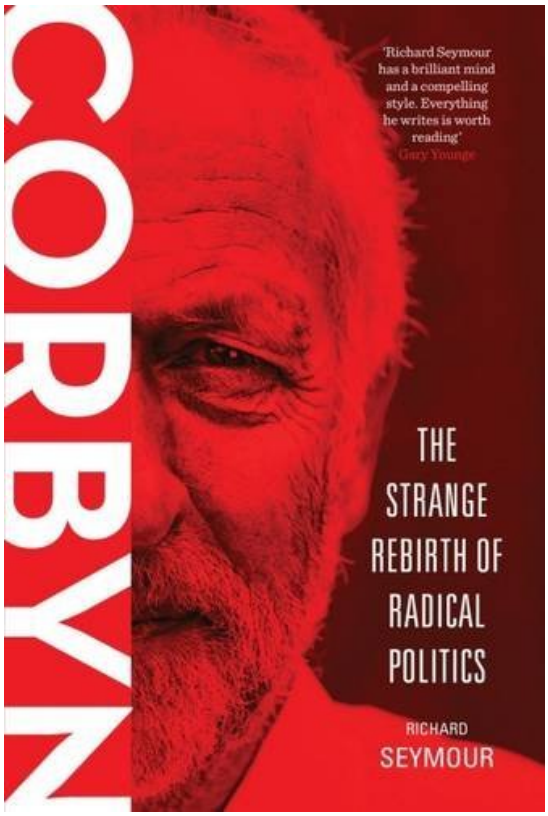
Richard Seymour's "Corbyn": Not Gloomy Enough?

written by Ian Birchall | August 25, 2016



Richard Seymour, *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics.* New York: Verso, $19.95. 256pp.

This time last year I believed Jeremy Corbyn was wrong to stand for the Labour leadership; he would, I thought, get a derisory vote and merely reinforce right-wing hegemony and the marginalisation of the Labour left. Since then the unexpected has happened, and perhaps we should all be a bit cautious in pronouncing on what is and is not possible.

A great deal of nonsense, much of it highly pernicious, has been written about Corbyn. So a new book on the subject from Richard Seymour is very welcome. Seymour, who first established his reputation with the excellent website *Lenin's Tomb*, is a perceptive and exceptionally well-read commentator on current affairs, and what he has to say about Corbyn – which as he points out "won't leave anyone entirely comfortable" [p. 11] – can hopefully raise the level of the discussion above the spite and gossip which has characterised so much of what has appeared so far.

In a devastating opening chapter Seymour surveys the response to Corbyn's campaign and election from professional politicians and journalists. Comments ranging from the paranoid to the inane – from prophecies of strikes and violence to comparisons with National Socialism – show just how much Corbyn has succeeded in upsetting his opponents. The *Guardian* – from which one might, naïvely, have expected something a little bit better, has been particularly culpable, mobilising its writers against Corbyn. The lamentably obnoxious Suzanne Moore (who, as Seymour notes, learned her trade at *Marxism Today*) accused Corbyn of being an ascetic; the implication being that unless one enjoys oneself in the particularly lurid manner that Ms Moore would like us to believe she

indulges in, then one is incapable of any sort of enjoyment.

As Seymour shrewdly observes, Blairites are so angry because they are frightened, "panicking", and the same is true of the journalists who back them. These people are often described as "opinion formers"; but it seems that the ungrateful populace do not want to have their opinions formed any longer, and that opinion formers, like wig-makers during the French Revolution, may see their craft become obsolete.

Seymour attributes this to the declining influence of the press and the rise of alternatives, especially social media: "With the rise of alternative sources of information …. there is far less deference to the dominant television and press outlets than there had been before." [p. 23]. Undoubtedly there is considerable truth in this, but I would add the general prevalence of a diffuse sceptical anti-authoritarianism. This is not unambiguously progressive (for example, the belief that climate change is just a scam invented to increase our taxes), and when one reads the ignorant, reactionary self-obsessed contributions that flourish on the *Guardian* readers' "Comments" sections, there are no great grounds for optimism. Nonetheless the trend is unmistakable.

But, as Seymour points out, the onslaught on Corbyn was counterproductive. Those who were voting for Corbyn were not convinced by the virulent attacks; on the contrary, "those who were likely to vote Corbyn were already convinced that the old leadership was undemocratic and didn't take members seriously." [p. 15]

It was not that Corbyn represented a serious threat to those who hold power in our society and their hangers-on. As Seymour notes, "barring foreign policy, there is nothing in principle that Roy Hattersley couldn't support in Corbyn's agenda." [p. 83] Corbyn's appeal was that he was an example of that unusual phenomenon, an honest person in politics. As an LBC radio host remarked with incredulity "he's given me a straight answer to a straight question". [p. 25] Corbyn says what he believes rather than looking over his shoulder and wondering what he ought to be believing this week. Such people are rare, and the far left has no monopoly of them – the name Ann Widdecombe springs to mind.

Seymour mocks the way in which political commentators have repeatedly drawn comparisons with the rise of Bennism in the early eighties, and its impact on the Labour Party – the 1983 election defeat and the Social Democratic Party split. He makes some valid points in support of his insistence that "This is not 1981". [p. 54]

Yet there are some valid comparisons. Seymour should consider the analysis made by his own former organisation, the SWP, of the Bennite phenomenon. In the early seventies there was a powerful working-class movement, embodied in the Saltley pickets, the freeing of the Pentonville Five and the overthrow of the Heath government. The revolutionary left sometimes rode on its coattails, sometimes made small but significant interventions.

By the end of the decade things were very different. Tony Cliff, perceptively but over-optimistically described the situation as one of "downturn". He expected an upturn to follow – we're still waiting. So the turn to Benn, by many Labour members and trade-union militants, was a sign of weakness; in Cliff's words "because workers don't feel confident enough to fight for jobs or over wages in their own workplace, they look to Tony Benn".

Interestingly, the SWP today has not renewed this analysis for Corbyn. From being the author of the analysis it has become part of the problem; it looks to Corbyn to give a boost to its own reduced membership.

Seymour is, however, right to locate the Corbyn phenomenon in the context of a general crisis of politics, in Britain and around the world. This is expressed most concretely in a continuing decline in electoral turnout. And above all it is the young and the poor who do not vote. The poor because they have repeatedly seen that no party offers any solution to their plight. And unless the young take to voting as the joys of youth begin to fade, the decline will only continue as years go by. But the real causes lie in the political system: "it is not apathy that characterises a growing chunk of the electorate so much as their *exclusion* from effective political power." [p. 73]

Seymour then devotes two chapters to the history of the Labour Party, from the origins to New Labour. It is a useful summary of a familiar story, based on such sources as Ralph Miliband. Labour, he argues, has been trapped with a system that required it to support the existing order and permitted only the most limited reforms. The very particular, and probably unrepeatable, circumstances of 1945 provide the only partial exception.

One could quibble about details. Seymour says nothing of the events of 1960, when the parliamentary leadership refused to accept a conference decision for nuclear disarmament, and set a crucial precedent for the undermining of party democracy. The left, sadly, relied on constitutional niceties while the right mobilised at grass-roots level in unions and constituencies to overturn the decision. But overall Seymour's account of the Labour Party is correct, and shows just how tight the constraints on Corbyn's freedom of manoeuvre will be.

Which brings us to the crunch, the fifth and concluding chapter which asks "Can Corbyn Win?" Seymour is a leading figure in the new journal *Salvage*, which makes no secret of its political pessimism: its original motto was "Hope is precious; it must be rationed." Here he tells us: "This is not to claim that Corbyn can achieve nothing with this experience, or that his supporters will gain nothing from it. But they are best placed to do so if they are sober about the tremendous obstacles facing them." [p. 137]

He begins with a reference to what he calls the "uses of defeat", arguing that while victory can reward complacency, defeat encourages rethinking and regroupment. [p. 179] Seymour looks at the various alternatives ahead, and stresses the weakness of Corbyn's position: "Much of his shadow cabinet includes people quietly waiting for him to be forced to resign, while backbenchers maintain a fairly constant drumbeat of attacks …. The majority of his supporters in the party lack the organisation, experience, visibility and power that his opponents have." [p. 184] In particular Seymour is very sceptical of deselection, which is seen by some as a panacea; it could easily provide "ballast to a right-wing sabotage campaign" [p. 197]

If Corbyn survives to 2020 he will probably lose the election, and of course this will be used to condemn him, even though there is little or no evidence that anyone else could have done better. And in the unlikely but not impossible event of his winning he would face the same problems as all previous Labour governments in office: "It is not apparent that even if Corbyn were to win an election, he would be able to implement his core policies, which require a minimum of cooperation from business and even the financial sector." [p. 184]

The only hope Seymour offers is of real change over an extended period; "there is … a generation of work to be done to reconstitute a viable, habitable Left". [p. 217] What this might entail is left extremely vague, and is highly tantalising to the likes of myself who are very unlikely to live long enough to see how things take shape.

Where Seymour is clearly right is that opinion is not static. It is Corbyn's virtue that he "wants to change opinion, to lead it, rather than merely reflect it in various poll-tested triangulations". [p. 199] People do change their minds, sometimes very rapidly (in 1789 you'd have been pushed to find a

single French person who wanted to chop the king's head off). Those who voted for Corbyn are a small minority of the population – but they have friends and families, they are in workplaces and communities. If they endeavour to win support they can make a real difference, though not necessarily by 2020.

Many of the arguments about what would, or would not, make Corbyn "electable" are based on a static view of consciousness. In fact attitudes change. Thus in my own lifetime I have seen a massive switch from the homophobia which in the early sixties was nearly universal, even in far left circles, to the widespread acceptance of same-sex marriage today. This happened because gay activists stuck their necks out and fought bravely for their rights. So it is particularly sickening when the likes of Ben Bradshaw, who have personally benefited from the courage and determination of their predecessors, insist that Labour should simply reflect existing consciousness.

What Seymour says very little about is what organisational form a new movement might take. He has little hope of transforming the Labour Party and suggests that "for the great majority of the newest recruits, Labour is a temporary home". [p. 219]

He devotes only a few paragraphs to the far left. Seymour was, like myself, for a good number of years a member of a revolutionary left organisation. As it happens it was the organisation which made the best shot at combining adherence to a revolutionary socialist tradition with a serious and realistic analysis of the world around us. In the event it wasn't good enough. Inside the bubble of the revolutionary left it is all too easy to overestimate the importance of one's own group and to view the world in the distorting perspective of the party line. But to puncture the bubble all that is needed is one small prick.

Mocking those who raised the spectre of a Trotskyist takeover of the Labour Party, Seymour estimates the forces of the far left at less than fifteen thousand. [p. 32] If this means those actually in far left organisations it is a generous overestimate. But there is also a larger diaspora of those who were once in revolutionary organisations and have retained most of their beliefs and commitments.

In the aftermath of 1968 most of the far left saw the need to build a genuine socialist alternative outside the Labour Party, and for want of any other available historical model, decided to build Leninist parties. In that heady period, the days of the Chilean *coup* and the Portuguese revolution, it was a reasonable perspective. That it has survived so long is evidence of how deeply a generation were marked by their experiences.

In recent years a key part of the strategy of the far left has been to build an electoral alternative to Labour. From Scargill's Socialist Labour Party through the Socialist Alliance and Respect to Left Unity and TUSC, a whole series of attempts were made. Seymour is now dismissive of these, though at the time he, like myself, backed them enthusiastically. He explains the failure of Respect in terms of being "overly dominated by certain well-placed egos" and of the failure of any significant Labour figure other than George Galloway to join. [p. 165] The two are closely linked; if even a handful of Labour MPs had joined Respect, the egos could have been called to order. But it could not happen; Corbyn's mentor Benn was deeply committed to the principle that the Labour Party was the *only* channel for social change.

That whole electoral strategy has been destroyed by Corbyn. To stand against Labour while Corbyn is leader would mean denouncing Corbyn's programme and isolating oneself from Corbyn's followers. TUSC's attempt to find a middle way was hardly successful. (For TUSC's results you will have to go to the TUSC website [http://www.tusc.org.uk/17246/10-05-2016/super-thursday-elections-the-tusc-results] – they made

no impact anywhere else.)

Yet the far left has not managed to find any other response to Corbyn than to be relatively uncritical cheerleaders. Thus the SWP told its supporters: "How should revolutionary socialists respond to the sustained attacks on Corbyn and attempts to undermine him? Should we shout "Sell out!" at every compromise he is forced to make? Should we sloganise against the inevitable capitulations of reformist politics? Or should we build the broadest possible defence of his leadership in order to give him the backing to implement the policies he was elected on and to defend him against attacks from the right? If we adopt the former approach we will be consigned to a sectarian ghetto and not deserve a hearing for our politics. Instead we need to rally round to defend him from attacks from the right. In defending Corbyn we are defending the principles of anti-austerity, solidarity with refugees, anti-racism and opposition to war that are at the core of our own politics." [Sean Doherty in *Socialist Review*, October 2015] *Party Notes* reported gleefully on how many papers had been sold at Corbyn rallies; what they didn't tell us was how many of those buyers came back for even a second copy.

Even RS21, which has generally had a very realistic attitude to current possibilities, has been swayed by the enthusiasm for Corbyn : "The election of Jeremy Corbyn, the same day tens of thousands surged through London in defence of refugees, has opened a world of possibilities. The radical left is no less fragmented and our anti-austerity movement is no less short of what we need, but many can now sense the chance to advance radical politics and renew attempts to build resistance from below." [https://rs21.org.uk/2015/10/02/corbyn-what-next-issue-5-of-rs21-magazine/]

Yet what can the left hope for from the Corbyn experience? If Corbyn is deposed, or loses the 2020 election – the two most likely scenarios – there are unlikely to be any significant gains for the left. By the 2020 election Corbyn will be nearly 71. He will resign, disdainfully reject an offer of a peerage, and return to his allotment. What is absolutely certain is that he will not lead a split from the Labour Party, however badly he is treated. Like Benn, he will live and die in the Labour Party. The right will regain control of the party, and use Corbyn as a bogeyman, just as Foot and Benn were used by a previous generation.

So where will Corbyn's followers go? Some will stay in the Labour Party, nourishing the hope that one day happy times will come again. Others will go to the Greens, others again to single-issue campaigns. No more than a handful will go to the various groups of the far left.

Long ago, in some Trotskyist circles, there was the idea that revolutionaries should "take the masses through the experience" – i.e. encourage them to put reformists in power so that when the reformists "exposed themselves" the masses would flock to the revolutionary leadership. It is a notion which, along with "transitional demands", belongs in the dustbin of history.

Seymour is at least partially justified in his scornful dismissal of "Britain's old, exhausted, fractal Left". [p. 196] It occurs to me that the one way that SWP could make an effective intervention at the present time would to mobilise its grey-haired comrades into the pensioners' movement, where they could make a real impact. Unfortunately the veteran comrades still have their eyes on the stars and aren't prepared to take on the donkey-work.

But if the old far left will not give birth to a new movement, where will it come from? On this point Seymour has little to offer. Of course there is always hope – just enough to encourage us to keep on fighting. But overall the prospect is bleak – even bleaker than the melancholy sages of *Salvage* would have us believe.

Climate change will produce a migration crisis many, many times worse than the one we are

currently experiencing. A far right – whether or not fascist in the classic sense – demanding closed borders will get ever stronger. Increasing tensions between nations will make nuclear war ever more likely. Socialism or barbarism. Rosa Luxemburg was right, but not in the way she hoped.

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