

# The Return of British Social Democracy? Jeremy Corbyn and the Revolt of the Excluded

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*There is a profound shift going on in British politics that mirrors the wider collapse of legitimacy suffered by political elites in the West. But whereas Occupy fizzled out without an organizational structure and the political revolt in Greece has been ruthlessly suppressed by the EU, the economic size of Britain and the strength of its social democratic tradition means this insurgency may have greater potential.*

The occasion of this latest democratic revolt is the election for next leader of the Labour Party, the traditionally social democratic party that after 1997 lurched towards full-blown neoliberalism. As ground zero for neoliberalism's social democratic putsch, "New Labour" led the way for former social democratic parties across Europe with its polished PR, scripted sound bites, and a breathtaking political cynicism that would justify wars of aggression abroad and corporate handouts at home in the language of "responsibility," "humanity," and "fairness." It is to everyone's surprise, then, that the frontrunner in the current leadership race is Jeremy Corbyn, a softly spoken, socialist, and antiwar backbench MP who is known for his political integrity and personal decency. Not only does Corbyn reject the trappings of office by traveling on mass transit and making his own sandwiches, but it's said he prepares a couple extra in case any of his companions are without lunch.

Initially patronized and dismissed by party bigwigs and media opinion formers, Corbyn's leadership campaign has sparked a national movement that is in a number of ways reminiscent of Occupy. The rise of Corbyn's campaign has been both unexpected and meteoric because it draws support from those excluded from the political calculus of the elites. Some of that support hails from traditional constituencies that have been taken for granted by "New Labour": trade unionists and public sector workers, those opposed to war and neo-imperialism, and those concerned with the moral decay of British society and the neoliberal evacuation of any social and collective ethos beyond xenophobia and the new culturalist racism. But Corbyn's campaign also speaks to young people excluded from housing and job opportunities, students saddled with unsupportable debt, and the "precariat" more widely: those working on short-term or zero-hour contracts often in the newly privatized social services, the former local government sector, or in low paid and insecure jobs in the service industries.



Corbyn's policies have been relentlessly attacked by mainstream politicians and media pundits, not only from the right but even more vociferously from the self-proclaimed "center left." Time and again the charge is that Corbyn's ideas are dangerously extreme and unworkable, out of kilter with public opinion, and hopelessly behind the times. However, it

looks like the scare tactics that were employed to such effect only recently in the Scottish independence referendum may not work this time.

In fact, far from being “extreme” or unworkable, Corbyn’s [policy proposals](#) are moderate, commonsense measures that would mitigate some of the economic damage done since the 2008 crash, rebalance social provision away from corporate welfare, and restore an element of security for many of those marginalized by a neoliberal project that has been running at full throttle since the rise of Thatcherism in 1979. Corbyn’s economic program is comparable to Obama’s 2009 stimulus package, while his commitment to raise taxes on corporations and high-income earners is basic math for anyone really interested in reducing budget deficits rather than just “starving the beast.” His proposals for rent controls (once standard in England and Wales, and still in force to some degree in Scotland) have a huge resonance in the UK, where a super-inflated property market makes [livable rent](#) a necessary complement for a living wage. Renationalization of the railways would end the disastrous financial drain and byzantine bureaucracy of [rail privatization](#), while investment in public education and free university tuition would bring enormous social benefits, not least [economically](#).

Nor are Corbyn’s policies unpopular or out of step with public opinion. Indeed, his anti-austerity message reflects [majority social attitudes](#): 71% of voters see economic inequality as a major social ill, 62% prioritize social justice, and 85% believe corporate greed is a significant problem. A [recent poll](#) by Survation found that Corbyn is not only the choice of Labour activists but is popular with the general public.

Why then the panic on the “center left”? What accounts for the hysterical attacks, name-calling, vilification, and smear tactics that have been unleashed against Corbyn and those likely to vote for him?

There are two answers to this question which taken together also give a broader insight into the value and meaning of social democracy within the contemporary moment.

The first answer relates to the very popularity of Corbyn’s platform: like the extraordinary popular mobilization for Scottish independence last year (which in certain ways stands behind current events), Corbyn’s leadership bid appeals to the *wrong kind of voters*. That is, it appeals to those who have already been excluded from the political calculus of the elites, which in the UK is rigidly focused on what’s called “middle England,” a notional population of “centrist” floating voters who are securely employed, can comfortably pay the mortgage, and who are said to dislike foreigners and the “work shy.”

The irony of the so-called “big tent” politics of New Labour is that in reality it works by drastically reducing the population addressed by party politics since its concentration on the “center ground” disenfranchises whole social strata, and indeed entire national populations (its holy grail is “middle *England*” after all, not middle Scotland or middle Wales). Labour’s abandonment of social democracy means that a series of nearly identical political parties—all closely aligned with the corporate agenda—are offered to the electorate, and those who can’t find their vision or concerns reflected there are simply excluded. Or in the case of Labour Party supporters, told to keep voting for policies that actively privilege corporate profit over human development, debilitate working class communities, increase social inequality, undermine civil liberties and human rights, and weaken the democratic process.

The second answer relates to the practicality of Corbyn's proposals. The neoliberal project weathered the massive global recession it created in 2008 because it has managed to convince not only elites but large sections of the population in the US and Europe that there is no alternative, a dictum promulgated so successively in Britain by Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. Corbyn's modest proposals to boost economic activity and raise living standards by curbing austerity are deeply practical and pragmatic: it is austerity itself that has prolonged the recession, providing a cover for the dismantling of social provision and the rerouting of taxpayer funding to subsidize corporate profits.

Just as in Greece, the prospect of a return to a workable and broadly beneficial social democratic program is not simply a local issue but has global implications. Which is why Greece has been so brutally punished for Syriza's temerity in suggesting that democratic politics might have a role in the economy. And it is why British political elites—inside the Labour Party as well as outside it—and the corporate media to which they are aligned will not stop fighting Jeremy Corbyn or the popular social democratic politics he represents.

This hostility to popular participation and political plurality tells us something very important about the social democracy that developed in Europe in the postwar period. European social democracy was by no means perfect: it was built on the privileged position in the global economy bequeathed by empire, and was conceived geopolitically as a Cold War strategy to inoculate Western Europe from calls for more radical social and political change in the wake of the devastation of World War II. But as it's now possible to see, it allowed for a level of autonomous politics and democratic participation that far exceeds the pseudo-democratic rhetoric of the current neoliberal world order.

While Max Weber famously characterized the modern state as holding a monopoly of lethal violence within society, what's often forgotten is that there is no such monopoly of social coercion in the nonlethal, more diffuse sense.<sup>1</sup> For example, employers can pressurize their workforce by worsening conditions, reducing wages, or by withdrawing employment altogether; or they can exert broader political influence by relocating their operations or withholding investment—or indeed, simply by threatening to do so. Popular groups—whether trade unions or other political associations—have developed alternative modes of coercion, such as strikes, pickets, boycotts, secondary industrial action, etc., to counter such extra-political social power. The political impact of social democracy's economic compromise was a rebalancing of the ratio of social coercion between corporations and populations, a renegotiation that accorded a historically unprecedented legitimacy to popular modes.

This rebalancing of legitimate social coercion enabled the revitalization of public spaces and social institutions by shielding them from direct subordination to corporate power—universities and adult education programs, public broadcast media, and cultural institutions at the macro level, but just as importantly more informal and micro-level networks, such as tenants' associations, community organizations, and campaign groups. The economic architecture of social democracy was thus able to scaffold a political space that could sustain popular democratic participation relatively free from corporate social coercion. The political sphere engendered by social democracy therefore had a potential that reached beyond its economic limits; but this insight has been obscured by the reductive opposition of "reform or revolution" long common on the left, and more recently by undifferentiated accounts of "governmentality" and blanket ascriptions of the ubiquity of power so widely favored by contemporary intellectuals.

Faced with the insurgency of the excluded, the Labour party hierarchy may well intervene, either by suspending the election altogether or by disallowing sufficient pro-Corbyn votes to hand the leadership to one of the other candidates. But however Jeremy Corbyn's bid for the Labour leadership turns out, the popular optimism and elite hostility it has engendered points to the political potential of social democracy and thereby also the stakes involved.

Corporate media and establishment politicians are playing a reckless and dangerous game in seeking to suppress political plurality and set in stone parameters of exclusion that deny popular democratic participation. For if the excluded are not granted political participation through social democracy, they will turn to other political forms and movements to overcome their exclusion. In England, the beneficiaries will be the xenophobic and pro-corporate UK Independence Party (UKIP) and other ultra-nationalist currents; while in Greece it will be the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn.

*Note.*

1. Strictly speaking such coercion is by no means "nonlethal"; it is rather that its lethal impacts tend to take effect over longer periods and through diffuse and indirect mechanisms, such as poverty, lack of resources, diminished opportunities, and social disintegration. This terminological difficulty points to major problems in the modern political lexicon of violence.

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