

# Corbyn, Populism and Power

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Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party in 2015 with wide member support but opposed by most of the party's parliamentary elite. In late 2016, his team, wary of a possible election and with the party lagging in the polls, decided on a populist approach, inspired by Trump's no-nonsense anti-elitism. Corbyn was never one of the establishment, through his career a serial rebel against the party leadership and was seen as having an honest 'unpolished authenticity' (Bulman 2016, Stewart and Elgot 2016). He was allowed to be himself, perceived to be close enough to the people for this to find resonance with them. In the 2017 election campaign he spoke at large rallies and moved with ease amongst ordinary people, in contrast to the Tory leader who was said to be robotic in interviews and was kept away from the public. He used the slogans of 'straight talking honest politics' when standing for the party leadership, and 'for the many not the few' at the general election. The latter is from Labour pre-

Corbyn, but has a populist content to it, for all of society, not just the core working class, and against the elite. Corbyn had a phase of using Trump-ist terminology about the system being 'rigged'. For many he has seemed a man of the people, speaking directly to them, close to and for them, despite the opposition of political, media and corporate elites; a British part of a global populist surge in politics, left versions in Southern European parties like Syriza and Podemos, Sanders in the USA and the Latin American left. At the 2017 election, Corbyn's Labour won an unexpectedly large vote, across classes, with strong support from the young.

March (2017a, 2017b) argues, however, that there is little populism in mainstream British politics, beyond politicians being people-centric and claiming to be close to the people; as much electoralism as populism. Mainstream political populism, he says, is 'fleeting, vague and tokenistic' and not populist in the true sense of being anti-

elitist and favouring popular sovereignty: 'seeing Corbyn as populist is, at best, a half-truth' (March 2017a). However, the glass is half full as well as half empty and there are populist dimensions to Corbyn's policies, although some of it leftism creating populism as much as populism behind his leftism.

There can be populism at several levels. Corbyn's advisors were drawing on a perception that he is close to the people; a populism *of* the people.

used definition is of being *for* the people against the elites. A stronger and narrower definition is as for popular sovereignty and popular democracy, a *by* the people populism. Economic populism is about being for the people against the elite in terms of material redistribution and egalitarianism. Populism is sometimes defined in terms of nationalism, against outsiders and exclusionary. Finally, there is populism by aim or achievement, intention or accident. Someone can achieve it without intending to.



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There is a politics of being popular *with* the people, with cross-class rather than sectional support, across divides and plural identities rather than based on a specific group. A simple and widely

### Populism in the party

Ed Miliband resigned as Labour leader after the 2015 election. In the ensuing leadership contest Corbyn took his turn to be the candidate of the left.

Everyone expected him to finish a distant fourth in a field of four. Leadership elections had changed, after Miliband, from an electoral college of unions, members and MPs to one member one vote, shifting power from MPs to the grassroots. However, Labour leadership candidates required nominations from 15% of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and Corbyn only secured enough because non-supporters proposed him to ensure a broad field of candidates. He attracted great support from the rank and file desperate for an alternative to austerity and to the neoliberalism and austerity-lite of Labour since the 1990s. Corbyn's personal appeal played a part. Many joined the party to vote for him. When he won, more signed up inspired by the direction he was taking the party. Corbyn achieved 60% of the vote, the next candidate 19%. He came first across all categories of members, registered supporters and affiliated members. Most of the PLP opposed him and once he was elected many would not serve in his shadow cabinet. Labour had voted in a leader more left-wing than its PLP and closer to the membership than the parliamentary party. There were echoes of populism and anti-elitism; a leader going beyond elites and based in the people.

Corbyn's early days as leader were met with hostile opposition from the PLP and snide and mocking coverage by the media. Tory Prime

Minister David Cameron derided his dress sense and perseverance in persisting as leader despite the onslaught he was under. But Corbyn, surrounded by solidaristic supporters and with the backing of the party membership, resisted pressure to resign. In 2016 a leadership challenge was made by Owen Smith. As incumbent, Corbyn no longer needed the minimum PLP nominations, which he would have failed to obtain this time. He won with 61% of the vote. Smith received a lower proportion of support than the three losing candidates combined in 2015. Corbyn had bypassed the media and PLP elites again and once more gained endorsement straight from party members.

The party has grown phenomenally since Corbyn stood for and became leader, with 570,000 members at the end of 2017, compared to 200,000 when he became leader, 405,000 at the peak under Blair, and 150,000 for the Conservative Party (Perry 2017, Waugh 2017). Corbyn brought many into the party: the young who had been alienated by anodyne Labour beforehand, excited by a genuine anti-austerity alternative; Old Labour supporters who had left the party or grown disillusioned and inactive; even Marxists and socialists who saw a radical leader and hope for the social democratic parliamentary road they had previously dismissed.

Since Corbyn took the helm party reforms have increased the power of members, with more representatives on the National Executive Committee and a decrease in PLP nominations needed by contenders for the leadership, reducing the elite veto. A party review has investigated how to further expand members' power in policy making. Proposals include more representation on party bodies, again reducing the role of the PLP in nominating leadership contestants, and the mandatory reselection, and so possible deselection, of parliamentary candidates. Political compromises have led to changes in these directions, if not all the way in each case. The review aims to challenge the boundaries between party and movement. What may have seemed utopian, and raising contradictions between party and movement, now looks, in the context of change in the party, plausible and coherent.

So, in the party Corbyn is popular with the people, for them and on popular sovereignty grounds could be said to be populist. His place within Labour and proposed reforms fit, to an extent, with of-, with-, for- and by-populisms. But spreading democracy to party members favours the left so it may be politics leading to populism as much as populism being the driving force. And how populist Corbyn is, is affected by whether populism *in* the

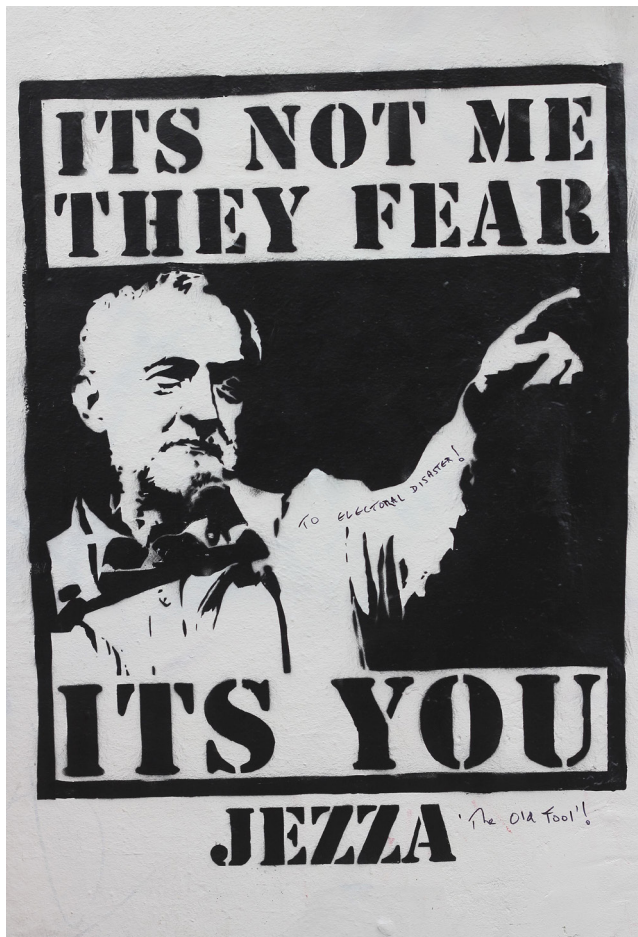
party becomes populism *of* it; whether popular support for the leader in the party translates into the same across society electorally, and party democratisation extends in government to popular democracy in society as a whole.

### **Populism in support: of and with the people?**

In 2017, Prime Minister May calculated she could increase her majority against a party with a left-wing leader under siege and called an election. But Corbyn won much greater support than expected. Labour's share of the vote rose from 30% in 2015 to 40%, compared to the Tories' 42%, and Labour gained an additional 30 seats in parliament.

Where did Corbyn's support lie (see Curtis 2017)? His, and that for May, was cross-class, popular rather than class-based and sectional. He won especially significant support amongst the young and expanding ranks of the more highly educated. This dropped amongst the older and those without degrees who supported the Tories more strongly. This group will shrink as the educated young grow older and take their place. A key issue is whether the backing of the young educated for Corbynism is lifecycle, so they become more right-wing as they get older, or generational and a sign of a lasting left anti-austerity cohort, in which case the Corbynite proportion of the population will grow over time. Corbyn

can mobilise the liberal-left educated middle class, especially the younger members of this strata and public-sector workers, although his acceptance of Brexit could risk alienating a mostly pro-Remain group. It is not clear if he has support from the insecure precariat, a cross-class group, but they seem likely to be open to his anti-austerity politics more than Labour's prior submission to neoliberalism, and Labour was well ahead amongst the unemployed in the election.



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With the private sector aspirational working class and less educated middle class, materialistically oriented and sometimes self-employed, Corbyn may have a problem where Blairism has

more appeal. The question is whether this is enough to lose Labour elections.

Post-election surveys did not show strong support amongst Labour voters for Corbyn as 'Prime Minister material' but suggested belief in his policies (Barasi 2017). Bringing anti-austerity and redistributive politics back into mainstream political discourse has involved hegemonic leadership by Corbyn, finding points of contact between the material reality of people's lives and his ideas and mobilising people behind them, something Thatcher was also skilled at.

So, Corbyn can be seen as populist in being of and with a cross-section of the population, not predominantly a particular class. But while he did well in the general election and won broad support, some groups do not support him in large numbers and he did not win. The Tories were returned to office and also received wide backing, so Corbyn has no greater claim to popular support than them. Furthermore, is cross-class support, or seeking it, which all politicians want, populism or just electoralism? Being of the people, understanding their concerns, expressing them and winning their support, may not be populism, or just thin populism. Being for the people against the elites or democratic empowerment of the people, by-the-people politics, are more clearly in the category of populism.

## Populism in society: for and by the people?

Corbyn attacks elites and argues for the people on economic grounds, criticising tax evasion and the top few's riches. The 2017 manifesto proposes the highest 5% earners pay more income tax, everyone else to give no more. The middle classes are not targeted for extra income tax, beneficiaries of redistribution to be the broad mass not just the working class, giving a populist as much as a class basis to Labour's egalitarian approach. Labour propose greater popular power in the economy: doubling the size of the co-operative sector, giving employees first right of refusal if their companies go up for sale, for local and community forms of non-profit public ownership in the energy and water sectors, and widening trade union representation in workplaces. The party proposes nationalisation of rail and the Royal Mail. A party report suggests further expansion of municipal and local social ownership, and democratised national state ownership. In the public sector, Labour intend to expand local participation in NHS planning, reverse health service privatisation, and re-insource public services. They say they will increase community involvement in local government planning and fan participation in sports governance. Labour advocate a more representative make-up in decision making across

policy areas, as well as within the party, and lowering of the voting age to 16 (Labour Party 2017a, 2017b).

The party propose a constitutional convention on extending democracy nationally, regionally and locally. The policy forum developing their next manifesto takes submissions from any members of the public. It is consulting on devolving power to local communities, how to facilitate participation and democratic accountability in them, extending democratic ownership in the economy and accountability of educational institutions to parents, children and the community. Corbyn has argued for public involvement in local budget decisions, referenda on public service outsourcing, greater trade union bargaining rights, and staff representation on executive remuneration committees. He proposes more online democracy, citizens' assemblies, and replacement of the House of Lords with elected representation; contrasting proposals for bottom-up democracy with monopolisation of power in the 'closed circles' of central government, the heights of the civil service and corporate boards (Smith 2016).

Corbyn's politics are *of, for* and *with* the people in economic egalitarian anti-elitism. There are *by* the people elements in the economic bases for participation that redistribution can facilitate. Economic egalitarian

populism may have political power populism effects. Party policies involve shifting power to the public sector for and on behalf of the people away from private interests and economic elites. They propose a more democratic economy, greater direct popular

Corbyn's Labour say funds should be diverted to areas where public services are affected by immigration (Labour Party 2017a: 28-9), seemingly endorsing discourses that immigration causes social problems. However, while he has said that Brexit will end free



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participation in the workplace and public-sector planning, and devolution of power closer to the people in localities politically (see Guinan and O'Neill 2018). There are populisms of, for, and on behalf of the people against the elites and by the people in these policies.

### **Nationalist and economic populism**

Populism has been defined as about nationalism and exclusionary. Corbyn is primarily focused on the UK and the interests of people in Britain. But the 2017 manifesto contains internationalism in the tradition of the Labour left (Labour Party 2017a: ch. 12). And Corbyn is not nationalist especially. He does not promote Britishness as an identity, and his politics are not ethnically exclusive like right-wing populism.

movement he also states this does not pre-determine a Labour government limiting it (Kuenssberg 2017). One of Miliband's 5 election pledges in 2015 was 'controls on immigration'. Corbyn's manifesto, though, makes a clear rhetorical differentiation from anti-immigration sentiment. There is a strongly worded disavowal of scapegoating and blaming migrants for problems they did not cause and for valuing their contribution to the UK (Labour Party 2017a: 28-9). Corbyn argues, like Miliband, that problems ascribed to immigration, such as the undercutting of pay and conditions, are labour market issues, requiring employment protections rather than immigration controls.

Corbyn accepts Brexit, exiting the single market and is against a second

referendum on a completed Brexit deal. But Brexit was won in a referendum and his acceptance is for democratic rather than nationalist reasons. His history of Euroscepticism is about opportunities for a left government outside a neoliberal EU, not xenophobia. In his departure from nationalism and racism there are clear differences between right-wing populism and Corbyn's politics. He campaigned for Remain, although perhaps for political as much as conviction reasons, and has marked his position off from the Conservatives' by advocating continuing British membership of the Customs Union.

**I**t can be argued that nationalist-populism is not populist as it divides ordinary people as much as unites them, whereas economic populism is about a unified popular mass against a small wealthy elite. It less divides the many amongst themselves, more the many against the few. Corbyn's left-populism is economic and about economic equality and redistribution, against rich elites, and for greater economic inclusion, justice and rights for most of the people. Left economic populism has a more socio-economic focus than the socio-cultural nationalist right concerned with identity and is more inclusive and pluralist than the cultural and exclusive nationalist-populism of the right.

**B**ut left and right populism do not differ because the left one is socio-

economic and right-wing populism is cultural. There is a neoliberal populism that is socio-economic and stresses individualism and property rights; taking power from the state and public sector and giving it to people through private ownership and market choice. The left departs from this by having a collectivist and redistributive concept of empowerment. For politicians like Corbyn, the state not the market, and government not capital, are for the people. So, Corbyn's populism differs from the far right's nationalism by its socio-economic and inclusive approach but also from neoliberal right populism by different conceptions of socio-economic justice and rights for the people and the means to these.

**T**he horseshoe model that sees left and right as curving close in their radical reaches does not work here. The economic egalitarianism and social democracy of Corbyn is far away from the ethno-nationalism of the radical right and the economics of neoliberal populism. Economic egalitarianism creates the populism in his politics. It is ideology that makes his populism; not populism that makes his politics.

### **Left, right, populism and power**

**C**orbyn is a democratic socialist but his policies are social democratic, for political as much as ideological reasons, for egalitarian and socialist institutions



within capitalism. Labour's policies for rail nationalisation do not require the

But Corbyn is radical measured against neo-liberal austerity-lite



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expropriation of private property, just non-renewal of contracts for companies running train services. 60% of the population support rail nationalisation and state train operations are common in countries like Germany and France where rail travel is superior. A majority support nationalisation in areas like water, the Royal Mail and energy (Smith 2017). A proposed National Investment Bank has featured in past Labour policies and other countries. Quantitative easing for the people echoes Keynesianism, once accepted across the political spectrum. Abolishing £9000 student fees sounds radical. But 20 years ago there was free university education throughout the UK as there is in countries like Scotland, Germany and Denmark.

Labour of the '90s onwards and after 30 years of neoliberalism as the paradigm for politics in the UK. And alongside for- and on-behalf-of the people policies that shift power from private interests to the public sector, are potentially radical by-the-people proposals for a mass movement-based rather than elite-led Labour Party, and greater economic democracy and popular participation in the running of public services. At the same time, it is leftism and egalitarianism that make this populism as much as populism constructing Corbyn's ideology. Categories of left and right tell us as much about Corbyn as those of elitism and populism.

Britain has been under the political and ideological spell of neoliberalism since 1979. Political discourse shifted to the right such that market principles became a norm for public policy decisions, as well as for the private sector, and the burden of proof came to lie with those who want to use collective provision and planning rather than private sector delivery and the market. This was a path set by Thatcher but further established by Blair, who ruled out alternatives in his politics of political caution and the market. Labour vacated alternative ground. There have been no mainstream political forces across the UK to oppose this and take another way. Advocating alternatives has been left with social movements, pressure groups, Green and small left and parties and academics. But rather than trying to compete with the Tories on their own grounds, Corbyn has brought collective provision, economic equality, and social democracy back into mainstream politics. He has reintroduced as normal the role of the state for the people, and concerns for the people less focused on individual achievement and more on collective effort and the poor. Instead of accepting dominant discourses of austerity, Corbyn has mobilised support for an alternative to austerity and moved it from marginal to mainstream.

Corbyn's leadership has been endorsed by party members against Labour's

parliamentary elite and won cross-class support in the 2017 general election. His policies match with egalitarianism rather than individualism in the electorate. It remains to be seen whether this of-, with- and for-the-people populism will extend to an electoral majority. If it does Corbyn's programme will challenge political, media and corporate elites of the UK. He proposes economic egalitarianism alongside the beginnings of a populist reconstruction of power towards the people within and beyond his party. There will be a fightback by those with power and Corbyn may need to appeal to the people in and beyond the party and to extra-parliamentary forces in his defence. In the face of elite attacks, his economic populism may rely on an expansion of his political populism that gives power to the people.

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