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Corbynism, Marxism, and "orthodox Marxism"

Matt Bolton and Frederick Harry Pitts, interviewed by Martin Thomas

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S: Tell us first how you came to be interested in this sort of thing, and writing this sort of book.

P: I've always been politically active, but not particularly consistently. I first became politically aware in opposition to the Iraq war when I was 15. My involvement with the Labour Party started in 2008 in one of Labour's only traditional strongholds in Cornwall. I held various committee and campaigns roles in my constituency, and I stood for council. I got involved in trade union activity with Unite. I studied whilst working sales and admin jobs, and a lot of my involvement in this stuff initially came out of being interested in Marxism, which for me at the time meant Raymond Williams, E P Thompson, writers like that. I was a subscriber to Solidarity for a while. Reading Hardt and Negri's Empire in 2009 changed the way I thought about how the kind of work I was doing – call centres, service sector – related to the world around me, although I've since become a critic. My big intellectual turning point was reading the writings of Moishe Postone, Michael Heinrich, and Werner Bonefeld.

B: I was a student at Cardiff university around the time of the Iraq war, and involved in anti-war and Palestinian solidarity activity. Then, for a period, I didn't do much politically.

In 2010-11, when the student protests over university fees started, I went to a lot of the demonstrations, and I started reading a lot of theory, Negri and the autonomist writers. I did an MA at Birkbeck on critical theory, and read Adorno, Benjamin, and Marcuse. Now I'm doing a Ph D at Roehampton on the concept of justice in philosophy.

I had been a member of the Labour Party over the years, on and off. I rejoined in 2015 in order to vote for Corbyn and became active in my local party.

Theoretically, as I moved on to Bonefeld, Heinrich, and Postone, that started to undermine a lot I had previously taken for granted politically. I read Postone's arguments on antisemitism, and Robert Fine’s Political Investigations. I started questioning the ascribed status of Israel in the commonplace leftist worldview.

In the first year of Corbynism, I felt there were a lot of contradictions in the way it was developing, and that was re-emphasised during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign. I wasn't that aware of Corbyn's history on Europe, and I hadn't thought through my own position properly. That, combined with the theoretical shifts, made me re-evaluate my political positions.

P: After Corbyn's election as leader, I was involved in setting up a Momentum branch. Previously I'd worked with Labour centrists whose commitment I respected, if not their politics. But Momentum was my first sustained organisational experience of the wider left.
As Momentum mobilised against the vote in late 2015 on air support to forces fighting ISIS in Syria, I came to see it as a vehicle for a kind of foreign policy politics I wasn't quite signed up for. For a variety of reasons I scaled down my involvement, but continued being active in the Labour Party at a branch and constituency level. At the time of the so-called coup [by Labour MPs against Corbyn, in July 2016], Matt had put out a couple of pieces about the Corbyn movement which resonated with me.

B: There's a lot wrong with those pieces.

P: Yes, a lot of it has been proved wrong. But it was interesting to see someone using a likeminded theoretical framework in that context.

S: There is some common ground between you and us. You refer to Robert Fine, who was one of us, and Moishe Postone, who wasn't, but whose ideas we've discussed and publicised on the British left because we consider them valuable. You argue that Corbynism tends to substitute, for a critique of the social relations of capitalism, a moralising populist critique of the greed of a few. (And, we could add, it proposes not to eliminate the inequality between the "many" and the "few", but only to rebalance it a little).

You that this replacement of critique of social relations by critique of the greed of a few opens the door to conspiracy theories, to what you call "two-campism" in international politics (siding with whatever is hostile to the USA), to demonisation of Israel as the world's arch-imperialism, and to antisemitism. It also, we could add, nurtures anti-intellectualism, hostility to debate, and the claims to represent "mainstream" or "common sense" opinion.

But then you label the views you criticise as "orthodox Marxism". We would see them as the products of Stalinist influence on and seepage across the left over decades.

P: We never passed through any sort of Trotskyist or Leninist political education to get where we are now, so our work is not a dialogue with those strands.

B: I think there are two versions of Marx, which often contradict each other within his own work. The one I'd refer to is not just highlighted by Postone, but the Neue Marx-Lektüre [Michael Heinrich and others: see www.oekonomiekritik.de/], and others such as George Comninel. They don't see Marxism as being based on the exposition of a single transhistorical trajectory travelling inexorably through different modes of production and ending in communism, powered by unchanging notions of "forces of production" and "class struggle". I think a lot of what is in that version of "historical materialism" actually comes from ideas Marx uncritically took over from liberal theories of progress in Adam Smith and liberal historians of the French revolution, and which he later rejected.

Postone and the Neue Marx-Lektüre look instead at the logical critique Marx develops in the first few chapters of Capital. They tend to emphasise the historical specificity of value, which suggests that concepts of class and class struggle should be specific to capitalism too.
That throws into doubt understandings of Marxism as an explanation of "history" as a whole, and instead focuses on the development of capital or value as a historically specific social relation. The effects of the unfolding of this relation are different at different times. So for Postone, much of "traditional Marxism" makes the mistake of freezing in time a particular vision of how capitalism works. This vision may well have been true at one point in the history of capitalism – say 19th century England, with clear cultural and political divides between the working class and the bourgeoisie – but the further development of value has shown that it was in fact a temporary manifestation of that relation, rather than its essential form. Traditional Marxism mistook the development of the Soviet system, in which the workers state took control of production and distribution, as the overcoming of the value relation. Postone shows how that's wrong, and that value works at much more abstract level than particular property relations, or particular visions of the "proletariat" based on a shared culture or certain occupations.

P: What have been considered the totemic works of Marx are often fragmentary and re-edited posthumously. The weight given to works like The German Ideology [an unfinished polemic written in 1846, and not published until 1932] has impacted excessively on the way Marxism is understood. The work Marx put most effort into - Capital volume 1 - is given more weight in the tradition we come from. That doesn't mean that we should never look at Marx's letters, or such...

B: But there were contradictions within Marx...

P: And we have to do work ourselves to fill in those contradictions.

B: We're for an open Marxism. Our argument is not that we're right, and everyone else is wrong. It is that Marxism is an open-ended project.

S: Yes, but what you describe as "orthodox Marxism" is decisively shaped not by this or that reading of Marx, but by political currents like the one round the Morning Star. The Morning Star has become surprisingly influential. A lot of the Labour left-wingers who have come back into activity with Corbyn after being largely out of politics since the 1980s have drifted towards Morning Star politics through such experiences as the Stop The War campaign around 2003.

It is instructive that STW now has its office at the same address as the Morning Star: the SWPers who thought they were using Andrew Murray and such people as a bridge to new young activists have ended up with the political flow going the other way, and themselves being hegemonised by Morning Star politics.

"NGO politics" - seeing NGO activity as the main challenge to the dominant politics, and NGO methods as the template for activism - which became influential in the Blair era, when labour-movement activity was eclipsed, is not the same as Stalinist politics, but it has enough in common, bureaucratisation and so on, that it can synergise with that Stalinist or semi-Stalinist politics...

P: I'm interested in the way that the left has moved from "alter-globalisation" to more nationalist perspectives. The NGO world has arguably retained a keener
internationalist commitment. But what is interesting is how, amidst inchoate elements from the Occupy generation [the spate of camps and other protests in 2011-2] and the implicit influence of Negri's ideas about "the multitude" [designated as the new revolutionary force in the book Empire], alter-globalisation has been thrown out for a cynical retreat into the nation-state as a bulwark against global capital.

B: There is a lot of talk in the Corbyn movement about democracy and the return of politics, but in fact, I think, internal dissent and debate are not that welcome there.

There are a lot of internal contradictions and different strands in the Corbyn movement, but none of them are that keen on dissent. We argue that the figure, or myth, of Corbyn personally, serves to hold them together. He acts as a blank slate enabling different factions to project themselves onto him.

I'm influenced here by David Hirsh's critique of the "politics of position" [politics in which you are defined not by the arguments you advance but by the moral identity you claim]. He looks at the debate in the University and Colleges Union over boycotting Israeli academics as prefiguring what is happening in Corbynism. Reason is swamped by moralism: you're either good or bad.

What's happened with Jon Lansman is an example here. He's done more for Corbynism than virtually anyone else, McDonnell aside, but it didn't take much for him to be cast out of "the community of the good", and have accusations of betrayal, tinged with antisemitism, thrown at him.

P: That sort of thing is not new, but it is new to find it at the heart of one of the two major political parties. It is a step change from what CLPs were like in the Brown or Miliband era, not that they were by any means glory days in most other respects.

B: It means that you don't have to examine antisemitism - "we're good people, so we can't be antisemitic".

S: There was plenty of defining-out and suppression of reasoned debate under Blair. Where things were more open, that was often because the MPs and the councillors and so on were going to take no notice of the results of debates in the CLPs anyway.

Most of the deficiencies of Labour Party democracy under Corbyn are matters of things not being changed, or customs continuing, from the Blair era - for example, Labour policy being made primarily by the Leader's Office rather than through democratic debate.

P: But the way the Corbyn movement has developed has allowed the Labour Party to develop policies, on border guards for example, which you would think would cause outrage, and yet pass with little comment. Elements of a left which began as libertarian, even anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist, have become suspicious of any criticism of the leadership.

There is a space out of which something can come, given a spirit of criticism and measures of democracy. But the limits of programmatic construction so tightly set around one man make for serious barriers to that.
Let's not romanticise the way things were. I remember in the 2010 general election knocking on doors for Labour with a "control immigration" message in villages and estates – some of the most deprived in Europe – where there were zero immigrants. Compromises are necessary, but not the wrong compromises with the wrong forces – compromises parts of the party under Corbyn have been too keen to make.

B: I take the issue of antisemitism extremely seriously, and I'm not convinced it can be overcome within the movement as it is constituted now. To tackle it properly means to criticise Corbyn himself, and the distorted role of Israel and "Zionism" in the mainstream left's worldview; rather than just focus on the really obvious stuff like David Icke.

There's an interesting similarity between Blair and Corbyn. Blair said the world had changed, and Labour had to adapt to it and reshape to fit. Corbynism has the same sort of argument about the world changing - neoliberalism has come to an end, there's a general retrenchment back to the state - Turkey, Russia, China, all over - and Labour can manage that change in a good way.

You can only say that if you separate neoliberalism from capitalism. In many ways Corbynism is about going with the current. It has important differences with the right-wing versions of more nationalist, statist policies, but there is a lot in common.

I dispute the argument that there were no positives at all in what Blair did. The Blair government spent a lot on schools and on the NHS. This idea that Corbynism represents a Year Zero in Labour history actually mirrors what Blair said about "Old Labour."

S: And Blair channelled the school spending into an expansion of academies... Whatever your criticisms of Corbynism, without question there is more open ground for Marxist and socialist arguments to get traction now than under Blair.

B: But again, at what point does the criticism get to re-evaluate Corbyn's own personal political history? Maybe our perception is skewed by the social-media expressions of the Corbyn movement. I think there are some very clever people in the intellectual wing of Corbynism online but I feel like they're an increasingly negative influence. Going on TV to justify Holocaust inversion, signing these open letters presenting claims of antisemitism as a politically motivated "smear," or trying to pit other BME groups against Jewish people. The Corbyn left is so wrapped in a world view centred on Israel, which is itself a perspective based on separating imperialism from capitalism.

S: A lot of the Corbyn left is bad on this issue, but if you dig down a bit to the younger people in the Labour left, or less vocal people, there are more openings to argue the issues than for a long time.

You distance yourself from what you call "orthodox Marxism" in general, which seems to include all Marxism until recent times, but then make a passing exception to praise the Mensheviks. Why?
P: That's a messy part of the book. We'd been impressed by an article in Dissent magazine [a social-democratic magazine in the USA, launched in 1954 by Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, who were moving away from Third Camp Trotskyism], and were looking for an articulation of some sort of Marxist reformism – that the contrasting of revolution and reform is undialectical.

In the wake of the Brexit vote John McDonnell talked about "moral pressure up and down the land" being sufficient to turn things in a positive direction. There's an idea of bypassing parliamentary politics by the unmediated force of enough voices out on the streets, which we see terminate in the present impasse. We want to emphasise the importance of mediation and political structures.

B: We want to hold open space for an alternative left politics that isn't based on the residue of two-campist Stalinism - for unfollowed paths, for different ways of conceptualising things, for thinking critically.

P: One of the weak aspects of our book is the compulsion we felt to offer something affirmative in place of the current orientation.

B: I don't think Marx really came up with a coherent positive programme. His originality was in developing a total critique of capitalist society. In everyday politics a lot of what he did was to support liberal democratic reforms. I don't think that the critique of class society and a theory of revolution should be conflated.

P: In the book we argue for helping the liberal centre to hold against right-wing and nationalist pressures. At other times it might be different – we can only hope. But, against the over-optimist current on the Labour left, we argue for a pessimistic outlook. It is perhaps a little undertheorised because of a lack of specifics.

B: We are wary of political movements which conceptualise any form of spontaneous political activity or mass action as implicitly anticapitalist, in an emancipatory sense. There are reactionary forms of anticapitalism. Mass action can end up making things worse.

S: That's a valid point. We learned that from the 1978-9 Islamic revolution in Iran. But it doesn't follow that the answer is to solidarise with things as they are. You criticise one strand of Corbynism - Novara Media and so on - as combining apparently ultra-radical speculations about a utopian future coming soon ("Fully Automated Luxury Communism") with conformist politics in the here and now. But a similar criticism could be made of you.

You deplore Corbynism's lack of a radical critique of the social relations of capitalism, suggesting that a more combative critique is called for. And then you write about "a welcome spirit of compromise with the world as it is". You say that there is "there is no 'side' to take in the movement of class struggle", and "the era of the 'workers' movement" is over. You deplore attempts to compose "a popular subject that cannot exist...", and end up advocating that we, as left-wingers, help the liberal centre to hold.
B: We're trying to hold a space open, rather than rushing to pick up on the first things available. It's important to recognise what capitalism is - a historically specific set of social relations which imposes abstract domination on society. If you don't recognise that, you can end up with movements that make things worse. Better a holding position.

P: At the present time, anyway. I've heard Adorno characterised as a combination of Leninist and liberal. Transformation had to be total, but when there aren't the conditions for it – if ever – you have to work with the reality you have. There's no external position, outside that reality, to work from.

B: Robert Fine takes a similar position in his later work. Our attitude to the EU is an example. We accept a lot of the usual left-wing criticisms of the EU, particularly over the Eurozone and austerity. But there are other elements of the EU, as a transnational normative project set up in the wake of World War Two and a fascist Europe, which are not just reducible to imperatives of capitalist accumulation. Overturning the EU in the hope that something better will come automatically is not the answer.

P: It is wishful thinking to suppose that the normal state of society is good, only infringed by external impositions like the EU which are bad. John Holloway [a Marxist writer, currently an academic in Mexico, author of Change the World Without Taking Power] said in a seminar we spoke at together recently that Corbynism, whilst auspiciously offering hope, is not only a mistake but a dangerous path to take, not least because it proposes to seize the state and wield it as if it were a neutral object. The right thing can also be the wrong thing. There is no easy resolution.

S: You end up oddly close to Althusser's approach [Louis Althusser was a French Communist Party philosopher] in which "history is a process without a subject". The determining role of social relations is abstracted from the human agencies which make those social relations, except that you concede that right-wing agencies can push things worse than the social relations in general would determine.

B. That is a criticism levelled against us in an article in Jacobin magazine (by Tom Mills: bit.ly/bp-jac). But we're not Althusserians.

Althusser came up with the most sophisticated version of what we call orthodox Marxism. Politics was relatively autonomous from the economy, but they were both regarded as transhistorical forms. Postone, on the contrary, is saying that capitalism is a historically specific set of very abstract social forms which are created by our own activity. He examines the general trajectory of capital, of which both the USSR and the Keynesian welfare state were both expressions. That trajectory is out of the control of any single actor in society. Political differences still matter. Agency exists. But it is limited by the necessity to exist through the social forms of commodity and capital. None of the agencies overcome the need to live within or through the mediation of the social forms that are their precondition. The reason why we end up defending liberal democracy is that it is better than the other extant variants right now.

The social relations themselves cannot be overcome by the agencies that exist within them. The structures themselves are produced by our activity. Our actions as agents
can have unintended consequences that constitute forces alien to us. Agency and structure - each moves through the other dialectically.

But there’s a fundamental difference between theocratic or fascist forms of capitalism and liberal-democratic capitalism.

P: Demands for unmediated existence, which is what some forms of fascism propose, are dangerous. We’re upholding the importance of being unsure and uncertain, within limits.

S: At a certain level that emphasis on being unsure and uncertain turns into a political factor favourable to the demagogues. As in Yeats's lines: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity".

B: Well, you can't be uncertain about anti-fascism. That's the baseline of any leftist politics.

S: Your theory ends up a bit like neo-classical economics read backwards. For neo-classical economics, present-day economic relations have always existed, only in more or less developed forms. Nothing was ever outside them. For you, capitalist social relations stretch forwards indefinitely into the future, with nothing within them with the potential to subvert and replace them.

B. Orthodox Marxism also sees present-day economic relations as ever-present, except it argues that its path of development does not end in capitalism but in communism. Postone and others like him see that idea of the development of the self-same forms as deriving from misrecognition of the movement of capital. The idea of that movement having a terminus is a hangover from writers like Adam Smith, a matter of misrecognising the dynamic of capital as the dynamic of history as a whole. The idea of an inevitable endpoint is not inherent in the critique of capitalism.

That said, in a Hegelian sense, as soon as you perceive a limit - which is what a critique is, the perception of a limit - that is the first step to overcome that limit. It's important to have a clear definition of what capital is. But equally theories which, for example, blame Nazism or the Holocaust just on capitalism alone – like Adorno and Horkheimer's early attempts to grasp Nazi antisemitism - are unsatisfactory. There are things in history we need other concepts to understand.

To be oppressed is not a good state of affairs, or a guarantee of bringing improvement. It doesn't automatically provide a transcendental perspective. But not everything is fixed in advance. To be involved in workers’ struggles can open up new perspectives.

P: Yes, to be on a picket line is a potential moment of de- and re-mediation, and does open things out.