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By Leaps or by Federation: Two Paths to Left Unity

In the aftermath of the Labour Party's defeat in December 2019, many on the British anti-capitalist left argued that Corbynism had come too soon. Instead of a victory based on years of infrastructure-building in the wilderness, it was a surprise. For Ben Sellers, an organizer who ran Jeremy Corbyn's digital campaign for leader, "we did it back to front": the left did not have time "to educate, organise and agitate in the rest of the party and movement" (Panitch and Leys 2020: 474). Edmund Griffiths (2019) characterized Corbynism as a strategy for winning power based not on "a Long March through the institutions," but a "Great Leap over them." Many had long warned it was a mistake to see in Corbyn a shortcut to power: Corbynism, Richard Seymour argued, was only beginning "the job of reversing a long course of decline in the size and activity of the union movement, and the organised Left, as well as the ideological profile and resonance of left-wing ideas." It was never going to be easy, nor would there be "one miraculous breakthrough." "The course of history may be punctuated, as the late Daniel Bensaïd said, by "Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!" but no single leap does the job. There remains a generation of work of rebuilding, recomposition, and regeneration" (Seymour 2017: 285–6).

The metaphor of the leap is often invoked as a kind of a consolation. It has a long association with socialist accounts of the dialectics of defeat and political untimeliness, according to which metabolizing defeats involves explaining failures as the result of mismatches between struggles and conditions: the struggles come too late or too early (Traverso 2016: 36, 53). As an analytical lens, however, the leap is also a useful metaphor for understanding

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the particularities of Corbynism. The political movement (Basset Yerrell 2020) of Corbynism was forged by leaps: the leadership campaign of 2015 that made Corbyn leader, the defense of his leadership from challenges in 2016, and the 2017 general election. Together, these events mobilized, radicalized, and constituted a membership base. They had a centripetal function: they made it possible for the extra-parliamentary left, with all its fissures and factions, to operate within and through the institutions of the Labour Party. They also led to the 2019 election being fought as if victory would mark a final leap into Downing Street, itself sometimes imagined as a gateway to a postcapitalist world.

Corbynism is best understood as the name for a period of left unity, a unity that was shaped, at least in part, by these leaps. Corbynism sutured together unlikely allies on the fragmented left within the Labour Party. This brief unity marked a significant transformation of the British left: as the anti-capitalist left entered the party, the party provided it with the vehicle to transition from a horizontalist politics to a counter-hegemonic one that aimed to take over state institutions. The movement left entered Labour by joining forces with unions and via the new activist organization Momentum, which was set up to support Corbyn's leadership campaign and which became the hub of Corbynist activism, media, campaigning, and canvassing throughout his tenure. Within Labour's broad apparatus, the Corbyn project built uneasy and uneven alliances between members and activists committed to British New Left, Keynesian, Fabian, unionist, Old Left, soft left, Green, social liberal, and ethical socialist visions, as well as a range of Marxist, autonomist, Trotskyist, and anti-capitalist ones. This unity itself marked a novelty in the history of British socialism, long split between those who rejected the Labour Party and those who remained within it. It embodied the dream of the Labour New Left—a faction that shared the extra-parliamentary New Left critique of postwar socialist and communist parties but nonetheless argued that the Labour Party could play a role in the transition to socialism, by functioning as a "federation of social movement groups" (Panitch and Leys 2020: 5–7, 202).

So far, the postmortems of the Corbyn era have mostly focused on failures of leadership (Jones 2020; Pogrund and Maguire 2020). Less attention has been paid to problems of party organization and the membership—to the fact that the institutional and organizational developments of the Corbyn years were insufficient to sustain the new unity. It is well known that Corbynism divided the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), the elected group of Labour Members of Parliament, and that it did not hold together the constit-

uencies necessary to win a general election: socialism still has a social base in the UK, but not a majority. Though Labour became a mass membership party, Corbynism was not a mass movement. It remained "top-heavy" and disconnected from a broader base (Cant 2019). However, that top-heavy membership left was also divided, along lines both of principle and strategy. While Corbyn was leader, these divisions were temporarily submerged—by a consensus on the policy platform, by the successes of the new left media infrastructure and digital organizing structures, and beneath the debate over Brexit, which was the primary cleavage within the party and country. But Corbynism did not build political structures to make these temporary alliances last. The aspiration that the party could function as a federation was merely that, and efforts to achieve unity through a federation were more rhetorical than organizational. This contradiction was embodied in Momentum, which struggled to bring together its electoral and movementist commitments. In the end, Corbynism did not build an organization that could transcend division. Nor did it articulate a coherent account of the purpose and meaning of the Labour Party for its new membership.

I want to suggest that the leap is such an apt metaphor for Corbynism precisely because it captures these strengths, weaknesses, and ambiguities. As a political formation produced by electoral events as much as sustained organization, Corbynism fostered and enhanced an equivalent activist imaginary that saw victory as requiring leaps. This, in turn, had effects on the shape of Corbynist political organization. The other potential path to left unity—the federation, and the organizational efforts required to instantiate it—did not become ideologically or politically viable.

In this article, I begin by charting the variety of left ideas and factions that shaped the organizational and institutional dimensions of the Corbyn project. I focus on how these were held together by three mechanisms: Corbynism's annual campaigns, which functioned as leaps to cohere the membership; Momentum's digital structures; and the policy platform. These mechanisms were insufficient to achieve lasting organizational change, in part because ideological divisions persisted within the temporary unity that Corbynism forged. These divisions were not only about Brexit, but about internationalism, class analysis, the organization of Momentum, and the purpose of the Labour Party. I conclude by suggesting that these divisions—and the inability, ultimately, of a fragmented movement left first shaped by neoliberal politics to diffuse or transcend them—had important consequences for the fate of Corbynism, particularly for the social meaning of party membership. The decline of membership that occurred after Labour's

defeat (from a 2018 peak of 564,443 to 430,000 in July 2021) is unlikely to signal the total collapse of a Labour left, but it may well indicate that that the transformation of a movement left into a party left was temporary. The success of leaps without organization was fleeting.

A Federated Unity?

Socialists joining mainstream parties always face a dilemma: those parties may serve material interests for workers but strengthen rather than undermine capitalism (Przeworksi 1985). Many on the British left long saw it as an illusion that Labour could ever be an "instrument" of socialist politics (Miliband 1976). But the MPs of the Socialist Campaign Group which formed around Tony Benn in 1982 thought the Labour Party could seek a mutually beneficial relationship with both the labor movement and the wider progressive and anti-capitalist left (Panitch and Leys 2020: 20, 202). However, by the end of the twentieth century, Labour functioned as a cartel party: in the cartel party system that followed the decline of mass membership parties, parties used the resources of the state to maintain power, colluding as much as competing; the goals of politics became "self-referential, professional, and technocratic" (Katz and Mair 2009: 755). In this context, the Campaign Group MPs dwindled in number, along with Labour's membership.

Corbynism emerged against the backdrop of the degenerated Labour Party, aiming to fill the space vacated by the decline of mass membership organizations and unions (Mair 2000; Seymour 2017). Its activist base came out of the horizontalist left movements of the 2000s, but Corbynism itself became a party-driven movement: the development of the movement wing was shaped by the Labour Party (Muldoon and Rye 2020). With its campaigning base in Momentum, and the party leadership counting allies among union leaders, it promised a version of the Labour New Left dream updated to the bleak horizons of the twenty-first century. The proximate aim was electoral: Corbynism would win a governing majority to enact, at the least, social democratic policies. But it was also hoped that the party would democratize, and unite the urban precariat and downwardly mobile professional class with the industrial and postindustrial working class, bringing the unions together with the grassroots membership. The vision of the party as a federation of social movements was recovered. Momentum was often seen as key to that vision, and characterized as offering the potential for "coordination on every terrain of struggle" (Schneider 2020: 235). With a

new media infrastructure, new ideas, and a new campaigning organization, the hope was that distinct factions would occupy different parts of the party apparatus.

How did this fare in practice? The Labour New Left legacy, itself ideologically diverse, was most robust in the leadership office and affiliated unions. Corbyn, who had joined the Socialist Campaign Group after his election to Parliament in 1983, was himself long associated with the new social movements (particularly the campaigns for nuclear disarmament and for party democratization) and known for his anti-Atlanticist, anti-imperialist foreign policy commitments, and work with the Stop the War Coalition. Corbyn's brand of socialist moralism underpinned both his initial appeal as an anti-austerity politician (Bolton and Pitts 2018)—one whose record was unscathed by support of the Iraq War or welfare cuts, or by the 2009 parliamentary expenses scandal—as well as his limitations as leader. But his rhetoric of movementism also endeared him to the activist base of the new Labour membership—which more broadly included social liberals, progressives, and greens—drawn proximately from movements created out of the 2010–11 wave of anti-austerity dissent against the Tory-led coalition policies after 2008.

This base created new institutions inside and outside the party to provide a home for a radicalism adjacent to Labour but hostile to the socially conservative aspects of the Labour tradition. Many of these institutions were digital: tech skills were, after all, what the professional precariat class, with no access to existing bureaucratic structures, had to offer. They built its media infrastructure, recasting the media as a terrain of struggle: through new and revamped magazines like *New Socialist*, *Red Pepper* and *Tribune*, the independent multi-media organization Novara Media, and political education festivals like The World Transformed. They organized Labour's digital campaigns and built institutions like Momentum's digital democracy platform. This was the part of Corbynism that could plausibly be characterized as a digital insurgency or movement party within the cartelized bureaucratic apparatus of Labour itself (Gerbaudo 2018; Piguer and Jaeger 2020). But unlike European digital parties that were explicit alternatives to the old legacy parties, Corbynism was a new kind of party-movement faction that was digital not by design but by default.

The activist base shaped the policy platform too. The transformation of Labour's policy agenda was overseen by John McDonnell—as Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer and former chair of finance in one of Britain's more

radical experiments in economic governance, the Greater London Council—who encouraged a flourishing of left political theory. He oversaw the formulation of policies intended to provide conditions for working class agitation, regionalism, and a bolstering of union power, capacity, and membership, through schemes for industrial democracy, ownership, and accountability. There were plans for ending the gig economy; wealth and corporation taxes; the removal of barriers to strike action and the creation of conditions for collective bargaining at the sectoral level; public ownership via inclusive ownership funds; regional development and industrial strategy; and the creation of a National Care Service (to provide universal adult social care). McDonnell drew ideas from the Labour New Left and from recent critics of rentier capitalism (Raine 2019), automation theorists, and feminists (Hester 2017). The advocacy of major transfers of land ownership (Monbiot et al. 2019) and the 'Green Industrial Revolution' was indebted to the climate and housing movements (with which McDonnell had historic connections). These policies were also responses to neoliberalism, seeking to rebalance the power of capital and labor and building imaginatively from the languages of Thatcherism: the 'right to own' policy that ensured workers would be buyers of first refusal if their employer company was sold mimicked the Conservatives' 'right to buy' policies that privatized social housing.

When these ideas were invoked in Labour's strategy, they were often framed as restorationist by Labour's communication strategists (Bassett Yerrell 2020; Davies 2020)—not as steps toward socialism or transfers of class power, but attempts to shore up Britain's hollowed-out liberal institutions. The promise of rescuing the best from the past as a condition for future transformation was embodied in the figure of Corbyn himself. Despite Corbynism's reliance on anti-establishment rhetoric to cut through the hostile press, its media strategy therefore focused on themes from Labour's social democratic playbook—the revival of the NHS and England's towns. It is an irony that the antagonistic version of this class-struggle social democratic strategy worked only in the cities, where inequalities are experienced most viscerally (and where social geographies can have radicalizing effects absent political organization). Most of the time, Corbyn's own strategy involved moral rather than political critique (Gilbert 2020). These inconsistencies reflected ideological tensions, but they were also more prosaic failures of message discipline.

If McDonnell was the figure who smoothed tensions between old and new lefts inside Labour, Momentum was the site where those tensions became conflicts. Despite its movementist rhetoric, Momentum under Cor-

byn was largely an electoral campaigning organization that operated best during moments of crisis. But its aims were contested. Longstanding Labour activists saw it as intimately tied to the party—an organization that would help win elections, support Corbyn, and democratize Labour. But the volunteer wing wanted an open membership organization with regional meetings that prioritized movement building. By 2017, the delegate system of local groups represented nationally by chosen delegates was replaced by direct member participation, with restricted membership and a low participation membership list, facilitated by a digital platform. With its centralized decision-making and digital plebiscites, Momentum came to resemble a campaigning NGO (Bassett Yerrell 2020, 93–94; Dennis 2020). It had some success in promoting candidates and in establishing a Corbyn-supporting majority on Labour's governing body National Executive Committee (NEC) but was less good at encouraging community or workplace organizing or performing socially integrative functions regionally. Engagement with Labour Party councilors and bureaucracy was limited; the central elections department and regional offices remained resistant to Corbynist innovation, like the Community Organising Unit (now disbanded).

Against this backdrop, the regulative ideal of the party as a federation of social movements—an umbrella organization that would steer movements without subsuming them in Westminster politics—was always going to be challenging to realize. The difficulties in doing so were visible in Momentum's strategies, which embodied a kind of structural ambivalence. This was reflected by Corbyn himself, who often did not look to Momentum for support. Though he initially tried to build a ministerial team drawn from across the party, parliamentary resistance to his leadership led him to depend on staff from the Socialist Campaign Group, the Stop the War Coalition, and union leadership (particularly Unite). The affiliated unions—themselves not exactly forces for mass participation—remained powerful bodies under the party's constitution. Corbyn relied on their leadership to diffuse demands for democracy made by the grassroots membership. Ultimately, he centralized decision-making in the Leader of the Opposition's office, even as he failed to lead (Butler 2020; Panitch 2020). This combination of centralization with leadership failure has had significant effects. Under Corbyn, the right of the party remained embedded and maintained its networks of power. The same has not proved true for the left: Corbyn's unwillingness to follow through on democratization left not just the leadership office, but the party machinery, out of their reach.

Division without Federation

The pre-Corbyn fragmentation of the left was not entirely reversed in the Corbyn years. But a temporary unity was achieved, despite the primary cleavage of Brexit which divided the left, the party, and the country. How? There were three main mechanisms. First, the campaigns functioned as cohering events—the leaps. Second, the digital infrastructure of Momentum provided temporary centralization where analogue structures failed. The digital democracy platform My Momentum and the apps developed by Momentum's tech team (M.app directed members to take part in floor votes at Party conferences; My Campaign Map directed armies of canvassers to where their efforts were most valuable) each provided coordination without Corbynists having to control the party bureaucracy. Third, the policy platform: Labour's transformational policies, popular in party and country, had a cohering effect, providing unity at conferences and rallying points.

The reliance on these mechanisms itself had difficulties and downsides. Digital parties struggle to perform the integrative functions for which mass membership parties were designed (Gerbaudo 2018). Corbynism made regional gains only where there were robust preexisting political cultures. The overreliance on digital infrastructures and on policy meant that organization was insufficient (Forrester 2021). Like the left everywhere near power but unable to win, the British left needs to reckon with how to connect much-loved policies to people's everyday experiences, interests, and investments. As Seymour (2017: 459) writes, in a phrase we would do well to memorize, most people "take far too much pleasure in their beliefs to give them up for a well-put policy statement."

Divisions of principle did persist on the Corbynist left; they were temporarily submerged but have now resurfaced. Take the left's internationalism. Some see Corbynism's legacy as the mainstreaming of the anti-Atlanticism, anti-interventionism, anti-imperialism of the Stop the War Coalition (Murray 2020). This internationalism underwrites critiques of the European Union as a neoliberal constraint on a democratic majoritarian state (some make the further step of characterizing this majoritarianism as itself socialist or cast the referendum as a working-class revolt). This vision conflicts with the other Corbynist internationalism—an autonomist vision of alliances among precarious laborers of all nationalities and none, including migrants from the peripheries and the edges of Fortress Europe fleeing wars, exploitation, and climate change.

Similar divisions exist over class analysis and socialist strategy. Labour lost many constituencies that voted Leave in the Brexit referendum—partic-

ularly older people in postindustrial areas of Wales and the "red wall" of the "Labour heartlands" in the north of England, as well as a small but strategically crucial section of middle-class, middle-aged Remain voters. Those losses raise familiar questions. Are the generally white inhabitants of the British rust belt towns of the North and Midlands still the working-class base that Labour should represent? Or do changes in class structure, work, and geography mean the left should find its base in a cross-racial, cross-class coalition of the young, the immigrant, the Black and minority working-class of the cities, with middle-class social movement progressives, and strive to build unity on the basis of an antagonism—the experience of precarity? This may well be a false choice, but it is one that will nonetheless determine Labour's future, as left and center-left parties struggle to win both constituencies and the left remains divided over the strategy for doing so. Labour's new leader Keir Starmer is taking a familiar route back to the heartlands that codes the regions by class and recasts divisions in terms of culture war via displays of socially conservative patriotism—embodied in his elevation of "flag, forces, family," rejection of freedom of movement, and dog-whistling reticence on trans rights and the UK Black Lives Matter protests. Many on the Corbynist left have responded by defending minoritized constituencies—by extending the focus on precarity (Gebrial 2020), pointing to age as a new modality through which class is lived (Milburn 2019; Blakeley 2020: 17), and framing the public sector as the route to uniting divided constituencies in Britain's asset economy (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2020). The question remains whether the left can build a bottom-up movement on the basis of this analysis, and what the path forward will look like while the prospect of Scottish independence remains a constraint on any future Labour majority.

A Fragmented Membership

The hope of the Corbyn years was that the leaps of the campaigns, with their intense canvassing ground game, alongside the new digital infrastructures would be enough not only to unite Labour's constituencies but to federate the party membership in ways that made these divides irrelevant. But in retrospect, the federation strategy appears largely rhetorical. After Corbyn's defeat, the left had little remaining control (even in its Corbyn-era stronghold of the NEC). It had developed no strategy for a Corbyn succession. With few intermediary social forms below the party, the pendulum of leftist politics may well swing from Corbynist electoralism back to horizontalism.

This indicates a larger Corbyn-era ideological lacuna of left politics and political education: the lack of interest in the party form. The movement left, operating in a landscape of cartelized parties, avoided discussing the purpose of the party, or what a federation of social movements entailed. How would social movements avoid bowing to Westminster? Should the party remain a site of struggle no matter who controlled it, and no matter its social base or connection to the labor movement? Can Momentum play the role of party surrogate and train future leaders? Was the party to be democratized as a means of widening participation, because of a commitment to those values, for the sake of movement-building, or as a means to controlling the party apparatus? How does the aim of control relate to the inevitably expressive nature of party members' commitments? Corbynism developed few answers. There were concerns over the leadership's decisiveness and discipline—its failure to push for open selections or to purge the Labour Right (given the political conditions, and Corbynism's lack of a deep bench to fill a cabinet, it's not clear what the latter would have involved). But such tactical dilemmas were rarely dealt with in strategic terms. The Labour New Left vision of democratizing and occupying the institutions of the party emphasized the former at the expense of the latter.

One area in which these limitations of strategy had a significant effect was on the contradictory meanings of party membership. There was little attempt to cultivate a particular understanding of the purposes of political action among party members. It was always going to be hard to engineer, in one election cycle, a reversal in cultures of membership, given the hollowing out of mass democratic institutions of neoliberal capitalism (Mair 2013; Brown 2015). In the end, members retained either liberal intuitions about expressive agency or autonomist suspicion of the party form. For most new members, Corbynism was an expressive commitment, often to the figure of Corbyn himself. Others saw party democracy and grassroots participation as intrinsic rather than instrumental goods. This meant that there was little long-term planning—whether for a succession or for building up the organization of the party or Momentum to act as a federation of social movements. Where there was an instrumental logic to Corbynism it was not often a vision of a party takeover, but a short-term electoral one—it offered "a left-wing version of the basic idea of 'getting our government in'" (Seymour 2020).

Insofar as Corbynism remained an electoralist project, it was unsuccessful. The movement left was squeezed into an electoral institution, but that institution was left relatively unchanged. Corbynism's organizational success was that left unity was achieved without significant party-led political

education or discipline, but through the electoral and leadership campaigns, through digital structures, and by commitment to the aspirations and values embodied in the policy platform. But absent more significant institutional and organizational change, that unity could not endure over the long term.

This is one reason why the metaphor of the leap is so apt. The leap model of politics had purchase both with a left nourished for decades on a diet of direct action, occupations, and protest camps, with little interest in party organization, and those who saw the proximate and plausible goal of Corbynism as a leap into Downing Street at the next election. The leap was symptomatic of the desire of socialists everywhere to describe a prospective electoral victory in terms more often used for revolutionary rupture. It captured an activist imaginary. But it also functioned to shore up an electoral horizon. The leaps made federation seem unnecessary, but without federation, the leaps were insufficient.

What now? Today, the British left has a larger counter-public presence than it has for decades, but it lacks corresponding organizational strength. It is not yet clear whether those members who remain in the Labour Party will see it as a vehicle for the advancement of socialist politics, or whether the radical left is entirely abandoning the Labour New Left project once again. The COVID-19 pandemic has witnessed a surge of social movements, trade union membership and strikes (Davies 2021), but with little support from Labour. In absence of either the electoral or promised leaps that cohered Corbynism or the institutional structures of a federated party, the conditions for building the base will have to be manufactured without leadership battles or selections on the horizon. Doing so will involve the kind of local politics that Corbynism deprioritized, relative to canvassing or digital campaigns. The road to municipal socialism may not run through the PLP, but it could well be paved with council elections. It will also involve listening to new rhythms created by the COVID-19 pandemic and its conditions of possibility—the week the furloughs end, the days the evictions begin. The political legacy of the 2007–8 crisis has not only been Corbynism but also a re-commitment to class politics, so those rhythms may now be easier for the left to hear.

In spring 2021, Momentum embarked on a strategy to reengage the left within the Labour Party and to reverse the breakdown of relations between Labour and its core activist membership. It held a 'policy primary' in which members identified priorities; Momentum will pressure Labour to include these in its platform. It also set out an organizing strategy that includes ongoing support for eviction resistance, for social and renters' unions, as well as new schemes for supporting councilors and trade unions—the Future

Councillors Programme, Momentum Councillors' Network, a Leadership Development Programme, and the Momentum Trade Unionists Network. Momentum's aim is to act as a "bridge between extra-Party struggle and Labour" (Momentum 2021: 12). Whether it can succeed in federating new movements, without managing or coopting them, and what this will mean without significant leverage in the party, are open questions. Starmer's efforts to reclaim the Labour Party from the left have so far been successful, but its broader apparatus may yet present opportunities.

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