

# Corbynism, Hegemony, and Us

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*Sebastian Berg (Bochum) assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Corbynism, and its ongoing impact within and beyond the Labour Party. Viewed as a broader political shift, Corbynism has broadened the scope of what is regarded as sayable and doable in British politics, by challenging austerity politics and speaking out in support of refugees. While German critics of Corbynism frequently highlight Corbyn's reluctance to oppose Brexit and the allegations of antisemitism that plagued the Labour Party during his leadership, Berg contextualises both as symptomatic of disagreements over the likely impact of Brexit and over the definition of antisemitism that are yet to be resolved even after the end of Corbyn's leadership.*

If the term Corbynism refers to the era of an elected leader of the Labour Party, it is over now. Many seem to say, it is exactly that, and that for Labour and Britain, Corbynism has meant five wasted years. The dominant verdict by academic and media pundits on Corbyn's

leadership usually boils down to the following: he was not fit for the job. He oscillated, they claim, between too laid-back a style of leading the party (when it came to dealing with antisemitism in its ranks) and control freakery (when reacting to internal criticism of himself and his allies). These allies, according to this view, formed a hard-left clique that hijacked Labour's broad church and almost succeeded in transforming it into a narrow-minded sect. They managed to install in the party a blend of Trotskyist entryism, Stalinist democratic centralism, and post-1968 libertarian identity politics. The model for this ideological and strategic amalgam was the aborted attempt of the New Labour Left (not to be confused with New Labour) around Tony Benn to create internal democracy in the party and socialist democracy in the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Labour's 2019 election manifesto, according to Corbyn's critics, was an indiscriminate ragbag of material promises no one in the electorate had really asked for and that only a few people supported. Furthermore, critics condemned Corbyn's

handling of Brexit: he should have campaigned for a reversal of the 2016 referendum result since it was a ‘populist’ aberration, those of the ‘Love Corbyn, Hate Brexit’ wing of the party said. He should have embraced it wholeheartedly as the expression of working-class opinion, disagreed many of those who took a more traditional workerist position. Some approving sounds are made – even by critics – when they point to the revitalisation of the vastly expanded party that came with Corbyn’s leadership campaign. The relatively strong result in the 2017 election is also occasionally found worthy of applause. This predominantly negative story of Corbynism is popularised not only by the capital-and-small-c-conservative media that dominate published opinion in Britain, but also by the *BBC*, the *Independent* and the *Guardian*. Maybe this is the reason why this view has become hegemonic also among German professional observers of things British – most of us belong to the German section of the International of *Guardian* readers, and many though not all of us identify with some sort of pro-EU, anti-authoritarian, reformist, liberal (centre-)left.

## Achievements

**W**e all know and tirelessly try to teach that hegemonic interpretations are not necessarily correct. I think Corbynism is a case in point and contend that, if it is seen as a broader political shift rather than the era of a party leader, it constituted and still constitutes a force in British politics that has positively altered what it is possible to say and to do in the

field of institutional politics. With a discursive offensive similar to the one dubbed a “great moving right show” by Stuart Hall to explain the strength and success of Thatcherism as a new political project in the late 1970s, Corbynism has dramatically changed the programmatic frames of political debate. To some extent, it has achieved a moving left show. I hesitate to call it a ‘great moving left show’ because some observers, such as the veteran left-wing political scientist Colin Leys, have complained about the rather moderate social democratic core of the Corbynists’ anti-austerity stance (2018: 358-9). Still, the programme managed to challenge the unquestioned acceptance of austerity policies that were political common sense until 2015. Before that date, the only way to deal with the nationalised debt of the banking crisis supposedly was to reduce government spending, especially in the social services. In the years of the Conservative-Liberal coalition government this was sold as a national rescue package to which everyone had to contribute: “We are all in this together”, as David Cameron famously put it. The Labour Party under Ed Miliband did not radically criticise this approach but argued for a more socially just variety of it. It was only with Corbyn’s campaign for the party leadership that a fundamental critique of the politics of competitive austerity found its way into a British mainstream party. This challenge caused a revitalisation of British political debate, which became visible in the 2017 election campaign. John Trickett and Ian Lavery point out that “[i]t is sometimes hard to recall, in retrospect, the excitement which the manifesto release produced. It changed the landscape of

that election.” (2020) Indeed, I remember the atmosphere of open and almost enthusiastic debate in Britain days before the 2017 election – people talked politics wherever I went. On the day after the election, Neil Faulkner, author of *A Marxist History of the World: From Neanderthals to Neoliberals* and keynote speaker at a conference I attended at the time, called the result of the election the rebirth of reformism in Britain. It was exactly that: the Conservatives’ weak performance in the 2017 election (called by Theresa May to increase her majority in the House of Commons) showed the popular support for Labour’s recent anti-austerity position. Even the *Daily Telegraph* commented on the minority government’s 2018 budget:

*What’s more, if Mrs May’s drubbing at the polls was indeed a vote against “austerity”, the Government must cut its cloth accordingly, judged at this stage to be some kind of middle course between the “spend, spend, spend” recklessness of Jeremy Corbyn on the one hand and the penny pinching meanness of George Osborne on the other – a balancing act between the still-pressing need for fiscal discipline and the perceived electoral demand for more spending on public services. (Warner 2018)*

Philip Hammond, then chancellor of the Exchequer, purportedly admitted that with an Osborne-budget, one could not win against Corbyn. George Osborne himself, Hammond’s predecessor, commenting from the off, warned that the Conservatives should not try to “out-Corbyn Corbyn” (BBC News 2018). Thus, in terms of budget debates, Corbynism clearly set the agenda. Hence, it makes a lot of sense to claim that Corbynism posed the strongest challenge to neoliberalism within mainstream

politics since the latter’s rise to hegemony under Thatcher. Corbynism stands as a parallel to a development in the USA, recently acknowledged by Joe Biden, who admitted that his competitor Bernie Sanders has been most influential in recent years: he formed political discourse and helped create a movement for social justice in the USA, even if he failed to win the Democrats’ presidential candidacy again.

In addition to challenging neoliberalism, Labour has also become more courageous in its position on immigration. Corbyn refused to speak of refugees and migrants as problems and threats, and the 2017 election manifesto had a strong internationalist plank (even though there was some retreat from this position later). This was a remarkable shift in a party which for a long time had been afraid of showing signs of ‘softness’ on immigration. Furthermore, the party took a new approach to the urgent issue of climate change. Labour was centrally behind the declaration of ‘climate emergency’ by parliament in 2019. Its last election manifesto sketched out ambitious plans for a Green New Deal. For all these reasons, it would be far too early to declare Corbynism dead, leaving no political legacy, being irrelevant for the future of the Labour Party. What is going to happen under Keir Starmer is unclear and perhaps does not look very promising at the moment – but the party has changed since 2015 and it has managed to substantially alter the terms of political debate and policy making. If Boris Johnson really turns out to be a ‘red Tory’, as some claim, this will be a (perverse?) sign of Corbynism’s success, just like New Labour was a legacy of Thatcher.

## Problems

This does not mean that there were no problems, that Corbyn and the people around him made no mistakes, or that there is no need to analyse Labour's failures to win a general election in either 2017 or 2019. Many things went wrong. As was to be expected within a rapidly growing party in which the traditional centres of power (the parliamentary party and the party bureaucracy) fought a bitter struggle with the new ones (the leader and a massively expanded and outspoken membership who demanded to be heard and involved in the policy making process), experiments with intra-party democracy did not always go smoothly. In a recent edition of the left-wing magazine *Red Pepper*, members of *Momentum*, the intra-party movement originally formed to support Corbyn's leadership bid, self-critically took issue with their own occasional failures when it came to taking democratic procedures seriously (Nwogbo 2020). Anecdotal evidence gained in occasional conversations with activists over the last couple of years testifies to at times intimidating behaviour at party meetings by *Momentum* members. The new forces in the party were not automatically good. Concerning the old forces, a controversial inquiry has been set up within the party to analyse the allegations of a leaked internal report. It claims that people in the party bureaucracy attempted to sabotage the 2017 election campaign, to concentrate financial and personal resources on safe seats held by MPs on the party's right, and to obliterate internal inquiries into allegations of antisemitism. At the time of writing (late August

2020), some of the people accused in the report are threatening libel cases against the party.

For obvious reasons, German critics of Corbynism tended to focus on two issues: the handling of Brexit and allegations of antisemitism. With Brexit, the party faced an irresolvable dilemma: most of its MPs and grassroots activists agreed on the benefits of continuing EU membership and the need to do as much as possible to avoid the worst Brexit scenarios (even if many of them agreed on nothing else). Corbyn's allies in his showdowns with the parliamentary party before 2017, the mostly Europhile grassroots members, suddenly found themselves on the side of the majority of anti-Corbyn MPs in disagreeing with their leader on Brexit in 2018 and 2019. Labour's electorate, however, was split on the issue. Backing Brexit would have cost votes in one of Labour's strongholds, London. Campaigning for a second referendum after a negotiated deal alienated the other heartland, the Northern English 'red wall' constituencies. I am not sure whether there was a solution to this problem, but lack of clarity obviously was not one. Challenging austerity and arguing that the fundamental line of division was not between Leavers and Remainers but between the many and the few did not suffice in 2019 – even though the situation was further exacerbated by the Brexit Party's strategic decision not to nominate candidates in the 'red wall' constituencies, thereby effectively supporting the Tories. It is an interesting question to what extent the effectiveness of doorstep canvassing, representing a central pillar of Labour's strong

performance in 2017, was influenced by the Brexit issue: grassroots activists are crucial to this type of campaigning – does it affect their enthusiasm and credibility in canvassing if they disagree on a fundamental question with the candidate they campaign for?

**I**n Germany, commenting on antisemitism is always dangerous. I totally agree with everyone who states that several of Ken Livingstone's comments were unacceptable. To claim that Hitler backed Zionism was not only historically incorrect but also irrelevant – Hitler backed vegetarianism; still there were and are good reasons for being a vegetarian. The Labour Party, it should be noted, did react to Livingstone's statements and threatened disciplinary action. Livingstone left the party. (May I draw attention to the fact, without drawing facile comparisons between very different statements, that the Conservative Party did nothing in the case of a former foreign secretary and current prime minister who claimed women wearing a Burka looked like letter boxes and should expect to be asked to unveil during his constituency surgeries?) More seriously, the Labour Party was criticised heavily for only adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism in a modified form rather than wholesale. However, this definition is highly controversial and considered to be work in progress by many scholars and activists.<sup>1</sup> It was suggested that it conformed with the MacPherson Report's recommendation to consider as racism anything that is perceived by a victim of racism as racist. In MacPherson's context of investigating

the relationship of BAME people and the police after the murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence, this recommendation makes sense: it allows relatively powerless people to name cases of potential structural racism in a powerful institution – cases that otherwise would be ignored. The proposal becomes problematic once the empowerment to call something racist is extended to a government and to institutions. Should it be accepted unconditionally that something constitutes racism or antisemitism just because an institution claims that it does? Should the police have the right to define as 'policist' any criticism of its behaviour? (Again, two comparisons that, like all comparisons, have their problems: if the Turkish government claimed that any criticism of its dealing with the Kurdish population of Turkey constituted a case of Islamophobia, would this be accepted uncritically by Turkey's NATO allies? If the People's Republic of China claimed that condemning their recent moves against democracy in Hong Kong was an illegitimate mingling with their internal affairs – would this be unconditionally accepted by the British commentariat?). Of course, accusations did not only come from the Israeli government but from within the party: it was a distinctive feature of the antisemitism issue that obviously a link existed between people's support of, or opposition to, Corbyn and their position towards the Israeli government, the Palestinians, British political activity in the Middle East, etc. It fed into a longstanding dispute between Atlanticists and anti-Imperialists, between realists and idealists (in the language of international relations research), or between hawks and doves in the

Labour Party. Confronted with personal threats spreading through the social media, both sides completely lost trust in each other. The Corbyn-critical *Jewish Labour Movement* was utterly disgusted by what they considered as the party leadership's lack of understanding of current antisemitism (antisemitism's key feature being the refusal to accept the Israeli state's very right to exist) and by their lack of support for party members who became victims of antisemitic smears. The Corbyn-supporting *Jewish Voice for Labour* was equally annoyed with what they saw as the *Jewish Labour Movement's* hawkish Atlanticism, anti-Corbynism, and lack of compassion with the Palestinians. The situation was not helped by the media using this difficult debate as ammunition in their campaign to destabilise the party leadership. (It should be mentioned that several of the newspapers firing away at Labour's antisemitism had had no problems with othering Corbyn's predecessor Ed Miliband as a Jew, and the son of a Jewish Marxist who had come to Britain as an immigrant.)

## Lessons

To me there seem to be important lessons to be learned from Corbynism: Any project that is seen as a threat to the current distribution of power in society has to be aware of the strength of resistance it will provoke. Some politicians felt threatened by Corbyn's announcement to do politics differently and to democratise decision-making in the party. Some corporations felt threatened by announcements

of the rise of taxes, the redistribution of wealth, and the renationalisation of parts of the economy. Neither were squeamish in their reactions. Labour's internal investigations will hopefully reveal to what extent these forces of resistance have exerted influence within the party itself.

The vast majority of the media tend to collude with attempts to delegitimise and scandalise such a threat. This does not mean that they produce fake news, but that they define objectivity primarily from the perspective of watchdogs of the status quo of a capitalist democracy. The BBC's news agenda (with the BBC still being the most widely-trusted source of political information in Britain) is disproportionately influenced by the right-wing national press. This is one of the results of a recent investigation by the Media Reform Coalition at London's Goldsmiths College (2019: 2). Even Andy Burnham, one of Corbyn's former competitors in the 2015 leadership contest, pointed out that hostile media coverage on Corbyn by far exceeded what is common while dealing with a leader of the opposition. This has also been meticulously analysed by media scholars Bart Cammaerts and colleagues in a large quantitative and qualitative media content analysis project (2016). They concluded that in Corbyn's case, the media had mutated from watchdogs to "attackdogs".

Hence, for us, there is a need to base our political judgments on more than the most easily available sources of information (like the free-of-charge *Guardian* and *BBC* websites). If, as academics/intellectuals, we

can do something meaningful, it is to unmask hidden power structures behind, and agendas of, institutions and public as well as published discourse. And if we still believe that there is a world to win, we should criticise not only racism, antisemitism, nationalism, etc., but also those who relentlessly try to persuade us that there are no alternatives to the Germanies, Britains, or EUs we are currently living in. Corbynism has shown that there are.

### A Note on Corbyn's suspension

The above text was completed before the suspension of Corbyn's party membership as a response to his claim that, for political reasons, the EHRC's report on antisemitism in the party was dramatically overstated. Since then, within the party and among its Jewish members as well as among Jewish Corbyn supporters and opponents, disagreements are as strong as before if not stronger. While the *Jewish Labour Movement* welcomed the decision taken by the party's disciplinary unit (most likely in agreement with Keir Starmer), other groups, such as *Jewish Voice for Labour* and *Jewdas*, condemned it. I would like to point to three 'Jewish' voices in defence of Corbyn. First, veteran socialist feminist and member of Corbyn's Islington constituency party, Lynne Segal, pointed out that the report by the EHRC explicitly stated that, in accordance with Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights, it needs to be possible for Labour members to "express their opinions on internal Party matters, such as the scale of antisemitism

within the Party, based on their own experience and within the law" (2020: 26). She claims this right to apply to Corbyn too, even though she admits his comments directly after the report's publication were a mistake (2020). Second, in a reaction to Corbyn's suspension, *Jewdas* sent an open letter to Keir Starmer, demanding the suspension of several MPs and a member of the House of Lords for antisemitic statements. These included backing the erection of a statue for a suffragist who had expressed sympathies for the NSDAP, references to "a bit of a run on silver shekels" in connection to a list of people to be elevated to the House of Lords, a Jewish businessman being called "the puppet master to the entire Conservative cabinet", and the characterisation of antisemitism as "a racism that punches up" (Cohen 2020). The party leadership did not react (Instead, it suspended the party membership of others who criticized Corbyn's suspension). Third, already some time ago, writer, poet and journalist Eleanor Penny claimed in the journal *Red Pepper*:

*Jewish people disagree. (It's kind of our thing – critical engagement with scripture is one of the hallmarks of Jewish practise.) We disagree about Israel. We disagree about capitalism. We disagree about Corbyn. We disagree about how to pronounce those ring-shaped bread rolls. Those disagreements are not a reason to summarily turf out one group of Jewish people because they happen to disagree with you. Those disagreements should not be used as an opportunity for right-wing pundits to come crashing in and accuse left-wing Jewish people of race-treachery. (Penny 2018)*

Jewish people disagree about antisemitism in the Labour Party too.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Legal scholars see several problems with this definition because of, for example, vague formulations and gaps in what it covers. One of the problems, essential for understanding voices in the Labour Party sceptical of adopting the definition completely, is a certain imprecision in some of its passages referring to the state of Israel. The definition itself suggests that “criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.” However, antisemitism does mean, according to examples added to clarify the definition, “[d]enying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavor” or “[a]pplying double standards by requiring of it [Israel] a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation” (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance). This leaves open the question how, and who is, to decide on the boundaries between legitimate criticism and denial of the right to self-determination. This might be a minute detail when dealing with antisemitism in Britain, but it should be acknowledged that debates about the legitimacy of the ‘Boycott, Disinvestment, Sanctions’ Campaign and Corbyn’s dialogue with Palestinian groups including Hamas have been central parts of the controversy for some time. For a detailed analysis of the IHRA’s working definition, issued by an institution usually not suspected of condoning antisemitism, the German Rosa Luxemburg Foundation,