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Socialism, or Left Populism?**

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**Corbyn's Ideology:
Social Democracy, Democratic Socialism, or Left Populism?**

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Abstract

The “Third Way”, the recipe Labour Party (UK) adopted in the 1990s with the aim to differ from the old left and the New Right and to reconcile the social democracy with the primacy of the market, was the consequence of the end of the Welfare State consensus, the decline of the Marxism's appeal, and the economic, social, and technological changes that took place after the 1970s in the capitalist world. The successes European social democratic parties enjoyed in the 1990s, including Labour, were exhausted by the mid-2000s, though. The 2008-9 economic crisis completely discredited the idea of a market-oriented social democracy. Having won the 1997, 2001 and 2005 elections, Labour fell from power in 2010. In an era where the traditional centre-left parties constantly lose ground to the rising right-wing populist movements, Jeremy Corbyn's Labour (from 2015 on) is increasingly portrayed as a left-wing alternative to both pro-austerity incumbent parties which rule out redistributive policies and right-wing populism which is fuelled by the grievances of the masses targeting the traditional political elites. Corbyn managed to mobilize a vast section of the society by becoming the biggest left-wing party of Europe in terms of membership and to increase its votes in the 2017 election, especially by gaining more youth support than before. The political leaders, movements and parties standing at the same ideological point with Corbyn are generally labelled democratic socialist. There is no reason to deprive Corbyn of this label. When it comes to the political discourse he employs, both during the electoral campaigns and at times he met serious challenges, one can easily identify Corbyn as a left-wing populist. It is therefore plausible to define Corbyn as a democratic socialist usually resorting to left-wing populist means in a social democratic party.

Keywords: Social democracy, left-wing populism, democratic socialism, Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn

Introduction

Jeremy Corbyn's election as the leader of the Labour Party (UK) in September 2015 by the majority of members, the organizational, political and even ideological change he has brought about in the party and his electoral success in June 2017—which was seen as a surprise by the British establishment—have increasingly drawn the attention of political observers and researchers. In an era where the traditional centre-left parties of Continental Europe constantly lose ground to the rising right populist movements (in most cases their decline is more severe than that of the centre-right parties), Corbyn's Labour is increasingly portrayed in the popular political discourse as a left-wing alternative to both pro-austerity incumbent parties which rule out redistributive policies and right-wing populism which is fuelled by the grievances of the masses targeting the traditional political elites. The attempts to theorize the basis and content of Corbyn's post-New Labour political restructuring programme are still in their initial phase, though. The objective of this paper is to position Corbyn's ideology into the most appropriate sphere by discussing to what extent it suits the propositions of social democracy, left-wing populism and democratic socialism.

A Short Theoretical Overview

Throughout the 20th Century social democracy (SD) was an ideology which rejected the economism and passivity of orthodox Marxism and liberalism as well as the authoritarianism of fascism. SD emphasized the primacy of politics and the communitarianism instead and managed to become hegemonic in the post-WWII Europe by proving to be more successful than its adversaries such as liberalism, communism and fascism (Berman, 2006). The decrease of the importance of class struggle, of Marxism and of revolutionary discourse shaped the development of the SD after the WWII, hence a kind of corporatism based on industrial discipline, productivity, full employment and rising real wages survived until the global crisis which stemmed from the 1973 recession (Eley, 2002).

The evolution of SD throughout the previous century was also shaped by the strategic decisions of the socialist parties made at critical junctures, regarding issues like capitalist development, nation-state, international system and relations with other ideologies (Sassoon, 2014). Przeworski points to three strategic decisions while identifying the emergence of SD in a country: The decision as to whether the move towards socialism will be conducted within the boundaries of the capitalist institutions or not, whether the socialist transformation's agent will be merely the working class or a cross-class alliance will be sought, and whether the political agenda will be reformist or revolutionary (Przeworski, 1985). While Przeworski is not optimistic about the likelihood of the social democratic transformation of the capitalist society (Ibid.), Esping-Andersen posits that historically the social democratic parties had the possibility to materialize their objectives by managing to build cross-class alliances (Esping-Andersen, 1985).

It has been Giddens who theorized the social democratic parties' inclination to adapt themselves to a version of SD which is in harmony with the requirements of the neoliberal globalization in the 1990s. Arguing that old fashion radical politics became ineffective and defunct in the era of globalization (1994), Giddens proposes a "Third Way" which differs from the old left and the New Right (1998). That new recipe which reconciles the SD with the primacy of the market is the consequence of the end of the Welfare State consensus, the decline of the

Marxism's appeal, and the economic, social, and technological changes that took place after the 1970s (Giddens, 1998 and 2000). He summarizes the roles he assigns to the market, the civil society and the state as follows (Giddens, 2000: 165):

A market economy can only function effectively within a framework of social institutions and if grounded in a developed civil society (...) The good society is one that strikes a balance between government, markets and the civil order. (...) It is a mistake just to counterpose the state to markets. Without a stable civil society, incorporating norms of trust and social decency, markets cannot flourish and democracy can be undermined.

Giddens' contentions framed and theorized the pro-market orientation of the European social democratic parties, especially that of the New Labour under Tony Blair's leadership. However he was more like the explicator than the architect of the European centre-left's shift to the centre. The "neo-revisionism", as termed by Sassoon, of the Spanish, Italian, British and Belgian social democrats was the contemporary stage of a historical tradition whose milestones were laid down by Eduard Bernstein, Anthony Crosland and the German social democrat leadership of the late 1950s (Sassoon, 2014: 733). Stressing that the neo-revisionists adopted "the idea that capitalism would not be destroyed by a self-generated crisis, or by a revolution, or by the steady expansion of public property" like their predecessors, Sassoon continues (Ibid.: 733-734):

When the Socialist International was founded in 1951, its *Declaration of Aims* (...) did not hold back from declaring that the aim of socialists was the abolition of capitalism. The 1989 Stockholm Declaration of the Socialist International claimed freedom, solidarity and social justice to be the aims of the movement. The abolition of capitalism was not mentioned. (...) Capitalism was not a particular transitory phase in the historical development of humanity, but a mode of production which was subject to political (...) regulation.

In fact, it was the evolution of capitalism following the 1973 global economic crisis which shook the foundation of the SD. A "rapid erosion of the institutional and organizational framework that made social democracy possible in the first place" took place, as put by Esping-Andersen and Van Kresbergen. The social democratic model was actually based on the "organized capitalism", thus the changes such as "the demands of flexibility and the pressures toward differentiation" brought about by the "post-Fordist" neoliberal capitalism weakened the SD (Esping-Andersen and Van Kresbergen, 1992: 203). When it comes to UK, policies such as stakeholderism and the Third Way aimed to adapt the Labour to the priorities of the Anglo-Saxon capitalism such as the "shareholder value, short-term profitability, the mobility of capital and labour flexibility" (Thompson, 2006: 267). Stressing that Tony Blair's vision was about bolstering a mild version of individualism in conformity with the globalization and undermining the traditional left's egalitarianism by emphasizing meritocracy, Thompson notes (Thompson, 2006: 268-269, 276-278):

New Labour's stakeholderism was therefore a political economy that took seriously the New Right's desire to create a truly popular capitalism. (...) As for the goal of social equality, this should be about equality of opportunity, with emphasis shifted from the redistribution of income and wealth to the redistribution of possibilities. (...) If social democracy was to be renewed it had to go with the global flow and not struggle against the irreversible currents of international capitalism.

The successes Western European social democratic parties enjoyed in the 1990s were exhausted by the mid-2000s, though. The 2008-9 economic crisis completely discredited the idea of a market-oriented SD. This helped the left-wing populism (or left populism) and the democratic socialism rise their appeals. They are far from reaching the attractiveness the SD had over the electorate for decades, though. Examples such as Bernie Sanders (USA), Jeremy Corbyn (UK), Jean-Luc Mélenchon (France), Podemos (Spain) and SYRIZA (Greece) have risen as new political alternatives situating themselves on the left of the mainstream social democratic policies, but none of them except the latter managed to get a grip on power.

It should also be noted that the ideological differences between democratic socialism and left-wing populism are highly blurry, while the ambiguity of the SD's borders with these two currents persists. Implying that it is difficult to draw a boundary between left-wing populism and democratic socialism, March defines Dutch Socialist Party, Scottish Socialist Party and Left Party (Germany) as parties which “combine a democratic socialist ideology with a strong populist discourse”. He adds that the “left-populists present an idealized version of a social democratic society before it began to ‘rot’ under the influence of 20 years of neo-liberalism and betrayal by “mainstream” social-democratic parties” (March, 2007: 67).

Left-wing populism became a prominent political current in Europe especially between the late 1960s and the early 1980s: The student movement which began in 1968, the New Left of the 1970s and the emergence of Green parties in the early 1980s were all examples of the left-wing populism (Ibid.: 66). Paying less attention to the “doctrinal purity and class-consciousness” is a feature which differs left-wing populists from the traditional leftists, however their egalitarianism and their concern for the economic injustice clearly place them on the left side of the political spectrum (Ibid.). This is actually what makes left-wing populism diverge from its right-wing adversary.

Bernie Sanders, who call himself a democratic socialist, is one of the prominent political figures who has been employing left-wing populist themes in his discourse. Sanders is part of the international political stream that can be called “new leftist populism” in Rehmann’s words (Rehmann, 2016: 4). Although Sanders’ “economic demands moved mostly within a progressive social-democratic framework”, he actually made use of a populist language seeking to build an alliance between the working class and the middle class, and therefore addressing the “99%” of the society (Ibid.: 7-8). Rehmann posits that during the 2016 Democratic Party primaries Sanders sought to “construct a new and broad “historic bloc” of different subaltern classes and groups” in Gramscian terms, hence implies that Sanders used left-wing populism as a means to pursue a truly socialist strategy (Ibid.: 7).

Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), for their part, define democratic socialism as follows:

Democratic socialists believe that both the economy and society should be run democratically—to meet public needs, not to make profits for a few. To achieve a more just society, many structures of our government and economy must be radically transformed through greater economic and social democracy so that ordinary Americans can participate in the many decisions that affect our lives. Democracy and socialism go hand in hand. All over the world, wherever the idea of democracy has taken root, the vision of socialism has taken root as well (...).¹

¹See “What is Democratic Socialism?”, Democratic Socialists of America, at <https://www.dsasusa.org/about-us/what-is-democratic-socialism/>

Corbyn's Labour

Having won the 1997, 2001 and 2005 elections, Labour fell from power in 2010. Following another electoral defeat in 2015, Jeremy Corbyn assumed party leadership. The legacy of the Blair era is still strong amongst the members of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), though. The majority of the PLP, including a considerable number of MPs known as Blairites, turned down the new and leftist policies Corbyn tries to adopt (Crines, Jeffery and Heppell, 2018). They even openly challenged Corbyn's leadership in 2016. However, backed by an even increasing number of party members, Corbyn defeated this challenge by strengthening his popular (i.e. Constituency Labour Party–CLP) support (Martell, 2018).

The general expectation about Labour's prospective electoral performance under Corbyn was not promising prior to the 2017 election. A big segment of the corporate media and commentators reflecting the views and preferences of the establishment anticipated a comfortable victory for Theresa May's Conservatives (Dorey, 2017: 308-312; Stephens, 2017; Diamond, 2017). The media coverage of Corbyn could be best termed hostile. The "British press acted more as an attackdog than a watchdog when it comes to the reporting of Corbyn", the press therefore "acted in an undemocratic manner" by portraying the Labour leader "as a deviant enemy, rather than a legitimate political actor" (Cammaerts, DeCillia and Magalhaes, 2017). Corbyn however conducted a successful electoral campaign in 2017 which extended his party's popular support and counteracted the media's negative coverage targeting him since he became the party leader (Dorey, 2017: 308, 331-332). Corbyn's Labour managed to mobilize a vast section of the society by becoming the biggest left-wing party of Europe in terms of membership (Mouffe, 2018a; Crines, Jeffery and Heppell: 363-364) and increasing the turnout, especially by gaining more youth support than before (Dorey, 2017: 327-329; Diamond, 2017). (For a different view contending that "there is no evidence of a surge in voter turnout amongst the youngest eligible voters" see Prosser et. al., 2018).

How can we interpret the ideological implications of Corbyn's rise? Corbyn has been seen as a "hard left" figure by the majority of the Labour "aristocracy". The most recent split from the Labour took place in early 2019. Eight MPs quitted the Labour and formed the "Independent Group" along with three other MPs who resigned from the Conservative Party. The cause behind the emergence of this new group was the endless Brexit turmoil which dominated British politics since 2016, but the accusation that Labour was "hijacked by a hard-left clique" under Corbyn's leadership also played a part in the resignations.²

Where should one place Corbyn's ideology on the political spectrum? Attempting to identify left-wing populism could be a good first step. However, the study of the contemporary right-wing populism is much more voluminous than that of the left-wing populism. Much of the researches concerning the latter analyze specific political movements such as Podemos of Spain (see for instance Kioupiolis, 2016; Ramiro and Gomez, 2017; Agustin and Briziarelli, 2018) and SYRIZA of Greece (see for instance Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014; Katsambekis, 2016; Mudde, 2017). One of the significant attempts to theorize left-wing populism in a general context has come from Mouffe. She argues that the "post-political" consensus of the neoliberal era which is characterized by the convergence of the policies offered by the established parties

² Chris Leslie from the Independent Group argued that "Jeremy Corbyn was promulgating "hard-left" policies, which did not deserve the label of "Labour" " (See Heather Stewart, "Labour hijacked by hard-left clique, claims Chris Leslie", The Guardian, 22 February 2019, at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/feb/22/labour-hijacked-by-hard-left-clique-claims-chris-leslie>).

harms the foundation of the democracy (Mouffe, 2016). In her 2018 book she further develops these views and advocates a new paradigm she calls “left populism” for combating the policies promoted by right-wing populism (Mouffe, 2018b). She views Corbyn’s Labour as a successful example of left populism (Mouffe, 2018a).

Another attempt to build a theoretical framework for Corbyn’s policies beyond the emphasis put on the return of the traditional left-wing values has come from Martell. His work identifies and explains in detail the left-wing populist aspects of Corbyn’s policies. Martell points to the anti-elitist (anti-PLP) struggle Corbyn had to pursue by successfully appealing the support of the ordinary people (party members) and discusses whether Corbyn’s populism stems from his leftism or vice versa (Martell, 2018). In his words, “Corbyn is a democratic socialist but his policies are social democratic, for political as much as ideological reasons (...)” (Ibid.: 5). On the same token, Rehmann defines Corbyn’s stance as “a leftist-social-democratic approach” (Rehmann, 2016: 7).

Conclusion

Labour in the 1990s was amongst the pioneer European social democratic parties in terms of the adaptation to the free-market policies. The British capitalism which has been historically and structurally prone to favour policies strengthening the self-regulating market—as opposed to most of the Continental European economic systems leaning towards corporatism—and the Thatcher era’s legacy further facilitated Labour’s neo-liberal transformation. In his fourth year in the party’s direction, Corbyn still has to act within the boundaries of a “generally accepted” version of social democracy. What makes him a controversial figure in the eyes of the British dominant classes, the media which is controlled by them, and the conformist wing of his own party is that he seeks to pursue a set of social democratic policies which could be seen natural during the “welfare state capitalism” era (the 1950s, 60s and 70s) but which are hardly acceptable for most of the social democratic elites today. These policy proposals are equally acceptable for Labour voters, on the other hand. The immense rise in the number of Labour members under Corbyn’s leadership is a clear indication of that.

All around the Western world the political leaders, movements and parties standing at the same ideological point with Corbyn are generally labelled democratic socialist. There is no reason to deprive Corbyn of this label. When it comes to the political discourse he employs, both during the electoral campaigns (of 2017 for instance) and at times he met (mainly within-party) challenges, one can easily identify Corbyn as a left-wing populist. In a nutshell, it seems plausible to define Corbyn as a democratic socialist usually resorting to left-wing populist means in a social democratic party.

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