

'This Land - the Story of a Movement': The Rise and Fall of Jeremy Corbyn

Review of Owen Jones Book

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In his latest book, 'This Land - The Story of a Movement' (Penguin, ebook version, 2020), The Guardian's Owen Jones charts the rise and fall of Jeremy Corbyn.

Jones depicts Corbyn as a 'scruffy,' (p.8), 'unkempt' (p.50), thoroughly shambolic backbench MP, 'the most unlikely' (p.50) of contenders for the Labour leadership. In May 2015, Corbyn reluctantly dipped his toe in the water of the leadership contest, saying: 'You better make fucking sure I don't get elected' (p.54), only to be swept away on a tide of popular support.

As this suggests, Jones argues that while Corbyn was indeed relentlessly savaged by forces both inside and outside the Labour Party – including the 'mainstream' media, with 'profound hostility' from 'the publicly funded, professedly impartial' BBC (p.68) – he was out of his depth, his team making constant, massive mistakes from which all progressives must learn. It is not at all inevitable, says Jones, that future leftist movements need suffer the same fate.

Much of this analysis is interesting and useful; Jones [interviewed](#) 170 insiders closest to the action, 'people at the top of the Labour Party right down to grassroots activists', who supply important insights on key events.

Jones portrays himself as someone who fundamentally agrees with much that motivated Corbyn, emphasising that his disagreement lies in tactics and strategy. But, once again, we note a remarkable pattern of omissions in the work of Jones, an ostensibly outspoken, unconstrained leftist, and by his serious misreading of the antisemitism furore that engulfed Corbyn.

Jones recognises that people loved Corbyn because, unusually for a UK politician, he was made of flesh rather than PR plastic; he told the truth:

'While other contenders refused to give direct answers to questions, and were caught squirming between their principles and their political compromises, he spoke with immediacy – sometimes rambling, always authentic, always passionate.' (p.57)

Ironically, Jones does plenty of his own 'squirming' between 'principles' and 'political compromises' as he airbrushes out of existence facts, views and voices that are consistently and conspicuously Guardian-unfriendly. He writes:

'Corbynism... was woven together from many disparate strands: from people who marched against the Iraq war in 2003' to people hit by the 'trebling of college tuition fees in 2010' and 'the millions more frightened by a looming climate emergency'. (p.10)

Above all, of course, 'Corbyn's entire career had been devoted to foreign affairs'. (p.29) Andrew Murray of the union, Unite commented: 'Corbyn was very prominent in the anti-war movement.' (p.33)



Thus, deep popular outrage at the Iraq war is key in understanding Corbyn's popularity. And yet, in discussing this central feature of the movement, Jones makes no mention at all of Julian Assange (or WikiLeaks), of Noam Chomsky, or John Pilger – the most important anti-war voices – exactly as he made no mention of them in his previous book, 'The Establishment', published in 2014.

Jones has not mentioned Assange in his Guardian column in the last twelve months. Indeed, his sole substantive [mention](#) came in April 2019.

Corbyn became Labour leader in 2015, but Jones mentions NATO's catastrophic, 2011 war on Libya, opposed by Corbyn, once in passing, noting merely that Labour MP Chris Williamson had 'supported the war in Libya'. (p.251)

Jones' previous book, 'The Establishment', published three years after NATO's assault, similarly granted 'Libya' a single mention, noting that UK voters were 'Weary of being dragged by their rulers into disastrous wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya...'. (Jones, 'The Establishment – And how they get away with it', Penguin, ebook version, 2014, p.275. See our [discussion](#).)

The fact that the US-UK assault resulted in mass death, ethnic cleansing, mass displacement for millions of Libyans and the destruction of the entire country was not mentioned in either book.

Elsewhere, Jones has been more forthright. In February 2011, with NATO 'intervention' clearly looming, he [tweeted](#):

'I hope it's game over for Gaddafi. A savage dictator once tragically embraced by me on left + lately western governments and oil companies.' (Jones, Twitter, 20 February 2011)

On 20 March 2011, one day after NATO bombing had begun, like someone writing for the 'Soaraway Sun', Jones [commented](#):

‘Let’s be clear. Other than a few nutters, we all want Gaddafi overthrown, dead or alive.’ (Jones, ‘The case against bombing Libya’, Left Futures, March 2011)

Similarly, in 2012, Jones [reacted](#) to news of the killings of Syrian ministers in a bomb explosion with:

‘Adios, Assad (I hope).’ (Jones, Twitter, 18 July 2012)

After all, Jones [tweeted](#), ‘this is a popular uprising, not arriving on the back of western cruise missiles, tanks and bullets’. (Jones, Twitter, 18 July 2012)

As was very obvious then and indisputable now, Jones was badly mistaken – the West, directly and via regional allies, played a massive role in the violence. The New York Times [reported](#) that the US had become embroiled in a dirty war in Syria that constituted ‘one of the costliest covert action programs in the history of the C.I.A’, running to ‘more than \$1 billion over the life of the program’. (Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman and Michael S. Schmidt, ‘Behind the sudden death of a \$1 billion secret C.I.A. war in Syria’, New York Times, 2 August 2017)

As though tweeting from the NATO playbook, the same Guardian columnist now analysing the peace movement supporting Corbyn, [wrote](#):

‘I’m promoting the overthrow of illegitimate and brutal dictatorships by their own people to establish democracies.’ (Jones, Twitter, 18 July 2012)

In ‘This Land’, Jones mentions Saudi Arabia’s disastrous war in famine-stricken Yemen exactly once, again in passing:

‘...Labour MPs refused to back Corbyn’s call for a UN investigation into alleged Saudi war crimes in Yemen’. (p.81)

There is no mention of the UK’s support for these crimes since 2011, no discussion of the horrors the UK has inflicted (See our [discussion](#)). The word ‘Yemen’ was unmentioned in Jones’ previous book in 2014. To his credit, he has written several Guardian pieces on the war in Yemen, the most [recent](#) in 2018.

Gaza was mentioned once, in passing, in Jones’ previous book and three times, in passing, in ‘This Land’. Our media database search found that, since he joined the Guardian in March 2014, Jones has made three substantive mentions of Gaza, in [2014](#) (a philosophical piece focusing on ‘How the occupation of Gaza corrupts the occupier’, with few facts about the situation in Gaza) a brief piece [here](#), and one in [2018](#) (with a single paragraph on Gaza).

‘This Land’ simply ignores the Western propaganda wars on Iran and Venezuela.

Remarkably, while recognising the role of climate fears in the rise of Corbyn and discussing the UK’s ‘Climate Camp’ in the late 2000s, Jones makes no mention of Extinction Rebellion or of Greta Thunberg, both strongly supported by Corbyn, further fuelling popular support for his cause.

There is no mention of the Guardian's [lead role](#) in destroying Corbyn; although, ironically, Jones does celebrate the fact that, 'I wrote the first pro-Corbyn column to appear in the mainstream media: a Guardian piece'. (p.53)

The silence is unsurprising. In 2017, Jones [tweeted](#):

'I'm barred from criticising colleagues in my column.' (Jones, Twitter, 19 November 2017)

He [wasn't](#) joking:

'Guardian colleagues aren't supposed to have these public spats...'

Of his own opposition to Corbyn, in the Guardian and elsewhere, Jones writes:

'Although I voted for him again in 2016, I had a period of disillusionment before the [June 2017] general election – something which still riles his most ardent supporters.' (p.14)

In fact, the 'period of disillusionment' was extensive and began long before the 2017 election. In July 2016, fully one year earlier, Jones [wrote](#):

'As Jeremy Corbyn is surrounded by cheering crowds, Labour generally, and the left specifically, are teetering on the edge of looming calamity.'

He added:

'As things stand, all the evidence suggests that Labour — and the left as a whole — is on the cusp of a total disaster. Many of you won't thank me now. But what will you say when you see the exit poll at the next general election and Labour is set to be wiped out as a political force?'

Similar comments followed in February, March and April 2017. For [example](#):

'My passionate and sincere view is Jeremy Corbyn should stand down as soon as possible in exchange for another left-wing MP being allowed to stand on for leadership in his place: all to stop both Labour and the left imploding, which is what is currently on the cards.' (Jones: "'I don't enjoy protesting – I do it because the stakes are so high'", Evening Standard, 3 February 2017)

Blaming The Victim – The Great, Fake Antisemitism Scandal

Time and again, Jones criticises the Corbyn leadership for failing to deal adequately with antisemitism claims: 'there was no coherent strategy within the leader's office on how to tackle claims of antisemitism'. (p.227)

While Jones accepts that there were 'bad-faith actors opposed to Corbyn's policies', his

emphasis is focused elsewhere: 'ultimately there were severe and repeated errors by the leadership, which resulted from those two characteristic failings: a lack of both strategy and emotional intelligence'. (p.254)

Remarkably, Jones concludes that the crisis 'need never have happened'. (p.254)

This is nonsense. The crisis *had* to happen because sufficiently powerful forces within the Labour Party and Conservative Party, and across the corporate media 'spectrum', were determined to *make* it happen.

Compare Jones' account with that of Norman Finkelstein, whose mother survived the Warsaw Ghetto, the Majdanek concentration camp and two slave labour camps. Finkelstein's father was a survivor of both the Warsaw Ghetto and the Auschwitz concentration camp. In an [interview](#) with RT in May, Finkelstein commented:

'Corbyn, he did not present a threat only to Israel and Israel's supporters, he posed a threat to the whole British elite. Across the board, from the Guardian to the Daily Mail, they all joined in the new anti-semitism campaign. Now that's unprecedented - the entire British elite, during this whole completely contrived, fabricated, absurd and obscene assault on this alleged Labour anti-semitism, of which there is exactly zero evidence, zero.'

He added:

'Yeah, there's some fringe members of Labour who, you know, play the anti-semitic [interrupted by interviewer]... I read the polls, I read the data - it hovers between six and eight per cent are hardened anti-semites in British society. It's nothing! Yeah, so there are a few crazies, but there's no "institutionalised" anti-semitism in the British Labour Party. There's no threat of anti-semitism in British society. I've read all the data, I've studied it closely. It just doesn't exist. It's all being designed and manipulated... I don't believe in conspiracy theories, as you know, but this is a conspiracy.'

Jones accepts that 'the former leadership and the vast majority of Labour's membership abhor antisemitism', arguing that the problem lay with a 'small minority'. (p.254) But Jones does not cite an October 2016 [report](#) by the Commons home affairs committee, which found:

'Despite significant press and public attention on the Labour Party, and a number of revelations regarding inappropriate social media content, there exists no reliable, empirical evidence to support the notion that there is a higher prevalence of antisemitic attitudes within the Labour Party than any other political party.'

And he does not cite a September 2017 [report](#) by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, which found:

'Levels of antisemitism among those on the left-wing of the political spectrum, including the far-left, are indistinguishable from those found in the general population... The most antisemitic group on the political spectrum consists of those who identify as very right-wing: the presence of antisemitic attitudes in

this group is 2 to 4 times higher compared to the general population.'

Instead, Jones pours scorn on leftists who 'still were in denial, claiming that the antisemitism crisis had been entirely manufactured by a media "out to get" Corbyn...' (p.254)

Rational commentators have always accepted that antisemitism exists within the Labour Party. The point is that making that ugly reality a 'crisis' *specifically for Labour*, rather than for other parties and other sectors of society, and above all making it a 'crisis' for Corbyn – reviled as a dangerous antisemite – was entirely manufactured.

Jones cites 'the passionately anti-Corbyn editor of the Jewish Chronicle', Stephen Pollard, who grotesquely claimed to perceive 'nudge, nudge' (p.253) antisemitism in one of Corbyn's self-evidently anti-capitalist critiques. Such outlandish claims, Jones notes, only encouraged leftists to believe the whole furore was a smear campaign:

'It was a vicious circle, and it turned to nobody's benefit – least of all Corbyn's, while causing more hurt and distress to Jewish people.' (p.253, our emphasis)

But this is absurd. Quite obviously, the smear campaign was *to the very real benefit* of the political and media forces trying to crush Corbyn's version of socialism.

The claims targeting Corbyn were fake and they depended on ignoring as non-existent a mountain of evidence indicating that Corbyn is a passionate, committed and very active anti-racist. What is so outrageous is that this was accepted by essentially everyone before Corbyn stood for the leadership in 2015. As Jones comments:

'Anti-racism is core to Corbyn's sense of identity. He believes, proudly, that he has fought oppression all his life, so being labelled a racist was a cause of profound personal trauma to him.' (p.228)

Corbyn's chief of staff, Karie Murphy, commented on the impact of the smear campaign:

'This was a man who was beyond broken-hearted, that, as a proud antiracist campaigner, he was being accused of racism. So he was paralysed... It wasn't true – no one will convince me that he has an antisemitic bone in his body...' (p.242)

Genuine racists are *not* left 'beyond broken-hearted' by claims that they are racist. They are not 'paralysed' by a sense of injustice and grief.

Jones comments on Corbyn: 'no one close to him believes for a moment that he would ever willingly associate with a Holocaust denier'. (p.222) And Corbyn 'could point to an extensive record opposing antisemitism and showing pro-Jewish solidarity' (p.221). Jones lists some of Corbyn's efforts in this regard: helping to organise a counter-mobilisation to a demonstration by National Front fascists in the so-called Battle of Wood Green in 1977; taking part in a campaign to save a Jewish cemetery from being sold off to property developers in 1987, calling on the British government to settle Yemeni Jewish refugees in 2010.

Before the sheer intensity of propaganda caused most commentators to find truth in lies, Corbyn's deep-rooted opposition to racism was simply unquestioned. Chris Mullin, who did not vote for Corbyn to either become or remain leader, commented:

'I've always liked him as long as I've known him. He's a thoroughly decent human being, almost a saintly man.' (p.30)

As Jones writes of Corbyn at the time he stood for the leadership in 2015:

'Corbyn had no personal enemies. Everyone liked him. Relentlessly cheerful, endlessly generous with his opponents, he exuded integrity.' (pp.50-51)

Despite this, Jones says of the antisemitism crisis:

'The damage to Corbyn's Labour was grievous. The crisis led to months of media coverage.' (p.254)

In fact, the media coverage *was* the crisis! It was this real crisis that was the *cause* of the 'crisis'. The antisemitism 'crisis' was just one more fabrication by an awesomely corrupt and immoral media system willing to throw, not just the kitchen sink, but – God help us! – Nazi gas chambers at Corbyn.

The key to understanding the anti-semitism 'scandal' was explained by Jones himself:

'Anybody who knows anything about the British press knows that it is almost unique in the Western world for its level of commitment to aggressively defending and furthering right-wing partisan politics... the media onslaught that greeted his [Corbyn's] leadership win in 2015 was as predictable as it was unrelentingly hostile.' (p.67)

Jones lists only a few of the endlessly fabricated stories used to smear Corbyn: he supposedly planned to 'abolish' the army, refused to bow his head on Remembrance Day, danced happily on Remembrance Day, didn't sing the national anthem loudly enough, and so on. The London School of Economics reported in 2016:

'the British press systematically delegitimised Jeremy Corbyn as a political leader' through a 'process of vilification that went beyond the normal limits of fair debate and disagreement in a democracy'. (p.68)

Corbyn's great anti-semitism 'scandal' was a non-story, a fabricated non-event, a Soviet-style propaganda smear. Sufficient numbers of people *wanted* it to be true because they wanted to be rid of Corbyn. Everyone else bowed their heads to avoid being subject to the same career-destroying smears.

Jones often mentions Len McCluskey, general secretary of the Unite Union, in 'This Land'. McCluskey [commented](#) in the New Statesman last week on Corbyn's press chief Seumas Milne and chief of staff Karie Murphy:

‘Having given a brilliant and detailed polemic of the history of anti-Semitism, he [Jones] veers away to lay blame at the [door of] Milne and Murphy, based on a distorted view of what it was like trying to deal with the constant daily attacks.

‘When you are in a war – and be under no illusion, from day one of his leadership, Corbyn was subjected to an internal and external war – you develop methods of defence and attack that change by necessity almost on a daily, if not hourly basis. Being in your living room, observing with a typewriter, is a damn sight easier than being in the ditches on the front line, trying to dodge bullets flying at you from all angles, especially from your own side.’

Establishment forces were out to destroy Corbyn with antisemitism, or whatever else they could think of, no matter what he did, how he replied. And it worked. The incompetence of Corbyn’s team may have made things worse, but the truth that matters is that a form of ruthless fascism arose out of British society to crush an attempt to create a more democratic politics.

Needless to say, Jones has not one word to say about the [lead role](#) of his employer, the Guardian, in the antisemitism smear campaign.

Conclusion

Why do we focus so intensely on popular progressives like Owen Jones, George Monbiot and loveable, NATO-loving [loon](#) Paul Mason?

The reason is that they breathe life into the faded dream that progressive change can be achieved by working within and for profit-maximising corporations that are precisely the cause of so many of our crises. Even the best journalists cannot tell the truth within these undemocratic systems of top-down power. As Jones freely admits, they *have* to compromise, to self-censor. Guardian colleagues may *not* be criticised! Ultimately, they have to compromise in ways that allow the state-corporate status quo to thunder on.

Our most celebrated public radicals – almost all of them made famous by corporate media – function as dissident vaccines that inoculate the public against a pandemic of authentic dissent.

Corporate media are careful to incorporate a tiny bit of progressive poison, so that we all hang around for a whole lot of propaganda-drenched news and commentary, and a perma-tsunami of unanswered corporate advertising persuading us that status consumption, status production and paper-thin concern for the problems of our world are all there is.

Ultimately, corporate dissidents are the final nail in the corporate coffin, normalising the blind, patently doomed rush to disaster called ‘business as usual.’

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