

The Rise and Fall of the Corbyn Left

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Writing post-mortems of Corbynism is something of a cottage industry.

In 2022 alone, Oliver Eagleton, James Schneider, and Andrew Murray have all published books offering an “insider perspective” on the left-wing resurgence in and around the U.K. Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn from 2015 to 2020.

In *This is Only the Beginning*, Michael Chessum, a left-wing activist and journalist in the U.K., puts forward his own account of the “new British left” that emerged in the early 2010s and, from 2015, found much of its mainstream political expression in Corbynism before falling apart at the end of the decade. In brief, Chessum’s argument is that “[w]hat the left lacks...is neither a governmental program nor the people to support it, but a means of cohering a genuinely thriving, democratic movement” (p. 7). In Chessum’s view, “[t]he lack of a truly empowered grassroots in the new Labour Left was not an accident or an inevitable fact but the result of a series of conscious decisions on the part of its leadership and an unspoken battle of ideas and methods in which the politics of the social movements was, quietly, snuffed out” (p. 4).

Chessum and I work together on the British left in such organizations as the Labour Campaign for Free Movement (LCFM). In 2015-18, I was involved in the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC), the student activist group that Chessum co-founded in 2010. Therefore, my perspective will almost certainly differ from that of U.K.-based leftists who crossed swords with Chessum in the same time frame.

Chessum’s book enjoys several strengths over other post-mortems of Corbynism. Firstly, the prose is very readable. Although the book is published under the Bloomsbury Academic imprint and features numerous interview quotes, it is not an academic work. While I would have liked a more in-depth treatment of the subject matter, the part-memoir, part-political analysis format gives Chessum’s account a vibrancy and clarity that a social-scientific study would probably lack.

Secondly, the book avoids a “chess moves” telling of the events. That is, rather than focusing on the “court intrigue” of how different Labour and trade union higher-ups maneuvered against each other, Chessum connects the dynamics within the Labour leadership with those of the broader social movements and political currents from which the new British left emerged.

Thirdly, and relatedly, the book links the Corbyn moment with the ideological space opened by

earlier challenges to neoliberal hegemony, especially in the wake of the 2007-08 financial crash, the imposition of austerity measures, and the pushback against those measures.

While undoubtedly colored by my own fond memories of NCAFC, the chapters I enjoyed most were those on the U.K. student movement, sparked by the announced trebling of university tuition fees to 9,000 GBP per year in 2010, and the broader anti-austerity protests of that period. Chessum narrates events like the student protesters' storming of the Conservative Party's campaign headquarters in Millbank Tower, London, on November 10, 2010, with a verve that only a closely involved participant could capture.

Chessum praises the creativity and fresh aesthetic that this young movement brought to organizing and protesting and how this period of intense struggle helped many people realize their agency. Nonetheless, he is frank about the movement's weaknesses and failures. Here Chessum underscores how the anti-austerity movement lacked a sense of its place within a longer history and political tradition - a problem he links with the declining strength of the organized left. Large sections of the movement drew on anarchist politics and "horizontalist" models of organizing to make a virtue of its lack of centralized leadership and strategy, but this created its own serious pitfalls.

As those familiar with Jo Freeman's 1970 classic "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" might surmise, without formal organization and democratically accountable authority, the movement developed informal, unacknowledged hierarchies. Accordingly, "[t]he vast majority of those who took part in the protests had no voice in organizing them or deciding what would happen next" (p. 54). Likewise, the movement produced hardly any organizational or ideological legacy of its own. As Chessum observes, "[l]acking a properly hammered-out strategy and organizational center, the movement was limited to calling days of action and being blown along with events and had no time or mechanism by which to prepare its rank and file for the inevitable setbacks that came in the form of parliamentary votes and police repression" (p. 54).

Despite its defeat, the movement had positive repercussions for the left: "The hegemony of the neoliberal consensus was broken at a deep, sociological level, even if it persisted in the political mainstream for some years" (p. 104). In Chessum's view, this laid the groundwork for Corbynism. In 2015, Corbyn reluctantly stood for Labour leader following the Conservatives' victory in the 2015 general election and appealed to people frustrated with and seeking an alternative to the neoliberal status quo, unexpectedly catapulting the long-serving backbencher to the top of the party.

The shattering of the neoliberal, austerity-supporting consensus posed "a mortal threat to the existing Labour Party establishment which resided at Westminster and at the party's headquarters at Southside" (p. 152). As such, Labour's central office, most Labour MPs, and most of the mass media were venomously hostile to Corbyn, with multiple attempts within the party to oust or undermine him. One can therefore understand the felt need for an extra-parliamentary movement that could fight for a socialist program in the face of such unrelenting opposition.

Unfortunately, Momentum, the Labour left faction that emerged from Corbyn's 2015 leadership campaign, responded in a way that was disastrous for the movement in the long run. Anxious over accusations of far-left "infiltration" and of being a "party within a party," Momentum's leadership, grouped around veteran Labour leftist Jon Lansman, wanted to focus on simply supporting the Labour leadership and mobilizing Momentum members in elections within and beyond the party. It moved to replace Momentum's deliberative, delegate-based system of internal democracy with an online plebiscitary model that would let the national office retain central control. This culminated in the "Momentum coup" of January 10, 2017, when a majority on Momentum's ten-person Steering Committee abolished the organization's democratic structures and imposed a new constitution via an unscheduled email vote.

In 2016, there were over a hundred local Momentum groups, the vast majority of which had opposed the organization's restructuring. As Chessum observes, "[b]y the end of the decade, almost all of them had evaporated, cut off from any democratic representation", and, for the rest of the Corbyn era, Momentum had only token democracy (p. 170). In Chessum's view, the left failed to keep control of Labour after its 2019 general election defeat "in large part because it lacked the kind of cohesion and resilience that could only be built up at a grassroots level" (p. 170). While projects like the annual left-wing festival The World Transformed opened some space for a pluralistic discussion of ideas, these "could not substitute for a lack of a truly democratic organization and of a healthy democratic culture on the new Labour left" (p. 175).

The 2016 Brexit referendum and its aftermath were awkward for Labour because most of the party's members and supporters opposed Brexit, but many Labour-held areas voted Leave. The Labour leadership attempted to paper over this by adopting "constructive ambiguity" on Brexit and trying to "change the subject" to other policy matters. While this seemed to work for the 2017 general election, where Labour achieved its highest increase in vote share since 1945, trying to skirt such a major political issue was ultimately unsustainable. Instead of adopting a position early on and "putting forward a new class politics as the explicit and counterposed alternative to right-wing nationalism and border-building," Labour "shifted from policy to policy in the hope it might draw voters towards it" (p. 181).

Parts of the British left argue that, by pushing Labour towards supporting a second referendum, Chessum was responsible for Labour's crushing defeat in the 2019 general election. This betrayal narrative is both factually and politically suspect. It makes it sound as if Chessum, former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, and other individuals pushed Labour closer to an anti-Brexit stance through backroom maneuvering. This erases the political agency of rank-and-file Labour members acting to shift their party's position from the bottom up through political campaigning and democratic procedure. It also ignores that the Brexit policy that the Labour Conference 2019 adopted and that Labour carried into the 2019 general election was not that of Another Europe is Possible (AEIP), the left-Remain campaign group that Chessum founded, but rather the policy that the Labour leadership put to the conference delegates and framed as a loyalty test.

Instead of building a movement that could broadly support Corbyn's program while leaving space for open, political criticism and debate, much of the Labour left responded to the Labour right's sustained attacks by adopting a toxic culture of Corbyn loyalism: "as far as many were concerned, you could either defend Jeremy or betray him" (p. 191).

In the end, for all its inspiring moments and for all the people it energized into political activity, Corbynism ran aground. During the Corbyn years, the Labour leadership refused to push for mandatory reselection of MPs, made little effort to connect the party with broader social movements, and made no serious efforts to mobilize support for high-profile strikes. As Chessum remarks, "despite its much more radical policy program, Corbynism displayed all the internal management practices of a conventional Labour Party leadership" (p. 172).

While *This is Only the Beginning* focuses on contexts and events in the U.K., the book raises vital issues for the international left. Firstly, there is the importance of internal democracy. Reading Chessum's book so soon after the comparative article on abortion rights movements that Ewa Pospieszńska and I wrote for the Summer 2022 issue of *New Politics* ("Beyond Roe: Strategic Lessons in the Fight for Abortion Rights"), I found the parallels between the 2010-11 anti-austerity protests in Britain and the 2020-21 Women's Strike protests in Poland very striking. Both were eruptive movements that inspired masses of people to take to the streets, unsettled the ideological status quo, and politically activated thousands of previously unengaged individuals, but fizzled out and failed to achieve their objectives, in large part because the rank-and-file participants had no

democratic structures to decide the movement's direction and next steps and to prepare the movement for the inevitable setbacks.

Secondly, and relatedly, there is the question of a socialist organization's purpose. While many leftists see such notions as inherently and problematically elitist, the important truth within the Leninist idea of the "vanguard" and the anarcho-syndicalist idea of the "militant minority" is that people develop politically at different rates, so those with a more worked-out perspective must learn how to hone other people's thinking and draw them into the fight. Accordingly, the task of socialists is to build an active, organized, and politically-developed layer of worker-activists that can intervene in the struggle, sharpen ideas, enlarge itself through political persuasion, and seize opportunities.

Since Chessum approvingly quotes the socialist-feminist writer Hilary Wainwright that we need a way of doing politics in which "we're neither vanguards nor the supporting spectators," I suspect he would not frame the issue in the same terms I do (p. 216). Nevertheless, I believe this substantiates (a) what Chessum critically notes about horizontalism and consensus decision-making and (b) the connection he draws between strategic effectiveness and democratic empowerment. Without democratic structures in which the rank-and-file membership can propose, discuss, and decide upon positions, a socialist organization will struggle to improve its own ideas over time, making it less able to stage effective political interventions when an opening presents itself.

In short, *This is Only the Beginning* is an enjoyable read for anyone interested in the recent history of the British left and raises crucial questions for socialist organizing far beyond the U.K. context. I therefore recommend it strongly.