed from Marx's work, that just needs to be at last put into practice in the 'correct' way for everything to be made right with the world. Rather, this understanding of Marx sees his work as primarily a critical tool, a means to examine and interrogate the society in which we live, and to grasp the abstract forms which force us to exist by means of labour, commodities and money. This is politically thin gruel compared with the lavish promises of eternal harmony and red plenty which are the province of proponents of 'fully automated luxury communism' and the like. But it is a perspective which, like Marx himself, takes its cues from the world as it is, seeking to work through the real contradictions which run through society, rather than wishing them away in the name of the perfected society to come.

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We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who helped in bringing this book to fruition. Philippa Grand and the team at Emerald for their encouragement and patience; in alphabetical order Lewis Coyne, Jennifer Evans, Jack Griffiths, David Hirsh, Siobhan McAndrew, Paul Thompson, Jack Watkins and Jon Wellington for their thoughts, feedback and encouragement, large and small, on various iterations and presentations of bits and pieces associated with the book, for which all the usual disclaimers apply; and finally our partners and children for the support and inimitable brand of respite the latter offered as we slogged away in the final stages. We would also like to thank the organisers and participants of the Political Studies Association Political Marketing Group Meeting 'Political Marketing and the Future of the Labour Party' at the University of Salford on the 20th October 2017, where we test-ran some of the arguments presented here. Some of the arguments presented in the book appear in a

different form as an article in *British Politics*, for which we would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers.<sup>9</sup> Finally, this book is dedicated to the memories of Moishe Postone and Robert Fine, both of whom passed away whilst we were in midst of writing. We did not know them personally, and we make no claim as to whether they would agree with our conclusions, but without their work this book may well have not existed.