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‘Lovely People but Utterly Deluded’? British Political Science’s Trouble with Corbynism

Abstract:

This paper argues that political scientists in Britain have, for the most part, failed to adequately understand Corbynism (i.e. the movement surrounding Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn) as a distinctive iteration of left politics. To substantiate this claim, we begin by mapping a consensus in British politics scholarship about the central features of Corbynism, namely that it is a misguided politics characterised by poor leadership, a “hard left” ideological orientation, and a populist flavour. In the second part of the paper, we suggest that this unfavourable characterisation of Corbynism relies on problematic analytic assumptions about leadership, the left, and populism. Furthermore, we argue that such narratives do not withstand empirical scrutiny, largely because they fail to do justice to the heterogeneous strands that constitute the politics of Corbynism. In the final part of the paper, we offer an explanation for political scientists’ trouble with Corbyn, highlighting the continued dominance of the Westminster Model, widespread confusion surrounding the descriptive/normative relation, and considerable convergence between academic and media depictions of Corbynism. Overall, we suggest that political scientists’ failure to take seriously the full complexity of the Corbyn movement requires rectification.

Keywords: Corbyn; Labour Party; Left Politics; Political Science; Westminster Model

> ‘If Corbyn is the answer, then the Labour Party is asking the wrong question’ (Observer editorial, 19/07/15)
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> “you can do analysis of Corbyn and his “movement” (I have done it) but the essence of the whole thing is that they are just thick as pigshit” (Janan Ganesh, quoted in Allen 2018, p. 126).
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> ‘Jeremy Corbyn has to go. He is demonstrably unfit to be leader of the Opposition or to be Prime Minister. He lacks the personal skills needed, the temperament, or the ability to balance an argument between competing perspectives. He is also holding Labour back from being a credible party of government. Indeed, it is unclear if Labour is even a credible party of opposition’ (Crines, 2017, no pagination)

It has become almost cliché to note that the rise of Jeremy Corbyn in British politics caught academics and commentators off guard. Not only did British politics academics fail to anticipate the rise of Corbynism, their dominant response, as Ben Worthy points out, ‘have been somewhere between unimpressed to hostile towards Corbyn’ (Worthy 2017, no pagination). But why were we so blindsided by his ascendancy and how can we explain the growing distance between widespread predictions of doom regarding his leadership and the revitalised left politics that keeps him in place? In other words, why does British political studies still seem to have a Corbyn problem?

We develop an answer to this question across three parts of the article. In the first, we identify several recurrent tropes which, taken together, constitute the dominant consensus about this new politics in academic and media circles. More concretely, we suggest that the narrative that has come to prevail asserts that Corbyn is an ineffective and/or incompetent party leader and that his ineptitude casts doubt on the Labour Party’s viability as a party of government; that his election to the helm of the Party marks a move towards an ‘extreme’ or ‘hard left’ form of politics and, finally, that Corbyn’s politics is symptomatic of a more general unwelcome trend, namely the rise of populism.

In the second part of the article, we offer a counter-narrative to what we suggest is a fundamental misdiagnosis and misrepresentation of ‘Corbynism’, understood here as

a social democratic project and a nascent, albeit still inchoate, hybrid movement which includes, but cannot be reduced to, Corbyn, as the leader of the Party nor to his team of advisers. In so doing, we seek to explore and contextualise – rather than offer final judgements about – the set of ideas and practices that have accompanied his ascendancy in the Labour Party and reflect on what they might tell us about the state and fortunes of the left in Britain. We start our riposte by turning to the question of leadership, unpacking the assumptions that sustain the idea that he is not fit for office, before suggesting that his impact may be better understood in terms of what he signifies at this particular political conjuncture: who he is and what he does matters less than *what he represents*, especially in light of how he compares to other politicians on either end of the ideological spectrum. We then go on to challenge the idea that Corbynism can, in any meaningful way, be characterised as 'hard' left. And finally, we argue for considerably more care and attention to the category of "populism", and suggest that the tendency to cast Corbynism as populist says more about the over-use of "populism" in contemporary scholarly discourse than it does about Corbynism.

In the final part, we offer a tentative explanation for the striking lack of sustained intellectual curiosity on the part of British politics academics toward this new left landscape, highlighting three key difficulties: first, a myopic conceptualisation of 'the political' and 'politics', second, a lack of methodological reflexivity combined with a tendency to allow normative/political judgements to trump careful, thick description and balanced analysis and, third, the role of the media and the symbiotic relationship that academics are developing with it. In other words, the neglect and misrepresentation of Corbynism must be situated within a wider academic and political climate and can only be rectified when this climate is recognised and contested.

Before proceeding, two points of methodological clarification are needed. First, our argument draws on over three years of Leverhulme funded research dedicated to chasing down various manifestations of Corbynism from small, intimate academic workshops held in the back offices of think tanks to packed Church hall rallies. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of 101 left activists, the vast majority Labour members and Corbyn supporters, as well as participant observation

at two Labour Party conferences (2016 and 2017) and the World Transformed Events that ran alongside them. It is important to note, however, that the argument we present here is not intended to be a summary of our empirical findings.[1] Rather, our aim is to offer a critical analysis of the dominant narratives circulating in British academic circles about the Corbyn project and of the main analytical categories upon which they rest. For this reason, the empirical examples offered in this article are primarily illustrative in function and are geared toward justifying our claim that these narratives are simplistic, at best, and biased and/or ahistorical, at worst and, as such, do a disservice to scholarship on British politics in general and to a relatively new political phenomenon that deserves more thoughtful, even if critical, attention than it has garnered so far.

Second, a word on the scope of the sources analysed. Our critical analysis of the narratives being deployed by British political scientists to make sense of Corbynism draws on two main sources: peer-reviewed articles in academic journals, and blogposts (on sites such as The Conversation, the LSE Policy and Politics blog, and PSA Political Insight). Although blogs constitute a rather different genre of writing that often seeks to address a potentially wider target audience, we have decided to include them as a relevant site of 'knowledge' production to the extent that they play a key role in shaping the broadly anti-Corbyn consensus within UK political science. Indeed, given the increasing importance of the impact agenda and the pressures being placed on scholars to disseminate their findings as widely as possible, these blogs can be seen as a continuation of academic commentary in a more popular format.[2] In addition to blogposts it should also be noted that the anti-Corbyn thrust of the UK political science community is also expressed and sustained on social media: indeed, the informality of twitter debate is that political scientists' normative opposition to the Corbynite left is even more overt and explicit than in more formal channels of publication.[3] However, a more systematic analysis of socially mediated narratives about Corbynism lies beyond the scope of this paper.

I. **(Mis)diagnosing and (Mis)representing Corbynism**

This section aims to trace three dominant framings of Corbyn and Corbynism reproduced in published articles and comment pieces written by fellow members of the UK political science community. Crucially, while there are of course differences in how individual political scientists explain and understand this left politics, we have found a striking consensus around Corbyn's lack of leadership qualities, extremism and populism. What is more, this broadly unfavourable reportage of Corbyn is shared and reproduced by much of the media.

Leadership and Electability

> 'Despite the early optimism of his supporters, Corbyn already looks like being one of the most ineffective and unpopular opposition leaders in the post-war era' (Quinn, 2017, no pagination)

Dire appraisals of his leadership capacities have defined much of the academic commentary on Corbyn with scholars such as John Curtice, Steven Fielding and Quinn, quoted at the start, all lamenting his personal ineptitude and what they foresee as Labour's inevitable electoral annihilation (Curtice 2015, p.146; Fielding 2017a). More specifically, all seem to agree that Corbyn fails miserably on three widely-cited criteria for good leadership: acceptability, electability and competence (Stark 1996; Quinn 2016; Crines *et al* 2018). In terms of the first - i.e. the imperative that a prospective leader must be accepted by the party at large and be capable of fostering party unity – the evidence seems to speak for itself. After all, the Labour Party passed a no confidence motion against him in 2016, Owen Smith forced him into a second leadership bid and it remains true that a small, but significant percentage of the grassroots membership as well as high percentage of the Parliamentary Labour Party are set firmly against him.

On electability, the verdict has been equally damning, at least until recently, with Jeffery and Bale (2017, no pagination) predicting a 'post-catastrophe Commons' prior to the 2017 election, one in which Labour would be decimated. While the main reason put forward for this anticipated doomsday scenario concerns his poor leadership skills, it also feeds off several other assumptions. One such is that pro-Corbyn activists are merely 'clicktivists' who eschew active campaigning, a point reinforced

by the ESRC Party Members Project which states that, 'new members [i.e. those who joined around the time of the "Corbyn surge"] are plainly not as keen to get stuck in' (Poletti *et al* 2016, no pagination). Another concerns the assumption that electoral victory in Britain can only be achieved from the political centre ground and that Corbyn's enthusiastic commitment to left-wing politics will be his undoing (Hindmoor 2018, p. 47). Indeed, not understanding or accepting this political truism is part of what makes supporters of Corbyn, while "lovely people", so irritatingly and "utterly deluded" (Bale 2016, p. 1).

In addition to not being acceptable or electable, for most British political scientists Corbyn is also patently not competent. The supporting evidence put forward for this judgment includes criticisms of his general demeanour and persona, his equivocation on Brexit, his handling of the Anti-Semitism crisis that has dogged the party, his perceived interest in "protest" rather than "policy" and his controversial foreign policy stances on issues like Palestinian rights and Trident. What is notable about these attacks on his proficiency is how personal they have become as the musing of one journalist illustrates when describing him as: 'A rather dreary bearded fellow who …doesn't drink alcohol or eat meat and wears shorts teamed with long dark socks exposing an expanse of pale, hairy English shin' (Pearson, 2015, no pagination).

"Hard Left"

While few would dispute that Corbyn and allies such as John McDonnell are in many senses more "left-wing" than their predecessors, it is notable how quickly their brand of leftness was roundly judged by academic and media commentators alike as "hard", uncompromising and irresponsibly "radical". So, for example, while Ben Jackson describes Corbyn's support as underpinned by 'those on the hard left' (Jackson 2016, p.3) and Hindmoor characterises his politics as "far left" (2018, p. 68), others like Thomas Quinn prefer the language of "radical-leftist" (Quinn 2016, p. 761). Using rather colourful military metaphors, Andrew Crines adds his voice to the consensus claiming that Labour is currently 'occupied by the hard left and its Generals are sitting in key positions' (Crines, 2016, no pagination). Talk of "Corbynite ultras" (Steven Fielding 2017b), "Corbynistas" and Momentum "militants" (Pabst 2017, p.

504), all of whom are deemed to be 'ideologically pure but politically impotent' (Dorey and Denham 2016, p.261), contribute to painting a picture of Corbynism as the resuscitation of a "looney left". This view has to a large extent been reinforced by much media coverage, for instance through the deployment of familiar signifiers of Cold War-era communism, such as the beret or the hammer and sickle.

This apparent "hardening" of Labour's leftism is sometimes blamed on what has been called "entryism", i.e. members of the extra-parliamentary Marxist left cynically joining the Labour Party with the purpose of steering it in a more radical direction. Although rarely explicit, "hard left entryists" are cast as infiltrators, "outsiders within", for whom electability is a secondary concern, given that they think that parliamentary politics is 'a bourgeois preoccupation which invariably result[s] in the ideological betrayal of the working class' (Dorey 2017, p.12). With Stalinists and Trotskyites supposedly filling the ranks of the once Labour Party, it has become seen as self-evident that Corbynism is aligned with the "far", "hard", and "radical" left.

Populism

While authors vary in terms of how they characterise the alleged populism of the Corbyn project, there seems to be a growing consensus that Corbynism reflects a broader "populist turn", a view that has gained traction since the 2017 election proved that Corbyn is more electable than British scholars had initially anticipated. Matt Flinders, for example, contends that 'the 'Corbyn effect' was essentially synonymous with the adoption of a populist strategy that sought to re-frame the Labour Party as a fresh, new, anti-political, anti-establishment 'outsider' party' (Flinders 2018, p.222), while Peter Dorey (2017, pp.309-310) casts Corbynism as 'a variant of Left-wing populism'. Others, on the other hand, have sought to flag up what they see as the similarities between Corbynism and its right-wing counterparts. Particularly assertive in this regard is a recent essay on 'postliberalism' by Adrian Pabst, which suggests that UKIP and Corbyn 'share a certain anti-liberal outlook' in which, among other things, both 'promote a plebiscite populism that locks politics into a dialectical movement between empty mass theatrics and the power of oligarchy old or new' (Pabst 2017, p.504). A more nuanced take is offered in a recent article by Peter Kerr

et al on discourses of "modernisation" in British politics, which notes that 'Corbyn, Farage, May, the Brexiteers and so on…. mobilise and recruit voters around populist appeals which identify past practices and values that need to be restored as a corrective to modernising trends' (Kerr *et al* 2018, p.302).

Whatever the nature of the comparisons, what is unmistakeable, at least in the UK context, is that equating Corbynism with populism is to frame it as potentially threatening to British democracy as such.[4] As Matt Flinders summarises the problem, Corbynism understood as a 'left-wing strain of populism' must be seen as 'a dangerous political virus' (Flinders 2018 p. 233) aimed at only obtaining and retaining power (p. 255).

In sum, there is considerable convergence within the UK political science community around the view that Corbyn is a bad leader who stems from and attracts the "militant" left which today is increasingly adopting "populist" strategies. Taken together, these three "truths" serve to justify the derision and alarm expressed by British political scientists, a position that has been sustained by mainstream media outlets across the ideological spectrum (Cammaerts *et al* 2016).

2. Demythologising Corbynism: a critique and a recasting

These academic representations of Corbynism are, we argue, highly problematic both empirically and analytically. Empirically, most of the claims made are at best rather partial – focusing disproportionately on one specific feature of Corbyn's politics – and at worst simply inaccurate, grounded in clichéd mischaracterisation rather than careful scholarly analysis. Above all, the depictions rest on the use of analytic categories e.g., "leadership" or "hard left" that are not adequately conceptualised or explained, let alone justified. Let's take each narrative in turn.

On Leadership and Electability

Unpersuaded by the current wisdom prevailing among British academics that Corbyn is simply a "bad" leader, we would like to proffer two counter-narratives. The first is that even in light of Stark's criteria, Corbyn's leadership skills are perhaps less poor than initially portrayed. The second is that applying this criteria with no reference to the conception of leadership that animates Corbyn, his team or his supporters provides a very narrow, self-referential evaluation of this project.

Starting with Stark's first criteria, i.e., *acceptability*, while, undoubtedly, the bulk of the Parliamentary Labour Party is uncomfortable with Corbyn, he nonetheless continues to draw broad support from the Labour Party membership, despite the recent crisis over Brexit. In this regard, it perhaps bears repeating that he won the initial leadership race with 59.5% of first preference votes, compared to 19% for the next contender, Andy Burnham. This vote of confidence only increased a year later to 61.1% when he beat Owen Smith in the 2016 race. Moreover, it is also worth noting that in 2015 Corbyn received support from 44% of those who joined the Labour Party before 2010 and 49% from those who joined under Ed Miliband (Younge 2018). This seems to suggest that rather than constituting the spontaneous eruption of a 'personality cult' within Labour, the results of the leadership races reflected a deeper ideological shift in the direction of the party, one that pre-dated Corbyn. Last but not least, Corbyn's scoring on the acceptability criterion clearly depends entirely on who needs to "accept" him – the Party, as a whole, or the PLP? If it is the former, he has achieved the biggest mandate ever granted to a Labour leader. If it is the latter, he remains unacceptable.

In terms of *electability*, Labour's performance at the 2017 General Election to a large extent falsified the forecasts of British Political Scientists, resulting in an outpouring of apology and self-deprecating mea culpas (see, for example, Bale, 2017; Worthy, 2017). With Labour winning 40% of the vote, the Party under Corbyn's leadership managed to strengthen its mandate by 9.6 %, the largest such increase since 1945 (Dorey 2017, p. 319). Thus, not only did Corbyn contribute to reversing the long term decline in Labour's vote share (which had begun under Blair), he was also able to wage an election campaign that, as Dorey concedes, played a pivotal role in the election results given that many Labour supporters resolved to vote for Labour during

the campaign itself. In this context, claims that Corbyn is a liability to the Labour Party's electoral fortunes now seem unfounded (Dorey 2017, p. 317)

Moreover, the dramatically improved membership figures of the Labour Party, largely under the auspices of Corbyn, from 166,000 in 2008 (van Biezen *et al* 2012, p. 252) to 554,000 today (Audickas *et al* 2017), may also help explain its unexpectedly good election results. While membership size does not necessarily correlate with electoral performance, Bale *et al* conclude their survey of British political party members by noting that 'it's impossible to prove, but the results of the 2017 general election – and in particular the performance of the Labour Party – suggest that having more members can make a difference' (Bale *et al* 2018b, p.39). If this is in fact the case and Bale *et al*. are correct, then one can only assume that Corbyn's "acceptability" at least to his Party membership, if not his PLP, has most likely enhanced his "electability".

Finally, we suggest that assessing the "competence" of a leader, Stark's third criterion, depends on which leadership activities one prioritizes as well as the standards by which they are assessed. For whatever missteps Corbyn may have made and continues to make as an individual leader, it remains indisputable that over the past three years he has enabled and even inspired his team and supporters, in and outside of the Labour Party, to start developing the intellectual backbone of a new left politics, one now defined by a plethora of position papers and new policies (Eaton 2018). This process of intellectual renewal has centred particularly around discussions of new forms of ownership, "post-work", universal basic income, and automation (Williams and Srnicek, 2015; Bastani, 2019). And while relatively few of these ideas found their way into the 2017 Manifesto – and have been scathingly dubbed "cyborg socialism" by some within the party (Cruddas, 2018) – they nonetheless suggest that there is a process, albeit contested, of intellectual revitalisation within the Corbynite left.[5]

This new found intellectual confidence is particularly striking given that, as Tim Bale's own careful work on Ed Miliband's tenure makes clear, it follows a period of deep paralysis in which the Labour Party found itself unable to respond to any of the key issues of the day, i.e, the financial crash, the perceived immigration crisis and alleged profligate welfare spending of government (Bale 2015). Thus, a verdict of

"incompetence" requires some reflection on the content of the politics on offer as well as on the ways in which it speaks to (or not) the interests and needs of the British public.

Moving away from the Stark criteria, we suggest that an alternative way of adjudicating the vitality and legitimacy of a leader is to take seriously the wishes and demands of those being led, i.e., to pursue a more immanent critique. From this vantage point, Corbynism must be seen, among other things, as a form of collective activism oriented to empowering communities from the ground up. To this extent, leadership is less about the capacities of an individual to guide the Party from here to there and more about his or her ability to open up space for others to think and act creatively. Corbyn captures this conception of leadership when he explains: 'The fact is, it's not about me: it's about us, it's about a movement, it's about people, it's about ideas, it's about people looking for some collective way forward' (quoted in Unterrainer 2016, p. 14). Corbynism, then, can be seen as an open-ended project to which a range of actors are expected to contribute and which demands a model of leadership that is process oriented, dialogical and participatory (Wainwright 2018). Indeed, it is our intuition that it is precisely because he has eschewed the traditional ideological and aesthetic trappings of a media savvy leader that Corbyn has been more successful than many anticipated.

In sum, not only does Corbyn perform rather better on traditional indices of party leadership than some allow for, his election as party leader and subsequent performance points towards a different normative model of leadership, one that cannot be made sense of in the literature as it stands. Indeed, this raises questions about the utility and objectivity of this kind of fixed criteria, especially when they are so clearly disconnected from the aspirations and benchmarks of success upheld by those being judged wanting. In other words, a more fruitful appraisal of Corbyn's leadership would interrogate the claim that Corbyn is a bad leader *tout court* and rather pursue and defend the argument that the conception of leadership that he and his supporters seem to be committed to is wrong headed or dangerous or both. But this would require sustained empirical analysis and a degree of conceptual reflection, an exercise that so far only a few British journalists are beginning – post-Labour Party Conference 2018 – to undertake.

On Leftism

As already indicated, a taken for granted truth among British academics is that what we are witnessing in Corbynism is the resurrection of an "extreme" or "hard" left politics, a hangover from the factional disputes last seen in the 1980s (Hannah, 2017). Here we want to draw attention to two conceptual difficulties that soon become apparent when one scratches the surface of this claim. The first pertains to the common habit of political scientists to define the left in terms of a fixed set of policy attitudes, thereby evacuating from view its historical lineage as well as its broader political and normative content. A second conception of the "hard left" that does a lot of the heavy lifting when it comes to prevailing caricatures of Corbynism is more implicit in the literature and bundles together various stereotypes from authoritarianism to proletarianism. Either way, neither of these framings have been subjected to critical scrutiny.

With respect to the first conceptual misrepresentation, characterisations of Corbynism as "hard left" usually rest on two measures which emerge from quantitative political science and which both involve the use of scales. In the first case this scale is based on an individual's self-placement on a 0-10 left/right scale (see, for example, Bale *et al* 2016; Quinn 2016). A second, supposedly more 'objective' measure, involves matching peoples' attitudes to certain policy measures (such as taxation, NHS spending etc.) and then plotting them on a scale from left to right (Bale *et al* 2016). Even on its own terms, however, this second way of calibrating left politics throws up some very counter intuitive results such as the recent finding by Bale *et al* that UKIP members are apparently more left-wing than members of the Liberal Democrats (2016).

Leaving such surprises aside, we want to raise questions about the meaningfulness of reducing the "left" to as a set of fixed policy positions, especially in light of the rich tradition of political thought that has worked hard to define and conceptualise the specificity of left politics. Conceptualising the left as an evolving political project with roots that go back over two hundred years, thinkers, such as Noberto Bobbio

(1996) and Steven Lukes (2003), offer us a very different picture of what constitutes "the left", one that sees it as a collectively enacted set of practices, which are animated by an ethos of equality and a commitment to the rectification of injustice. Capturing the specificity of Corbynism through this lens would require the researcher to explore its distinct ideological, affective, aesthetic and epistemic features as well as the collective practices they have inspired (see authors 2018) and then to historically contextualise them within the broader history of British left politics. From this angle, it becomes much easier to see that Corbyn's putative extremism comes into sharp relief *only* when compared to the left political project immediately preceding it, i.e., New Labour, as well as to the hegemonic neoliberal consensus of the day (Hall 2011). Widen the historical lens, however, and descriptions of "hard left" start to falter not only in straight forward policy terms[6], but also with respect to its mode of doing of politics, a point we will come back to. As Lorna Finlayson states, 'Corbyn's left reformism is mild by the standards of earlier generations, by the standards of some other European countries and even in comparison to public opinion in the UK' (2018, p. 18). Indeed, and somewhat ironically, a number of media commentators are now suggesting that the trouble with Corbynism is that it is not radical enough (Harris 2018; Eaton 2018).

But there is a second conception of "the hard left" that operates outside the narrow political science matrix and which, in our view, has taken hold among many commentators in both academic and media. This tacit conception of the left generally evokes three features. The first is *vanguardism* which is associated with the belief that 'if the correct leadership captured the machine they could organise and evangelise their way to power' (Thompson 2016, p. 46), a strategy best secured by allowing an influx of entryists and by a dogmatic and authoritarian approach to all and any challenges. A second related feature concerns the prevalence of *hierarchical* modes of organisation in which decisions are made in a top down way and where there is little scope for meaningful grassroots involvement. The third but perhaps most commonly associated attribute of a "hard left" politics is a Marxist-inflected emphasis on *class* as the central axis of oppression and on the *working class* as the key agent of emancipatory change.

So, is the politics of Corbynism "hard left" in this alternative sense? First of all, despite Hindmoor's complaint that Corbynism rejects any 'give and take' because compromise is seen as both 'immoral and ineffective' (2018, p. 17), we have found no evidence that the model of leadership or the mode of organising in the Labour Party can be accurately described as either vanguardist or top down. On the contrary, having little support within the PLP, Corbyn and his political colleagues appear to be sustained primarily by an uneasy alliance between trade unionists, party members and grassroots activists, a motley mix of diverse political traditions that at times rub against each other. As was evident at the 2018 Labour Conference, it is the at times bitter struggles between these groups (over e.g. Brexit, Trident, the best way to democratise the Labour Party) and the evolving, uncomfortable compromises being forged therein that will shape the direction of the Labour Party. Thus, while there may be some unity of purpose and vision, there is still little agreement as to the means to achieve them. Moreover, Corbyn himself largely eschews the epistemic certitude characteristic of more overtly vanguardist forms of Marxism/Leninism, displaying a degree of 'laissez faire' leadership, *pace* Hindmoor, that belies any claims that he has an authoritarian hold over his Party. Indeed, of late he has been critiqued for his constructive ambiguity over a range of issues including Brexit and chastised for not giving the Party a clear direction. Last but not least, with far fewer entryists infiltrating the Party than predicted – there simply are not enough active Trotskyists in the UK (Fielding, 2018; Kelly, 2018) – vanguardism is not a viable option.

There is equally little evidence to suggest that Corbynism, as a left project, revolves exclusively or even mainly around class either as the main site of oppression or as the principal agent of change (Seymour 2016). Corbyn's own discourse makes only sporadic reference to class and amongst our interviewees invocations of class were surprisingly infrequent with more attention being paid to exclusions around gender, race and sexuality. This is not to say that there are no efforts among pro-Corbyn supporters to draw more attention to the politics of class in Britain (clearly there are) but simply that it remains a site of contestation and struggle in which class politics is simply one strand among others.

What is very interesting to us as scholars, however, and what potentially distinguishes Corbynism from previous renditions of left politics in Britain is the small, but

growing space that has been created – consciously and unconsciously - for the politics of race (or rather anti-racism) and feminism. While we do not have space to elaborate on this claim (see authors 2018 for a more detailed account), we want to draw attention to the fact that racial politics, as a site of oppression as well as of autonomous organising, found little support, until recently, from either the "right" or the "hard left" of the Labour Party (Hannah 2018, p. 47). And while rarely mentioned in media or academic coverage of Corbynism, we found that our interviewees involved in anti-racist politics were almost unanimous in their cautious optimism towards Corbynism's amenability to various forms of anti-racist politics.[7] Similarly, with regards to feminism, it is possible to note some significant inroads made by socialist, intersectional and anti-racist feminists, at grassroots level, and represented in the shadow cabinet by the likes of Cat Smith, Dawn Butler and Kate Osamoor. Thus, periodic characterisations of the Corbyn movement as hostile to women and/or feminism (see, for example, Newman 2015) tend to presuppose a variant of white liberal feminism as the benchmark against which Corbynism is judged. Ironically, these recent attempts by Corbyn-supporters to enact a more sustained engagement with questions of gender and race have come under attack from all wings of the party for supposedly nurturing a divisive form of "identity politics" (see Simons, 2016).

On Corbynism as Populism

As already stated, Corbynism is frequently labelled "populist" by academics and journalists alike. Whether there is any truth to this assertion depends, of course, on what is meant by the term. Although still contested, it can be argued that a consensus appears to be emerging – at least in the literature on European populism – around an ideational definition which sees populism as 'a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté general* (general will) of the people' (Mudde 2004, p.563).

On this definition for a politics to stand *any* chance of being seen as genuinely populist, it must be antagonistic in orientation with "the people" acting as its core constituency and as the basis of its legitimacy. The problem is that we find minimal

evidence to uphold this characterization of Corbynism. Granted, Corbyn – like most politicians – does make occasional allusions to "the people", and his supporters consider themselves "anti-establishment" in a very general sense, but this is true of most forms of oppositional politics whether from the right or the left. More importantly, the discourses of Corbyn and Momentum tend not to centralise "the people" as their main addressee, but rather revolve around substantive values such as "justice", "fairness", and "equality". Just as importantly, it is simply not accurate to frame Corbynism as an antagonistic politics that pits the "real" people against a singular, identifiable enemy (see author 2017; Glaser 2017). We are not alone in our skepticism. Luke March's analysis of left and right populism in the UK finds that 'populism's ubiquity is much overstated' (March 2017, p.283) in part because what passes for 'populism' 'is not really populism at all but *demoticism* (closeness to ordinary people), a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for populism to thrive. We agree: Corbynism is certainly a "demotic" politics, but it is not populist.

3. Making Sense of the Corbyn Problem

> 'interpreting and explaining events that confirm existing theories and beliefs is relatively straightforward. Interpreting and explaining the unexpected requires additional reserves of intellectual energy' (Allen and Bartle 2018, p.*xv*).

So far we have mapped some of the dominant narratives about Corbynism that one finds in British political science, and have sought to demonstrate that in addition to not withstanding empirical scrutiny, they make rather sloppy use of certain kinds of analytic categories. But this begs the question of how and why British political scientists have struggled to come to terms with Corbynism. Here we want to argue that far from being the result of careless scholarship on the part of individuals, these problems are in fact systemic within the discipline as a whole. The first of these relate to the continued hold of what is sometimes called the Westminster Model of politics and a second pertains to a general confusion around how to navigate one's normative commitments when conducting political science enquiry. The role of the media, and political scientists' relationship to it, is a third important factor.

The Westminster Model and its Discontents

The Westminster Model, as Kerr and Kettell point out in their introduction to the first issue of *British Politics*, has historically tended to dominate the study of British politics. This model, they tell us, entails 'a distinctly *narrow* view of 'the political' …, aligned with a largely *static* and fundamentally *benign* impression of Britain's central political institutions and processes' (Kerr and Kettell 2006, p.7, emphasis added). More concretely, they argue that the conception of politics underwriting this model is both reductive, to the extent it pertains almost exclusively to the institutions and activities of central government and its elite players, and ahistorical because these favoured actors and features are assumed to be durable and reliably predicable. Last but not least, this model takes for granted the generally accommodating and inclusive nature of British politics, with its exclusionary effects (such as those related to race, class and gender) either downplayed or overlooked. While Kerr and Kettell conclude by calling for a more dynamic, theoretically-informed and expansive conception of British politics, the current state of commentary on Corbynism suggests that their call remains unheeded.

For as we have seen, the narratives reviewed here reflect a deep, uncritical attachment to the Westminster Model. Rather than explore the recent wave of left politics in Britain as a confluence of diverse social forces which have come together under particular conditions, British political science has reduced this highly complex and evolving phenomenon to the utterances and performance of one individual man, Corbyn, (Diamond 2016; Quinn 2016) and/or his relationship with his own PLP (Crines *et al* 2017). But this overlooks the fact that the specificity of Corbynism lies in, as Jeremy Gilbert (2017) puts it, the interplay between "Labourism" (i.e. the institutional machinations of the Labour Party) and "movementism" (i.e. looser, more grassroots networks of activists). Thus, if we want to understand *why* Corbynism has not only emerged but has some staying power, despite the odds stacked against it, we require a much deeper and expansive analytical toolkit than that provided by the Westminster Model.

Furthermore, irrespective of one's normative commitments, we would suggest that the subfield of British politics is not well-served by the repeated denigration and infantilising of Corbyn-supporting activists, either as "populists" or as simply a bunch of "deluded" lefties: whether for good or bad, the modes of doing politics enacted by and for Corbynism cannot be wished away. The tendency to resort to denigration and dismissal reflects badly on the affective and normative orientations that underpin British political studies, and on our capacity to exercise requisite levels of intellectual curiosity and openness in the face of unexpected trends and developments.

But if not the Westminster model, then what? While we do not have room to develop an alternative framework, we want to simply acknowledge two conceptual templates that might inspire some thoughts about how to expand our conception of the political. The first comes from Foster *et al* (2012), who argue that we must distinguish between *arena* and *process* based conceptions of politics, the former limited to a narrowly demarcated institutional arena, and the latter referring to the exercise and contestation of power irrespective of its spatial location. While the former has been historically dominant within the discipline of political science, a process-based conception of politics better enables the analyst to understand two things that are particularly pertinent to Corbynism, namely the temporal fluidity and unpredictability of political struggle (in contrast to the Westminster Model's view of politics as largely static and/or stable), and the multiplicity of different actors in a range of different spatial locations who, collectively constitute Corbynism as a politics (this potentially includes, but is not limited to, Corbyn himself, the shadow cabinet, sympathetic MPs, ordinary Labour Party members, academics, journalists and commentators, and non-aligned activists who come into the orbit of Corbynism).

A second source of possible inspiration could come from Andreas Kalyvas who thinks of the political in terms of two forms of power. The first he calls *constituted power*, that is, a power 'determined by the previous legal order' or 'deriving its legality from a pre-existing constitution' (2005, p. 228). Such a view presumes a linear temporality and sees the institutional rules of the game as reflecting a degree of legitimacy that has been consolidated and tested over time. Politics in this picture is a self-contained game that reflects its democratic origins: any politics which seeks to bend or subvert these rules is either misguided or normatively undesirable. By

contrast, the second is *constituent power*, which stresses 'the power to found, to posit, to constitute' (2005, p. 225) and seeks to disrupt the prevailing order. This is a creative force that refuses the legitimacy of the status quo in the name of an unrecognised or excluded community. It is from this vantage point that one can see and explore the dynamic, bottom-up character of politics, its contingency and variability as well as the points of fracture within the established order of things.

Acknowledging either of these latter two conceptions - Foster's *process* based vision or Kalyvas' *constituent power* – would help contextualise and complicate the Westminster model, widening our view of whose actions count as political and where they can take place. In this framing, Corbynism would be conceptualised as a form of constituent power, a moment of rupture and resistance that goes beyond the arenas of "politics as usual" and which seeks to found a new order. Understanding this moment of collective recalcitrance, along with its various modes of expression, and its fraught interactions with those forces sustaining the constituted order of the day becomes the essential task of political scientists and political theorists, for it is precisely at this juncture of struggle and antagonism that politics is made and remade.

On Reflexivity and Politicised Scholarship

> 'Research is a process which occurs through the medium of a person – the researcher is always and inevitably present in the research. This exists whether openly stated or not…' (Stanley and Wise 1993, p. 175).

A second challenge that the discipline has to face when trying to make sense of Corbynism is methodological in nature and concerns the tension produced by the imperative of having to produce "objective" political science in a context where one's overriding normative and affective/emotional commitments run against the particular case of politics under consideration. As we have seen, the barely concealed disdain and frustration that underpins many of the rebukes of Corbyn's politics belie what appears to be a strong *political* reaction against the kind of left politics he allegedly represents as well as a *normative* investment in the established order of British democratic politics, consolidating what Richard Hayton calls 'an unthinking acceptance of the British Political Tradition as our underlying organising perspective'

(Hayton 2018, p.368). Peter Allen has gone further by suggesting that what we are witnessing is a form of 'epistemic snobbery' whereby British Political scientists have decided that Corbynism is unworthy of their intellectual attention and analytical efforts. As Allen puts it, 'consistently asserting the pointlessness of the new [Labour] members' and supporters' endeavour displays a fundamental suspicion of [any] political discourse that is not synonymous in form or content with recognized 'expert' sources' (Allen 2018, p.126).

To be clear: this is not to argue for a rigid imposition of a fact/value distinction of the kind found in classical positivism, and neither is it to say that Corbyn critics should abandon their sincerely-held opposition to Corbyn(ism) or to the wider left. Rather, it is to call for more reflexivity and openness about the ways in which our normative commitments inform and shape our analyses. One way to do this is to heed feminist calls to situate one's knowledge claims which demands, at a minimum, that we explicitly own up to our epistemic and political commitments. Or as Stanley and Wise put it, the 'artful construction' of sound, honest academic knowledge requires that 'researchers must 'come out' in their writings' (1993, p. 175-76). Such an exercise pushes against glib generalisations by asking the researcher to set out the analytical and conceptual criteria that they are using to defend their claims.

In light of this demand for full disclosure, we happily admit that we self-identify as 'feminist' scholars on 'the left' and that our appraisal of Corbynism has been shaped by the commitments that come with this political allegiance. In this sense we are at least sympathetic to the aims of the Corbyn project, if not always the methods used by its supporters or their consequences. Indeed, our track record of scholarship demonstrates that neither of us are naive cheerleaders of left politics: between us we have published several pieces that underscore what we see as its limitations and challenges from a feminist perspective (authors, 2010, 2016, 2018). These critiques notwithstanding, we still maintain that there are good reasons to be inquisitive about and attentive to the *potentially* innovative, creative and progressive aspects of Corbynism.

Furthermore, we would stress that there is no necessary relation between normative opposition to a certain politics, and a lack of intellectual curiosity about it. Consider,

for instance, the fact that the UK political science community has, at the time of writing, arguably expressed more interest in and even agonistic respect towards UKIP and the far right than it has towards Corbynism (see, for example, Ford and Goodwin, 2014). Consider also the fact that a number of authors situated outside the confines of British political science have managed to produce good, detailed analyses of Corbynism which, while certainly critical, nonetheless offer thoughtful and nuanced reflections on this British left project. The work of political economists Harry Pitts and Matt Bolton (2018) provides such a case, offering as it does a careful consideration of the historical emergence of Corbynism, the different strands of left politics that constitute it, and the ideas and practices that sustain it. And while we disagree with a number of their conceptual and empirical claims – concerning, for instance, the "populist" character of Corbynism – the rigour of their analysis, alongside their plaintive call for Corbyn critics to take Corbynism seriously, stands in sharp contrast to the glib characterisations and crude dismissals analysed above.[8] Our concern is, therefore, not with British political science's normative opposition to Corbynism per se. It is, rather, with the fact that this normative opposition all too often *spills over* into un-reflexive and un-rigorous scholarship. This spilling over is neither inevitable nor desirable.

The Role of the Media

One final striking feature of academic analyses around Corbynism is the extent of their convergence with the overwhelmingly unfavourable responses to Corbyn across a range of media sites. While several commentators have itemised the erroneous claims made about Corbynism that have circulated in the media (Davies 2017; Worthy 2017), a report commissioned by the LSE concluded that Corbyn has been subjected to 'a process of vilification' that went 'well beyond the normal limits of fair debate' (Cammaerts *et al* 2016, p. 2) and that is unprecedented for a British political leader. Surveying the coverage, they point to the way in which both the right wing press and liberal left media such as *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mirror* went from 'watchdog' to 'attack dog' and in doing so blurred the distinction between 'comment, conjecture and fact' (Cammaerts *et al* 2016, p. 4). Left-wing journalist Gary Younge (incidentally, a keynote speaker at the 2018 Political Studies' Association conference) has also indicted journalists for dismissing and lampooning 'one of the most

interesting periods of recent political history', describing their coverage of Corbyn as one of 'egregious professional malpractice' (Younge 2017). He also rightly points to the parochialism of British media punditry - a point that could also be made about the academic commentary - to the extent that Corbynism is rarely, if ever, contextualised in relation to the resurgence of grassroots left politics across Europe and the US.

Against this backdrop, two specific points are worth noting. The first is that, at least in relation to Corbynism, British academics have not sought to develop their own "voice" and set of analyses, preferring instead to corroborate, rather than question, the sensationalist and hyperbolic media narratives. Of course, this reciprocity serves both parties. As Peter Allen (2019) has pointed out, academic knowledge can, when disseminated into the public domain, afford epistemic status and value to particular media claims, in part because of the sheen of impartiality and objectivity that is assumed to accompany scholarly research. For our part, academics are increasingly being incentivised to cultivate closer links with those – journalists, politicians, policy makers - who might disseminate as well as implement our knowledge (Hayton 2018). This in turn has given rise to a second point which concerns what Peter Allen has called the "professionalization of political science", a process which increasingly aligns academics with media and policy professionals at the expense of keeping in touch with politics as it is lived and experienced by ordinary citizens and political activists.

Concluding Remarks

The overall aim of this article has been to highlight the broad consensus within the British political science community as to the nature and character of Corbynism and to demonstrate that this shared narrative is problematic for both empirical and conceptual reasons. With respect to the latter point, we have suggested that the Westminster Model tends to naturalise the machinations of elite politicians as the proper object of British politics scholarship and, thereby, inadvertently privileges its *constituted* rather than *constitutive* mode. In so doing, a broad swathe of potentially relevant and interesting features come to fall outside the analytical scope of the

political scientist – in this case, the broad ideological context in which Corbynism gained traction in the first place, the various parliamentary and extra-parliamentary social forces that have converged to sustain it, as well as the aspirations, narratives and experiences of the individual activists and citizens that call for it.

A further complication when trying to make sense of Corbynism concerns the unrecognised impact that our ideological commitments have on our scholarship. In this article, we have been open about our own position as feminists on the left who, although surprised by Corbyn's victory and doubtful about some aspects of this new politics, still think it deserves at least as much scholarly attention as the right is currently commanding from British scholars. Our point here is not that others should join us in our qualified support for this project: we are after all committed to a feminist left politics that others may not share! Rather we want to insist on the importance of grounding our proclamations and predictions, if we feel we must, on a much higher degree of conceptual reflexivity and more careful, nuanced empirical investigations. In other words, while we do not expect British political scientists to be more positive about Corbyn, we do think they need to be more curious about and rigorous in their engagement with the politics that surrounds him so that when they do decide to label him a "populist" or describe his supporters as "utterly deluded" they at least have some evidence based reasons to do so.

Endnotes

[1] For a much fuller account of some aspects of our empirical research on left politics in Britain and its relationship to feminism see authors 2018.

[2] For an interesting take on the gendered fallout of the Impact agenda's requirement for academics to engage with the media, in general and with social media, in particular see Savigny. 2019.

[3] Indeed, the anti-Corbyn thrust of much of pol sci twitter is so familiar that there is even a well loved parody account - @ProfBritPol – which satirises political scientists' tendency to combine visceral normative opposition to Corbyn with an ostensible commitment to "objective" data-driven political science. In one case, for instance, @ProfBritPol announced the publication of an "analytical essay" entitled "The Nightmare Rise of Jeremy Corbyn". For the record, the authors of this paper would like to dispel any rumors that one or other of us is behind the @ProfBritPol twitter account.

[4] Unlike in the UK, in Southern Europe there is a tradition of using "populism" to describe a particular form of politics favourably, particularly by analysts of left parties (Stavrakakis and Katsembekis 2014)

[5] Although disapproving from a policy standpoint, the Economist has recently and grudgingly acknowledged that it is the British Labour Party, of all mainstream left parties, that is offering the 'most radical, detailed plans for the democratisation of the economy' (Economist Feb 16th 2019).

[6] Arguably both the Labour Party of 1983 and the breakaway centrist Social Democratic Party defended more radical or "hard left" economic platforms than the current Labour Party under Corbyn (Hannah 2017, p.235; see also Goes 2018; Jackson 2017).

[7] This is, of course, complicated by the ongoing anti-Semitism crisis. It does seem clear that while the scope and depth of the problem (as well as the way in which is defined and measured) is a matter of much debate and controversy, this form of racism is finding some oxygen in certain corners of the Party and wider movement. And despite the fact that the attacks on Corbyn have been highly personal, unforgiving, and relentless and, therefore, his defensiveness and that of his team understandable to a degree, we still think there are valid questions being raised about the way in which the Party is responding to these accusations. At best, an opportunity has been lost to educate both party members and the public at large about the nature and specific workings of this particular strand of racism with the publication of a report entitled 'Antisemitism in Contemporary Britain' in 2017 by Daniel Staetsky of the well-respected Institute for Jewish Policy Research, a potentially constructive starting point for dialogue about a range of issues. At worst, various actors within the leadership team have allowed diverse factions, including opposing Jewish groups, e.g., the Jewish Movement for Labour and the more recently established Jewish Voice for Labour – to bed in and refuse to listen to each other with any care or respect. In this febrile context, the import and effect of antisemitism – whether actually widespread or not – risks becoming trivialised.

[8] Lewis Goodall's (2018) journalistic book *Left for Dead?* is also, in our view, an analysis of Corbynism which, while coming from a position opposed to Corbyn's politics, is nonetheless refreshingly detailed and considered in its analysis and critique.

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