

## **Manufacturing Dissent: Reflections on a Year of the Corbyn Movement and the Return of the Radical Bible**

### **Books & Culture Review Essay**

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Since the financial crash of 2008, the dominance of neoliberalism has been challenged—with varying degrees of success—like never before. In the UK the most sustained and potent reaction has come in the form of the support that propelled the anti-austerity, anti-war figure of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party in September 2015 and which was confirmed again in September 2016, following an unsuccessful leadership challenge from disgruntled MPs led by Owen Smith. There are a number of reasons why a figure like Corbyn became leader of one of the two main political parties (cf. Seymour 2016) which was still a surprise despite the fallout from the 2008 crash. A new Left, refracted through movements such as Occupy and UK Uncut, was now more focused on issues such as environmental politics, student fees, irregular working patterns, generational changes in living standards, and zero-hour contracts. This Left was addressing different questions than the old industrial Left which was Labour's base for much of the twentieth century, though now facing some of the worst humiliations in the new capitalism of the neoliberal era. And pre-Corbyn Labour only provided an uncomfortable residence in the Labour Party for old and new. An older Left has also returned. Since Tony Blair's landslide victory in 1997, Labour has haemorrhaged support, with the Iraq War being particularly damaging, though its managerial style, perceived metropolitanism, wealthy networks, and "on message" media approach was never wholly embraced by the membership and its traditional voters. Labour, it seemed, had not only capitulated to neoliberal economics but also to neoconservative foreign policy, much to the chagrin of its more leftist supporters. Against this backdrop, Corbyn represented the antithesis of Blair's New Labour and had been a leading backbench opponent with radical credibility going back decades.

Even so, how could such a range of people find themselves in a more comfortable residence in the Labour Party? Some seemingly innocuous reasons help explain this. The previous Labour leader, Ed Miliband, had opened up voting for the leader to the party membership as well as introducing voting privileges to new supporters who only had to pay £3 in 2015. Still, no one thought Corbyn would win the Labour leadership election at the beginning of the summer of 2015, as the socialism he represents had seemingly been long consigned to a pre-Blair past. Indeed, his name was only on the ballot because Labour politicians "lent" him their nomination in the name of widening the debate before, so it was assumed, such a position could be shunted safely away until the next leadership election. However, when the Labour Party line was to abstain from the Conservative government's Welfare Reform Bill, it was one concession too far and seemed to open up years of pent-up frustration and propel one of those who voted against it as a matter of

principle. It soon became clear that Corbyn would win the leadership election as he indeed did with 59.5% support when it was announced in September 2015.

The year that followed was tumultuous. Almost immediately, a significant number of MPs did not like the idea of Corbyn as leader or the fellow socialist and close ally, John McDonnell, as shadow chancellor. A pre-planned plot against Corbyn was triggered by the resignation/sacking of Hilary Benn from his shadow cabinet after the result of the EU Referendum in June 2016. Orchestrated resignations and a motion of no confidence supported by 172 MPs followed and another shadow cabinet member, Angela Eagle, initially challenged Corbyn for the leadership, though she was soon supplanted by another former shadow cabinet member, Owen Smith. But throughout his first year, Corbyn was supported by a new group, Momentum, founded in light of his 2015 victory, which was able to rally support and, despite various attempts to keep Corbyn away from the ballot or certain members from voting, Corbyn won with an increased mandate of 62% of the vote.

As I argued, the emergence of Corbyn to frontbench politics saw the return of the Radical Bible (Crossley 2016a, 283-318). By the “Radical Bible” I mean the Bible assumed to be synonymous with radical socialism and which was a serious authority on the Labour Left, and to a lesser extent the Labour Party more generally. Thatcher and then Blair pushed the Radical Bible outside the mainstream of parliamentary political debate as Thatcher’s Neoliberal Bible, with Blair’s socially liberal qualifications, became the accepted parliamentary authority for the accompanying political positions. One year after the rise of Corbyn, I want to look at that discussion from another angle: this time, the role of the media in the manufacturing of political consent and the ideological tendencies manoeuvring for hegemony of the Left in the aftermath of the 2008 crash.

### **Manufacturing Consent**

One of the most predictable things about the emergence of Corbyn was that the media would not like him. Throughout the neoliberal era, the British media have made notorious attacks on any culturally prominent (or even non-prominent) figure even *deemed* Left (e.g. Tony Benn, Michael Foot, Neil Kinnock, Ed Miliband). Given the broad acceptance of the neoliberal settlement by Labour (especially under Blair), the long absence of anything ideologically close to pre-Blair figures on the Left, such as Tony Benn, in frontline parliamentary politics was always going to lead to a response. To provide some flavour, we have been informed by the British press of many, many things that do not have an especially close connection to what Corbyn has said. These include the following:

Revealed: How Jeremy Corbyn welcomed the prospect of an asteroid “wiping out” humanity, attacked “pigeon prejudice” and demanded a ban on Action Man toys (McTague 2015).

Jeremy Corbyn is a threat to our national security, says George Osborne (Mortimer 2015).

Jeremy Corbyn “cancels Christmas” and refuses to issue festive message (Hope 2015).

Corbyn: Abolish the Army: New leader's potty plan for world peace (Hawkes 2015).

I will leave it to the reader to establish whether this is lying, naïveté, or deliberate decontextualisation, but what we can say is that it functions as propaganda. And by “propaganda,” I am using the term as developed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, who famously argued that media discussions of politics broadly reflect various elite discourses and corporate interests, irrespective of whether elite opinions are in agreement over details or not (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Individual journalists may think differently and sometimes may publish differently. Nevertheless, media outlets will, broadly speaking, foreground issues, ignore others, or ridicule those which are deemed beyond the pale in order to help manufacture consent and parameters of agreed assumptions of debate in liberal capitalist democracies. In terms of an updating and reapplying of Herman and Chomsky (cf. Edwards and Cromwell 2005; 2009; Cromwell 2012), a figure openly critical of the neoliberal consensus like Corbyn heading a mainstream political party was never going to be presented in a broadly positive light and this has since been shown in analysis of media presentations of Corbyn (Cammaerts, DeCillia, Magalhães, and Jimenez-Martínez 2016).

Indeed, figures on the Left predicted this at the time. Owen Jones, for instance, claimed in August 2015 that, if elected, Corbyn would face a vicious attack from the establishment media because he is a challenge to the political consensus (2015). When Jones later published a series of controversial critical questions to Corbyn's supporters when the coup against Corbyn had got underway, and when other leftist *Guardian* journalists were having similar anxieties, he referred back to his prediction and said that it was not prophetic but “entirely obvious.” But what is significant about Jones' prediction is that it focuses on the right-wing press. It is perhaps not surprising that he would not criticise his employer, the liberal-left leaning *Guardian*, and he openly pointed out that his employers at the *Guardian* “have never gagged me” (2016). But this is precisely the point: there are some unspoken constraints whether we notice or not, and we should not expect the *Guardian* to be so heavy-handed. Instead, there is another way to read the role of the *Guardian*. Caricatures of Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model would have it that they claimed journalists are almost robotically controlled from upon high and told to believe x, y, and z. But this is not what Herman and Chomsky were suggesting. Rather, as with plenty of other social groups, acceptable and unacceptable ideas are (often unintentionally) constructed, in this case consent might be connected to the kinds of people who work in the media (often liberal-ish, middle-class professionals), working for those who manoeuvre at the highest corporate level or even own newspapers and thus engage with various financial and high political issues. In terms of the *Guardian*, advertising plays a significant role in its revenue and the *Guardian* itself is owned by the Scott Trust Limited. In other words, and to state the obvious, the *Guardian* is part of the corporate world just like any other mainstream media outlet and is ultimately playing the same game.

While still valid, Jones' critique of the media is limited because the liberal-left play a crucial gatekeeping role in constructing one extremity of consensus. A certain radicalism is tolerated with some radical leftist journalism and, crucially, radicalism is regularly commodified, all of which keeps radicalism at a safe enough

distance. The *Guardian* presumably knows that there is a market among its readership, plenty of whom (if letters and comments are anything to go by) are more critical of the Thatcher-Blair economic consensus than the *Guardian* as a whole. To take a striking example of commodifying radicalism, any regular visitor to the website will have noticed advertisements for anti-New Labour t-shirts (e.g. “Labour: I prefer their old work,” one with the famous Bevan remark that Tories are “lower than vermin”), including, as some commenters noted, on anti-Corbyn articles. In normal circumstances, the usual tactic for the *Guardian* to pacify its more radical readers might involve qualifying statements about having to hold your nose and vote for Labour over Conservative, or even in articles critical of neoliberalism, though the signs were there of a more controversial centrist direction when they suggested voting Liberal Democrat in 2010, of which readers have regularly reminded them. But circumstances have changed, and the emergence of the Corbyn movement has shown the limits of what the leftish end of the media can accept. The emergence of widespread support for Corbyn among Labour supporters has, probably more than anything else, revealed how the *Guardian* is involved in the manufacturing of consent. Corbyn’s policy suggestions could even be classified as a *Keynesian* critique of the current Thatcher-Blair economic consensus which would only further highlight how narrow and far to the economic Right the current consensus now is. So how did the *Guardian* initially react once it became clear that some of the critiques found among its most leftist commentators might become a reality with Corbyn? Despite individual articles of support, there were over twenty anti-Corbyn articles in one week once it became clear Corbyn might win in the summer of 2015.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Bible and Manufacturing Dissent**

The emergence of the Corbyn movement put the assumed limits of media debate in 2015 into sharp focus. But if conventional media would inevitably be so hostile, what alternatives have there been for the Corbyn movement? One is social media where Corbyn’s team have been particularly effective, even if social media cannot dictate media narratives and reporting in the way the traditional media still can. Another way that can even gain some support from the traditional media is an appreciation of Christianity and the Bible. While there are exceptions among niche opinion writers, issues of Christianity and the Bible are treated positively by the British press and are broadly and vaguely understood to be a “Good Thing” and part of the British cultural heritage, even if things like content and complex histories are not over-investigated and so long as God is not perceived to be pushed too far into mainstream political discourse (Crossley and Harrison 2015a; Crossley and Harrison 2015b; Crossley 2016a, 277-82). It is striking that one of the precursors to the Corbyn movement—the political interventions of Russell Brand—was ridiculed when Brand mentioned discourses assumed to be “religious” or “spiritual” (e.g. meditation, Hare Krishna, pantheism, transcendentalism, etc.). His use of the Bible and Christianity may have been deemed inauthentic and his Christ-Che poses self-indulgent, but there was little in the way of attacks on anything deemed authentically Christian (Crossley 2016a, 297-305).

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<sup>1</sup> Collected at [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1L0aTsGMHyxwEj7CErUDcIV2ydnJ9\\_AkfwLmfxfhHCT4/edit?pli=1](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1L0aTsGMHyxwEj7CErUDcIV2ydnJ9_AkfwLmfxfhHCT4/edit?pli=1).

Brand may not have been deemed culturally credible but it was less easy to attack Corbyn on such issues, given he has long had connections with discourses associated with Nonconformist radical Christianity, particularly through his mentor, Tony Benn. This Radical Bible tradition has long had associations not only with socialism in different guises but also with culturally and politically credible anti-Stalinist, anti-totalitarian English or British traditions, with an emphasis on liberty and freedom of conscience and with reference to discourses about helping the poor and, more specifically, the founding of the National Health Service (Crossley 2016a, 18-32, 230-4, 266-76). This is not a tradition easily mocked in the media or by politicians. Nevertheless, Thatcher appropriated the leftist language of freedom for her economically liberal Bible, and this was to become the template for what the Bible and religion really mean in English political discourse with the Radical Bible largely shunted out of parliamentary discourse until the emergence of the Corbyn movement. Indeed, on becoming leader, Corbyn immediately began alluding to the parable of the Good Samaritan in ways familiar to the Radical Bible tradition and in tension with (intentionally or not) uses of the Good Samaritan by Thatcher (to support charitable giving over against the welfare state) and David Cameron (to support military intervention in the Middle East and North Africa) (see further Crossley 2015, 69-74).

In his 2015 victory speech, for instance, Corbyn said that “we don’t pass by on the other side” (Labour Party 2015) in the context of improving welfare and dealing with “misery and poverty”: “[W]e want to live in a society where we don’t pass by on the other side of those people rejected by an unfair welfare system. Instead we reach out to end the scourge of homelessness and desperation that so many people face in our society.” There was a more direct allusion to (and contrast with) Thatcher’s famous claim of “no such thing as society” in his interview on the *Andrew Marr Show* in September 2015 where he suggested that he wants a “decent democratic society” and a “society” where “we don’t pass by on the other side while the poor lie in the gutter” (steel76 2015). There was also a further qualification when Corbyn delivered his first speech as Labour leader to the Labour Party Conference in September 2015. In addition to the speech openly containing a number of familiar leftist positions, there was a more immediate qualification: “Fair play for all. Solidarity and not walking by on the other side of the street when people are in trouble. Respect for other people’s point of view. It is this sense of fair play, these shared majority British values that are the fundamental reason why I love this country and its people” (Corbyn 2015). This was delivered shortly after Corbyn had received intense media criticism for not singing the national anthem, and it is telling that, consciously or not, another common aspect of the Radical Bible was invoked and one Corbyn may well have known from Tony Benn: the Radical Bible as something home-grown and *British* (or, alternatively, *English*) (Crossley 2016a, 20-6). It is striking that Corbyn’s internal Labour critic and son of Tony, Hilary Benn, used the Good Samaritan (“We never have, and we never should, walk by on the other side of the road”) to oppose Corbyn and justify voting for the bombing of Syria (Hansard 2015). Benn also invoked the International Brigades (a heroic reference point for the British Left) fighting fascism as a similar means of combatting “this evil” today. As it happened, the then Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, had also been using the Good Samaritan to justify a potential military attack on ISIS whom he described in terms of evil and, crucially, a distortion or perversion of an

assumed True Islam (Crossley 2016b). Worth comparing here is Corbyn's seemingly similar construction of ISIS as a "perversion of Islam" but, for Corbyn, the opposite conclusion was drawn, i.e. the justification of non-military intervention in the Middle East and North Africa, which contrasts sharply with dominant constructions of False Islam (Crossley 2016a, 315-18). In this particular instance of the battle for the ideological soul of Parliament, Hilary Benn's militaristic construction of the Good Samaritan is closer to Cameron's Good Samaritan and assumptions about "religion" and "Islam" than it is to Corbyn's.

In this respect, it is notable how discourses relating to "religion" have been used since the emergence of Corbyn and how they shed more light on the manufacturing of consent and dissent. The language of "cult," "sect," "sectarian," "puritan," and even "fundamentalist" has been repeated and repeated and repeated in the media (and still repeated in the BBC reporting immediately following Corbyn's 2016 victory) and by hostile politicians presumably hoping such terms will catch on. Indeed, old slurs like "pharisaical" (cf. "like the zealot he is—he believes in a higher cause") have even re-emerged (Holland 2016) despite the presumably ineffective challenge by biblical scholars against the use of these derogatory labels over the past few decades. Of course, this language has little use in trying to establish cultic, puritanical or fundamentalist realities, but that is beside the point. Its function in such discourses is an attempted policing of the boundaries of ideological acceptability and an assumed political consensus, in this case the Thatcher-Blair settlement. While this language assumes an antithetical "orthodoxy" or "church," those commentators with fewer inhibitions about offending Christianity or religion could refer to related and long established tropes used to marginalise potentially anti-capitalist discourse in the context of liberal capitalism (cf. Toscano 2010) by linking the hard Left to a construction of "religion" as dangerously irrational (e.g. Kettle 2016). Nevertheless, and in line with the dominant attitudes to religion in the media and mainstream politics, the construction of a distortion or aberration of a more inclusive construct of religion, held sway. In the *Guardian* (to take one example among many), Michael White (assistant editor and former political editor), appeared to imply that there was a comparison of type to be made between the Corbyn movement and ISIS ("a different version of populist fundamentalism on offer") when Corbyn looked likely to win the Labour leadership election (White 2015). A social historian of Britain, Iraq, or Syria might point out that there are no obvious sociological or typological parallels (loose or otherwise) between, on the one hand, Corbyn supporters (with an interest in nationalisation of railways, non-renewal of Trident, and anti-austerity politics) and, on the other, ISIS (with an interest in beheadings, a fulfilment of prophecy, and the establishment of a Caliphate), both with very different and complex genealogies. However, this would be beside the point because, from the perspective of the mainstream political consensus in 2015, anti-austerity politics was more to the fringes—something found in the leftist end of the *Guardian*. Anything seriously challenging the Thatcher-Blair settlement might, by this definition, be constructed as "fundamentalism."

The repeated labelling of the Corbyn movement as sectarian, cultish, fundamentalist, etc. has another, related function. It has been used to provide a stable and palatable history which would be in line with the assumed political settlement. One of Corbyn's most vocal opponents in the Labour Party, John Woodcock, wrote about the alleged "cult logic" emerging with the Corbyn

movement (Woodcock 2015). This logic, he argued, included those who despise Conservative voters and who think those Labour figures who want to win them over are “actively wicked” and trying to implement a “devilish plan to steal what is left of the soul of the Labour party” (Woodcock 2015). Woodcock’s logic of what a cult is could, of course, be turned around and applied to the Blairite New Labour (including Alastair Campbell, who has continued to use the language of “cult” to critique Corbyn’s followers) and its “on message” approach. Or it could be turned around again and applied to Blair’s successor, Gordon Brown, his followers and the Labour Party more generally. Indeed, it was, and by Blair himself:

We had become separated from “normal” people. For several decades, even before the eighteen years in the wilderness, Labour was more like a cult than a party. If you were to progress in it, you had to speak the language and press the right buttons ... The curse of Gordon was to make these people co-conspirators, not free-range thinkers. He and Ed Balls and others were like I had been back in the 1980s, until slowly the scales fell from my eyes and I realised it was more like a cult than a kirk. (Blair 2010, 89, 641)

What this playing around with the definition of “cult” shows is that its meaning clearly depends on the interests and classifications of those doing the defining. But this recent history of discourses about “cult” in the Labour tradition could only be overlooked by Woodcock who sought to provide a continuous, stable orthodoxy. In Labour mythology, the Attlee government of 1945 and the creation of the National Health Service are what Labour politicians of all stripes would typically set as the benchmark. As Woodcock put it, “The true guardians of the spirit of 1945 are those who seek to understand how fast the world is changing and change their ideas to meet the new challenges.” Woodcock’s choice of highlighted figures from that administration is telling: “Messrs Attlee, Bevan, Bevin and Cripps, men who governed through the horror of war and went on to win the peace, would send packing those who espoused the fantasy politics that is seducing many in the aftermath of our latest defeat” (Woodcock 2015). This list of constructed heroes, tied in with the powerful myth of the War, provides both a source of legitimacy and a connection with the present. But a different reading of these figures might reveal a more chaotic past and we might wonder how the Bevan who resigned over dental and spectacle charges fits in. Or we might wonder what we do with the Bevan who was expelled from the Labour Party. Then there is the Bevan who famously thought Tories were lower than vermin. And what do we do with Cripps? Is this the Marxist or Keynesian Cripps? There is another problem for Woodcock’s orthodox narrative: Labour’s most celebrated government had much less electoral success in 1950 and 1951. Indeed, they were not as popular with Conservative voters, and Labour stayed out of power until 1964. Could not anyone in the Labour Party pick out bits and pieces from Labour history and make them their own and claim that Labour must behave likewise today? Obviously. But complicating history too much also misses the point, and creating a unified tradition is a way of coping with all the problematic contradictions. Woodcock has stabilised this complex past by constructing an orthodox anti-Corbyn history held together by a unifying “spirit.”

### **Gender: liberal or radical?**

Pejorative labels such as “cults” are less serious than the allegations based on ethnicity and gender—both significant ideological flashpoints for the Left in the

neoliberal era—which have been levelled at the movement around Corbyn and the associated radical British and English Left. Criticisms of Israel on the Left have also been analysed for antisemitism and some bitter disputes have ensued. But it is on the issue of gender where we can more readily see the Bible or quasi-biblical language being utilised in contemporary disputes for the soul of the Left.

To understand this, we might turn to Nancy Fraser who has argued that a feminist embrace of identity politics marked a shift away from feminism's radical critique of capitalism. Furthermore, she pointed out that certain forms of feminism have even contributed to the rise of neoliberalism in their embrace of, for instance, careerism, entrepreneurialism, individualism, and flexible capitalism. However, she further argued that the economic crisis could provide the opportunity for a resurgent radical feminism in new participatory democracies (Fraser 2013). The tendencies highlighted by Fraser and the tensions between the more "liberal" and "radical" versions of feminism have become highly polemical points of disagreement in the post-2008 political and economic chaos and the emergence of the Corbyn movement with its struggle to push back against neoliberal dominance. Issues of gender, bullying, and participation in political debate have been repeatedly raised during Corbyn's first year, with allegations thrown from different wings of the Labour Party and from outside. The different uses of gendered discourse can be difficult to untangle during Corbyn's first year, and it is not difficult to find misogynistic comments across the political spectrum. Moreover, the murder of the Labour MP Jo Cox showed, if it were ever doubted, how gendered discourses can have deadly consequences.

Clearly, the claim to represent the most legitimate form of feminism has proven to be central over the ideological battles over the past year, as seen in the bust-up between Diane Abbott and Jess Philips where this point was made explicitly (Dathan 2015b). And what we can say, albeit crudely, is that measuring a given representative or wing of the Labour Party against a benchmark of inclusion of women has dominated political debates since September 2015. We might suggest that the ideological benchmark constructed through the representation of Corbyn in the media is "liberal," at least in the sense that the dominant emphasis is on greater inclusion of women among the political class (though certain MPs have wider interests in domestic abuse that gets less prominence or controversy) and existing structures. But this position might typically be without the accompanying prominence of questions about (say) the material conditions which produce gender exploitation or about (say) foreign policy (at least beyond using gender inequality as a reason for invasion; cf. Puar 2007) and the women who might suffer from depleted uranium, or what might happen to women with the opening up of a corridor between ISIS and Boko Haram after the Libya bombing. To use an analogy from American politics, Hillary Clinton may well represent a significant shift towards greater gender inclusivity at the top of American politics and is still the subject of relentless misogyny but she is unlikely to distance herself from neoliberalism and its structural class inequalities, and she would surprise no one if she promoted future bombing in the Middle East or North Africa, continued to support Saudi Arabia, or advocated further intervention in Central America (Featherstone 2016). Yet she clearly attracts support among liberal Americans, including those who would self-identify as feminist (though unsurprising, given her opposition).



Similarly, we might take arguably the most prominent example associated with the Corbyn movement: Corbyn's first shadow cabinet. In terms of understanding the role of the media in manufacturing consent, it is particularly striking that no other frontbench in English political discourse has received the level of scrutiny on the issue of gender and, moreover, that Corbyn's shadow cabinet had, for the first time, been composed of a majority of women. In this light, it is not difficult to see some of the media games being played in comments where the criticisms shift from women not getting the right jobs to what seem to be factually inaccurate claims about "his white male-dominated shadow cabinet" (Allonby 2015). Even among the more nuanced understandings of Corbyn, we can detect certain ideological positions at play. On the day Corbyn was due to be announced as Labour leader again, Rachel Holmes, while claiming that Corbyn is an "instinctive feminist" in contrast to others in his circle, argued that "the composition and announcement of his first shadow cabinet was a disaster. While it was 52% women, none of the traditional great offices of state (prime minister, chancellor, foreign and home offices) were shadowed by a woman" (Holmes 2016). The response to this criticism had been made a year earlier but rarely gets addressed, partly perhaps, because of issues of manufacturing ideological consent. The response from the Corbyn team highlights both that Holmes' position here reflects that of the establishment and liberal mainstream and that there is a different attempt to stake a claim to legitimate feminism with Corbyn:

For Labour our proudest achievement is the creation of the NHS. We are the party that delivered comprehensive education. We are the party that founded the Open University, and that established and will defend trade union and employment rights. The so-called "great offices of state" as defined in the 19th century reflect an era before women or workers even had the vote, and before Labour had radically changed the state. (Dathan 2015a)

In addition to mentioning the conventional reference points of the Labour Left and, at times, Labour more generally (e.g. NHS, Open University, trade unions), there were further claims that Corbyn rejected the tradition of the hierarchical nature of the "four great offices"—with hints of their potentially sexist and imperialistic nature as they were formed when Britain had an empire—and that he preferred to foreground health and education as priorities (BBC 2015). It does, however, seem that Corbyn has now appropriated the rhetoric of "the great offices" in his appointment of women to such posts in his new shadow cabinet announced in October 2016.

If we are to construct the anti-Corbyn benchmark as "liberal," we might construct another position that has emerged in connection with post-2008 leftist political movements as "radical" in the sense that it represents a feminist position with a strong anti-imperial and even revolutionary dimension. To highlight the use of the Bible and quasi-biblical language in such understandings of feminism, we can turn to the popular Facebook group with Corbyn sympathies, Red London, and the associated Bob Crow Brigade fighting for the "Rojava Revolution" in northern Syria with anti-Owen Smith sympathies (Dearden 2016; MacDonald 2016a; MacDonald 2016b; Pullman 2016a; Pullman 2016b; Smith 2016; Verkaik 2016).

Both Red London and the Bob Crow Brigade came to a degree of media prominence during Owen Smith's leadership challenge to Corbyn over the summer

of 2016. The catalyst was an immediately controversial remark made by Smith in answer to a question about potential negotiations with ISIS: “all solutions to these sorts of crises, these sorts of international crises, do come about through dialogue. So eventually if we are to try and solve this all of the actors do need to be involved” (Watts 2016). One response that was picked up in sections of the press was that of the Bob Crow Brigade who appear to be made up of a left-wing British and Irish contingent associated with the International Freedom Battalion (IFB) and the People’s Protection Units (YPG) involved in the fighting in Kurdish Rojava, including “Gary Oak” from the Red London Facebook group (MacDonald 2016a; MacDonald 2016b; Pullman 2016a; Verkaik 2016; Smith 2016; Dearden 2016; cf. Anonymous, n.d.). Oak claimed that they were “appalled to hear about Owen Smith ... People are dying here in defence of democracy and civil liberties,” adding “Owen might not be clever enough to realise it but he’s stabbing us in the back, just like he stabbed Jeremy Corbyn” (Pullman 2016b). It is difficult to confirm details and the levels of involvement but my focus remains on discourse and genealogy rather than reconstructing what is happening on the ground in northern Syria and London. In their targeting of both Owen Smith and Hilary Benn, their tweets picked up on ideas familiar enough in the history of the Left, though laced with humour and perhaps even mimicking of language stereotypically or popularly associated with ISIS fighters. For instance:

@owensmith2016 want to talk to ISIS? Tell that to the martyrs of Manbij #BobCrowBrigade (@bobcrowbrigade, 25 August, 2016).

@hilarybennmp banging on about the International Brigades one minute, then backing someone who would make deals with ISIS fascists the next (@bobcrowbrigade, 27 August, 2016).

@hilarybennmp from the actual international brigades fighting Daesh: when will you condemn your mate Owen's words? (@bobcrowbrigade, 27 August, 2016).

Tweets were accompanied by pictures apparently of Brigade members armed, masked and in front of the tweet written on the background wall. In addition to reclaiming the mantle of the International Brigades fighting fascism, the quasi-scriptural language occurs elsewhere and in relation to celebration of “martyrs” as “immortal” (@bobcrowbrigade, 9 September, 2016).

While the immortal memory of inspirational martyrs would no doubt have some resonance among those familiar with popular presentations of groups like ISIS, the language is directly taken from the Kurdish idiom, *Şehid Namirin*, and related uses of martyrdom references one of the most famous socialist anthems. Picking up on the lyrics of the Red Flag (“The people's flag is deepest red, It shrouded oft our martyred dead ... Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer, We'll keep the red flag flying here”), the associated Red London Facebook group uses the tagline (at least at the time of writing), “Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer we fight on, proud of our past and sure of our socialist future. With the blood of the martyrs, our flag is red.”<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, the ideas of death and “immortality” of these martyrs incorporate a cluster of recognisable radical and even revolutionary positions, though not always the most prominent in mainstream presentations of the

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/redlondon17/posts/2079040742321306:0>

Left at present. Indeed, the group invoked the name of one of the most prominent left-wing leaders, the former General Secretary of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), the late Bob Crow, and they have uploaded pictures showing solidarity with the striking RMT guards at Southern Rail, as well as Dublin bus workers.

The immortalisation of the martyrs comes by way of their defence of the Rojava Revolution which, in this and related forms at least, is inspired by Marxist and anarchist ideas, and promoted ideas surrounding secularised cooperatives, confederal rule, democratic socialism, freedom of belief, and equality, among the most prominent of which (as least in representations among the British Left) has been gender equality.<sup>3</sup> In this respect it is notable that the Bob Crow Brigade and Red London have consistently foregrounded the immortal memory of *female* martyrs and the issues of gender discrimination (especially by ISIS) and gender revolution. Moreover, according to a *Morning Star* report, the partner of one fighter talked about being “very proud of my fiancé, he is brave and dedicated in fighting against all forms of fascism, including the misogynistic and oppressive Isis,” that the “Rojava revolution is a women-led struggle” and that as “a feminist and a socialist, I understand the importance of the international volunteers and the support they provide to the revolutionary struggle” (Pullman 2016a). This is significant because of masculinisation in constructions of martyrdom, not least by ISIS. However, there is a tradition of female “martyrs” for the socialist cause. Among the most prominent is Rosa Luxemburg who was already being given the label shortly after she was executed in 1919 (Bedacht 1919). Another significant tradition for understanding the rhetoric of the Bob Crow Brigade is, again, the Spanish Civil War. The iconic prominence of female fighters in photography, film (e.g. Ken Loach’s *Land and Freedom* [1995]), and popular memory of the Spanish Civil War is part of the prominence of the gendered ideology of such representations of the martyrs of Rojava Revolution. As with the Good Samaritan in relation to the role of the contemporary Left and its past, the language of martyrdom tells us something about the lingering use of biblical language and its legitimising of a given ideological position. Put another and admittedly crude way, the contemporary “liberal” stance promotes greater inclusivity and participation within the existing structures whereas the “radical” position pushes this logic one step further in attempting to turn the very system which produces inequalities on its head. As “Gary Oak” announced his hope on the Red London Facebook page, on departure to Rojava (3 July, 2016), ‘mass politics ... will be less identitarian, less subcultural, more counter cultural.’

### **Concluding Remarks: The Future**

What can we now expect with the return of the Left and the return of the Radical Bible to mainstream political discourse? Concluding the end of a recent book on the Bible in English political discourse I noted the following:

So, is the Radical Bible (/Religion) now back in parliamentary political discourse? Yes, sort of. But it is striking how much of an anomaly Corbyn and his close allies were when they began to lead Labour in parliament and

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<sup>3</sup> For full details see e.g. the Charter of the Social Contract (29 January, 2014) for self-rule in Rojava, a version of which is available at <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/>.

it is clear that the Corbyn movement was pushed forward by popular non- or extra-parliamentary support. Its longevity presumably depends on the fate of Corbyn and the movement which has pushed him to the leadership of the Labour Party ... It is by no means clear which position will come to dominate party political discourse and perhaps the only reasonable prediction is that the Bible will support whichever one does. (Crossley 2016a: 318)

Related to this are, of course, questions of the constructed boundaries of acceptability, whether more radical politics or radical biblical interpretation. Now that Corbyn has won a second leadership election, his position as leader seems as secure as it has ever been since September 2015. The leadership candidate, Owen Smith, took on a number of main Corbyn positions in attempt to appeal to the resurgent Left, even if he could not garner sufficient authenticity. After Corbyn's second victory, the joint political editor of the *Guardian*, Anushka Asthana, has claimed (not unreasonably), based on membership interests, that "Labour is now unquestionably a changed party." Whether there is an accompanying change in media opinion and construction of consent in the next few years, I will not predict, not least because of the rapid political changes over the past eighteen months. Nevertheless, if there will be a greater degree of unity in the Labour Party (hardly a foregone conclusion) then Corbynite positions may begin to creep into mainstream political discourse, and some issues already appear to be entertained at the fringes (e.g. nationalisation of railways). Of course, this does not mean that the mainstream media will be embracing full communism any time soon (that I will predict) and some of these shifts are indicative of how far to the economic Right/neoliberal consensus mainstream parliamentary discourse has become since the 1980s. Such shifting may be something of a shifting towards (though not the same) ideological positions of bygone decades or even the beginning of the end of neoliberal assumptions (Jacques 2016). Whatever, we can say that calling Jesus 'a radical socialist', as Corbyn's ally Cat Smith has done (Bennett 2015), is not as shocking as it would have been on frontbench politics 18 months ago.

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