

# Why Labour lost the 2019 general election: social democracy versus neoliberalism and the far right

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## Abstract

After Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party in 2015, the party for the first time took a stance against austerity. The new leadership proposed to raise investment and productivity; nationalise some utilities; end privatisations; improve trade union rights, wages and conditions; a Green New Deal creating a million jobs; a rise in taxation of capital and the rich, to fund a 10% rise in spending on public services and benefits; consequent expansion and improvements of services, better wages and conditions, some services made free; large scale council house building, and re-regulation of private renting. This programme goes no further than governments in the postwar boom; but after forty years of neoliberalism it is a radical turn to the left. The party, however, came up against an offensive by the far right to engineer Britain's exit from the EU and thus deepen neoliberalism, using xenophobia to gain popular support; the Conservative win in the 2019 election marked a victory for this project and a severe defeat for Labour and the working class. This article seeks to explain this outcome by considering the dialectics of long-standing structures of British political economy, the inheritance of neoliberalism, and the strategies and tactics of the Conservative and Labour Parties. It examines the aims of the far right in Britain in relation to capital, and the campaigns of Labour on its economic and Brexit policies. The article focuses particularly on popular consciousness: the rise of individualism and xenophobia arising from daily life under neoliberalism; poor understanding of the economics of austerity and Brexit; variation of these by age and geography; and consequent votes in the referendum and two general elections. It concludes with some reflections on strategies for social democratic parties in the present period.

## 1. Introduction

Following the defeat of the Labour Party in the British general election of May 2015, Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader, replacing Ed Miliband. In the next four years the Corbyn leadership developed a social democratic programme. Formally speaking, this programme did not go beyond the consensus politics of the postwar boom: its proposals for taxation, spending on public services and benefits, trade union rights, labour market measures, industrial policy and public ownership of utilities would not have surprised Harold Wilson or even Harold Macmillan; only the Green New Deal would have seemed novel.<sup>1</sup> But Corbyn's programme was a decisive break from the neoliberalism of capital and governments since the 1970s. This sharp turn to the left was, and still is, unique among social democratic parties worldwide since the start of the neoliberalism. This singularity was partly a product of the unusually democratic system for electing the party leader introduced by Miliband; but it also reflected widespread popular disillusionment with forty years of neoliberalism, and profound dissatisfaction of party members with the neoliberal-lite strategy of Blair, Brown and Miliband. Corbyn's election gave hope that a government could be elected that would improve conditions of work, restore public services, and begin to challenge some of the accepted prerogatives of capital. For some Marxists, including the present author, the hope was that such a government would encourage and enable an eruption of popular demands and self-organisation within both production and reproduction spheres, pushing the government further to the left and creating a dynamic of working class empowerment. A Labour government could thus produce immediate material gains for the working class, and potentially open up an offensive class dynamic. The popularity and potential of Corbyn's programme was shown by the party's membership tripling to 600,000, making it by far the largest party in Europe, and by the vote it obtained in the general election in 2017, when it deprived the Conservatives of their majority.

These hopes were, however, dashed by the December 2019 general election which the Conservative Party won by a large majority. This was a disaster not only for the working class and the left in Britain but also for the left in other countries, who are now told: Britain shows that a social democratic programme cannot win. This article aims to understand this debacle. My aim is not to 'celebrate' Corbynism but to analyse the barriers to social democratic parties seeking to form governments after forty years of neoliberalism and in the face of the global rise of the far right. The barriers are, of course, to some extent specific to each country; in this piece I put considerable emphasis on the peculiarities of British political economy. But I will argue that there are some problems of social democratic strategy which are likely to be found in all high-income countries in the present period, and these go beyond traditional Marxist critiques of social democracy.

Before it had hardly started, Labour's campaign against austerity was thrown in the air by Cameron's launching of a referendum on membership of the EU. The Labour Party argued for remain. After a perfunctory campaign devoid of information and analysis and dominated by the far-right Leave campaign, leave won the June 2016 vote by 52 to 48%. Labour accepted the result, and, until September 2019, campaigned for a soft Brexit with Britain remaining in the Customs Union and maintaining a 'close relationship' with the Single Market. Cameron was replaced by May as prime minister, who took and maintained a hard Brexit stance with no concessions to Labour or Tory soft Brexiters, let alone to Remain voters. Despite this stance, the right of the Tory Party, led by Boris Johnson, continued to push for leaving the EU with no deal and undermined May's negotiations. To strengthen her hand and exploit Labour's low poll ratings May called a general election in 2017. This, however, was disastrous for her: on the basis of its anti-austerity stance, Labour massively increased its share of the vote relative to 2015, the biggest increase in an opposition's vote since 1945. May lost her majority, and had to rely on the ten Ulster Democratic Unionist MPs. In 2019, when May's withdrawal agreement was voted down for the third time by a combination of the Tory right and the opposition, May resigned and was replaced by Johnson. Johnson purged the Tory soft Brexiters, and, aiming to give himself a working majority, called a

general election ‘to get Brexit done’. The anti-austerity sentiment which had nearly won Labour the 2017 election was not enough to counter Johnson’s promise to ‘end’ three and a half years of Brexit wrangling, and the Tories obtained a large majority. To assess the Corbyn project, then, we need to examine it over the whole period 2015-9, and in relation to the so-far successful project of the Tory Right.

Some commentators on the far left have criticised Corbyn’s programme as a strategy for socialism. I do not include such a critique here. The project of Corbyn and the majority of left Labour Party members was a limited and short-term one: to elect a government which would aim to ameliorate the conditions of labour, public services and benefits, industrial organisation and ecology. This would have been an advance for the class struggle, and its defeat (for the time being) therefore deserves analysis. It is implausible that this defeat was due to Corbyn not having a strategy for socialism. I therefore want to investigate the barriers to convincing a majority of the population to back the *given* manifesto, in preference to the Conservatives’ programme of hard Brexit, continued austerity and (rhetorical) xenophobia. My focus, then, is on popular consciousness of the macro economy, public services and ecology on the one hand, and of immigration and ‘immigrants’ on the other.

My approach is Marxist. Society is a totality, within which the spheres of ‘politics’, ‘economics’, ‘social life’ and ‘culture’ are moments rather than discrete structures, and hence are internally related. Capitalist society has deep structures and durable processes, but these are replete with contradictions, and so with class struggle (Gough and Das, 2018). I understand ‘the working class’ in the Marxist sense, that is, those who over their life span rely for their material survival on wage labour – roughly 90% of the British population.

This article is mainly about England and Wales. This because Labour had few seats in Scotland before the 2019 election and does not stand in Northern Ireland. It is also because I do not have space for a discussion of the specific politics of Scotland and Northern Ireland over the period.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 discusses the 2019 vote, distinguishing between the votes of different social groups and their apparent motivation. Section 3 considers explanation of the vote. I criticise and reject two explanations of Labour’s defeat given by the centre and right of the party. I summarise some well-known political-organisational moments: the different resources and capacities of the parties, the conventional and social media. I justify my main focus in this piece: popular consciousness and knowledge of and ideas about the economy. Section 4 recounts the impact on jobs and living standards of the Conservative (dominated) governments since 2010; this experience was Labour’s strongest card in the 2017 and 2019 elections. Section 5 sets out the progress of neoliberalism in Britain since the 1970s, and its impacts on popular consciousness of economic and social issues and on modes of political discourse. I use a theory of ideology derived from Marx, supplemented by a pragmatic theory of ‘interests’ in its double sense. Section 6 examines how the Blair-Brown government and Miliband lost support for Labour, particularly in poor regions and among older people; this posed a major problem to the party under Corbyn. Section 7 examines the class origins and ascent of the Tory Right. I argue that its programme is an intensification of neoliberalism, which uses nationalism and xenophobia to gain working class support for its project. I examine its reasons for getting Britain to leave the EU, and the contradictions for capital that this involves. Section 8 examines the votes in the 2016 referendum, focusing on reasons for the vote to Leave; preserved and intensified over three years, these proved to be crucial in the 2019 general election.

I then turn to the Labour Party. Section 9 considers the difficulties of convincing people of Labour’s economic and ecological programme after forty years of neoliberalism. Section 10 considers the difficulties of convincing people of the economic logic of Remain or a soft Brexit. All

these involved conveying ideas about the macro economy (national, international), coming up against the restricted nature of working class people's economic knowledge due to their position in capitalist society. Section 11 examines how judgements of the supposed qualities of the party leaders became central to the election, and how Corbyn became unacceptable to many voters. Section 12 analyses Labour's fateful decision in October 2019 to support an election. Section 13 summarises the analysis, and considers some lessons for social democratic parties seeking election in the present period.

## 2. The 2019 general election vote

The Tories won the election with 43.6% of the UK vote to Labour's 32.2%, giving a Tory majority of 80 seats. There was a swing of 4.6% from Labour to Tories compared with the 2017 general election. The Tories took 57 seats off Labour, all of which were Leave seats in the Midlands, North and Wales. These were nearly all deindustrialised, poor areas, and included many of the former coalfields which had been crushed by Thatcher in 1985; that these areas could, usually for the first time, elect a Tory MP was a particular shock for the left. Labour's share of the vote in each social class (A – E) was roughly equal, as was the Conservatives'; the class basis of the parties' support had therefore changed markedly over the previous two decades, with Labour increasing its higher income votes and the Conservatives their lower income votes.

The result was not, however, as decisive a defeat for Labour as this summary might imply. Labour's *share of the vote* was higher than in 2015 (under Miliband), 2010 (under Brown) and 2006 (under Blair). It was higher than in 2003 when Blair won by 144 seats. But the spatial distribution of Labour votes (concentrated in the cities) and Tory votes (diffuse), combined with the first-past-the-post system, gave the Tories a disproportionate number of seats. The social democratic vote, including the SNP, PC, Greens and SDLP, totalled 39.7%. The Conservatives' vote increased only a little from the 2017 election, while Labour's fell by 2.6 million; many former Labour voters did not vote. There was an enormous age divide in voting: Labour was supported by the majority of people under 45 and the Conservatives by the majority over 45; people aged 18-24 voted 60% for Labour and 18% Tory, whereas for people aged 65 and over the proportions were the reverse (YouGov). This bifurcated vote means that the analysis needs to both explain the support for Labour among younger voters and the lack of support among the older.

In the crucial Leave constituencies in England and Wales, people said that they voted for parties other than Labour, or abstained, for three main reasons (YouGov):-

- (i) support for Brexit, and a wish to 'get it done';
- (ii) contempt for, or hatred of, Jeremy Corbyn;
- (iii) being unconvinced of the feasibility of Labour's economic programme (Helm, 2019).

Implicitly, the *benefits* of Labour's economic programme were not perceived as sufficiently strong to outweigh these negatives. A very common view encountered by canvassers was *indifference* to the election: a belief that the government, or the state, or politicians can do nothing, or that 'politicians are all the same' (Chakraborty, 2019a). This article is focused on unpacking these views and explaining their origin.

## 3. Explaining the election result

The result can be seen as the triumph in Britain of the international far right project. From the post-Yugoslavia governments, to Modi, Putin, Erdogan, Kaczyński, Orban, Trump and Bolsonaro, this

project seeks to deepen neoliberalism's subordination of workers and, in the face of a growing environmental movement, allow extractive capital and polluting industries free rein. It suppresses opposition by attacks on the media, judiciary and parliaments, and fixes elections. It mobilises working class support through xenophobia, racism or ethnic/religious antagonism (Saad Filho, 2018; Worth, 2019). The project of Johnson, Gove and Farage fits this template in all respects, and 2019 election was the victory of this international movement in Britain. While this is an accurate *description*, to see it as *explanation* implies a structuralist theorisation in which particular periods of capitalist history are cast in a mode of regulation dictated by capitalist imperatives, as in Regulation Theory. This approach neglects the contradictory nature of all modes of capitalist regulation, ignores the role of class struggle, and thus has nothing to say about the agency of the working class (Clarke, 1992; Gough, 1996). It therefore provides no guide to *how* the far right achieved its ascendancy, and how the left could have acted differently.

The right and centre of the Labour Party and associated commentators have used two arguments to explain the result: incompetence of the Corbyn leadership, and the manifesto being too left wing. Neither of these holds up to scrutiny. It is absurd to attribute to a few individuals complete responsibility for a major national event, in the style of conservative historiography. The leadership's actions were highly constrained by internal divisions within the party, a forty-year neoliberalisation of the economy, social life, popular consciousness and politics, and a Brexit offensive by the Tory Right which was backed by important sections of capital and most of the press. What we need to unravel is the *dialectic* of this hostile external context and the decisions of the party. As to the manifesto being too left wing, some people did not vote Labour because they thought the programme unfeasible. But the majority vote for Labour of people under 45 was motivated overwhelmingly by the manifesto.

The election result was partly a result of factors in the realm of politics narrowly conceived:-

(a) The continuity of the Labour Party with the New Labour period. The Corbyn leadership was sabotaged repeatedly by senior managers in party HQ (Novaramedia, 2020). The majority of the party's MPs were opposed to Corbyn, triggered an unsuccessful attempt to replace him as leader in 2016, and continually criticised him in the media.

(b) The characterisation of Corbyn as anti-semitic by the Labour right, without evidence. The inability of Labour to bring to popular attention the racist policies, actions and propaganda of Conservative governments 2010-9, and Johnson's racism.

(c) Far-right terrorist threats to the left, and the murder of Jo Cox.

(d) The massive imbalance between the parties in the media, the social media, and funding. The Tories' threats to the BBC and C4. The refusal of Johnson to take part in TV debates.

(e) The Tories' stringing out of the negotiations with the EU, creating impatience to 'get Brexit done'.

(f) Illegal actions by the Leave campaign, and unconstitutional parliamentary actions by the government.

(g) Nigel Farage's vehicles, first UKIP then the Brexit Party, played a large part in developing xenophobia, particularly in the white working class. In the 2019 election, Farage stood aside in Labour held seats, allowing the Conservatives to get the votes of his base.

In this article, however, I focus on the role in the election of popular ideas, cultures and ideologies. I examine knowledge of and ideas about the economy (Britain's economic relationship to the EU; Labour's economic programme); immigration; British and EU policies and structures; and the views and strategies that people consequently adopt. Popular understanding of a social democratic programme, and combating xenophobia, are major problems for left parties and movements in all countries. Accordingly, these are the central concerns of this article.

#### **4. The Conservatives' economic and social record, and its competence**

The election result was extraordinary given the record of the Tories in government since 2010. During those ten years, Britain had the weakest recovery from the 2008 amongst the OECD countries. Capital's rate of investment was low, with corporations focused on increasing their share price by high dividend payments and share buy-backs; many corporations went bust having paid out unjustifiable dividends up to the last moment. In consequence, productivity growth – the key determinant of long term average income – has been abysmally low: over ten years it has been the lowest since the industrial revolution. Average wages in 2019 were still below 2010 levels.

From 2010 government spending was cut sharply year by year. Central funding of local government was cut by 50% over ten years, with larger cuts to Labour controlled authorities and smaller to Tory controlled. Every public service suffered deterioration of service, and some services (NHS mental health services, particularly for children, youth services, old people's centres, Sure Start, libraries, legal aid) were severely cut or terminated. The Private Finance Initiative was increasingly used for new facilities, and more and more parts of services contracted to private firms, including fictitious 'not for profits' such as academy school chains; social care became wholly privatised. Private providers nearly all have worse wages and conditions than public sector, and deliver inferior services, sometimes farcically bad. Public sector real wages deteriorated, and work intensity increased to unbearable levels. Regulatory departments of national and local government, and the HMRC, had their staffing drastically reduced, so that the private sector was increasingly not policed. State benefits were drastically cut, most of all to people with disabilities, resulting in sharply rising destitution, hunger, evictions, and deaths. Rises in life expectancy have ended and, for poorer women, it has decreased.

Housing price and quality worsened massively. Social housing continued to be sold to tenants and new build was minimal. The stranglehold of the four building majors on the construction of housing for owner occupation continued, resulting in increasing prices and atrocious quality of construction. Private sector renting grew rapidly, on the basis of six month contracts, rapidly increasing rents and bad maintenance. Local authorities' ability to refuse developers' proposals effectively disappeared, resulting in development of housing and commercial uses in locations accessible only by car.

As to the credibility of the Tory Party entering the 2019 election, there had been numerous cases of illegality by ministers, and projects involving spectacular waste of public money and egregious administrative incompetence. There had been five years of open warfare in the governing party over a major issue, without precedent in the last hundred years. Boris Johnson is, by any normal standards, an atrocious politician. His record of action in his eight years as mayor of London was farcically bad – no substantial action on the massive problems of housing and transport in London, capitulation to property developers, and a series of useless vanity projects costing tens of millions. He is a serial liar on major issues, not least when he led the Leave campaign in the referendum, and

subsequently in his advocacy of hard or no-deal Brexit. His public statements include crude misogyny, racism and homophobia.

Unlike Thatcher's election in 1979, people knew what they were voting for. Thatcher presented a radically new approach to the economy, neoliberalism, which she promised would revive it and thus overcome the stagnation and economic crisis which had resulted from the previous dominant model, Keynesianism. People voting for her were only able to guess the outcomes, but were prepared to give it a go. The 2019 election was different: the Conservatives promised to continue an austerity (plus a few flimsy promised improvements) which people had experienced for decades.

A party with this egregious record of economic and social failure, attacks on human rights and rule of law, and a five year internal split, led by an incompetent liar, should have been a sitting target for the Labour Party; yet it triumphed. Using Enlightenment assumptions, the left has tended to assume that people have a clear view of their own economic interests, that they can clearly read the actions of governments and the implications of party programmes, and judge them against their 'objective' interests. But Marxism shows that these assumptions are unfounded. In the *Gundrisse* and *Capital* Marx demonstrates that value relations reify relations between people as relations between things: the dependence of all on others' labour appears as the exchange of commodity-things ('commodity fetishism'); the power of capital is disguised as the impersonal impulsion to extract and accumulate surplus value; the wage relation appears as an exchange between equals rather than a process of exploitation; and thus the value (in the broad sense) of labour appears as the value created in production, and the value of workers as their wage (Elson, 1979). This is not to say that exchange and value are unreal; on the contrary, they are the determinate form of social interactions which impose themselves on all actors; but they mystify the underlying relations of exploitation; they are *both* real and false (Geras, 1972). In the next section I apply this approach to understanding popular consciousness under neoliberalism.

## **5. How neoliberalism has shaped popular consciousness: individualisation, competition, depoliticisation**

Capitalism is always a system of disempowerment and alienation of the working class (Ollman, 1976; Sennett and Cobb, 1993); this has been deepened by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s as a strategy of capital to restore the rate of profit by imposing the rule of value more sharply onto economy, social life and the state. Non-market forms of social coordination - of workers (trade unions, communities, social movements), of capitals (sectoral organisations, coordinations, long term dependencies), and the mediations of these by the state (public services, state regulations, state coordinations of production and social life) – were to be broken up. Workers were to be fragmented and individualised, made to be more reliant on their own resources, principally the sale of their labour power and their unpaid domestic and caring work. The competition between workers, a basic feature of capitalist social relations (though poorly recognised on the left), was sharpened by neoliberalism (Gough, 2010). The rule of value was to be imposed on all actors and social relations. Depoliticisation was thus not merely a side effect of neoliberal 'economics', nor merely an ideology propagated by the ruling class (though it was those things too), but was an essential moment of neoliberalism and a key aim of it. Margaret Thatcher's dictum 'the means is economic, the aim is the soul' points to this centrality of individualisation and depoliticisation (albeit with the mystifying counterposition to 'economics').

This rule of value, materially and ideologically, was not achieved over night. Neoliberalisation has unfolded in Britain since the 1970s as a dialectical unity of material changes (in production, in social life), changes in social relations of production and reproduction, and changes in popular ideas. One moment of this dialectic is that changes in popular ideas lay the basis for capital to further extend neoliberalisation.

In the realm of production, neoliberalism tendentially raises the rate of profit by devalorising capital through bankruptcies and scrapping; by freeing capital to move from less to more profitable lines of investment; and by increasing the rate of exploitation, the share of value-added appropriated by capital. The latter is achieved by holding down wages and intensifying work. In the private sector, workers and work intensity are directly subject to the discipline of the (apparent) profitability of their employer: if the workplace makes an insufficient rate of profit it will close. This discipline has been reinforced by high unemployment resulting from devalorisation of capital, net immigration, and the weakening of trade unions. In Britain these processes unfurled in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly after the recession of 1979-81 which Thatcher exacerbated in order to deepen value discipline. A large part of capacity in manufacturing and mining was closed, causing a dramatic increase in unemployment, and the disappearance of many large well-unionised workplaces. These closures ended many of the work-residence links where workers in a single large workplace or industry lived together in adjacent neighbourhoods, with a strong sense of shared life and solidarity. Employers went on the offensive to weaken or destroy unions, whether in the private sector (the building industry by moving to wholesale labour subcontracting; News International by its move to Wapping), mixed private and public sector (defeat of the steel strike in 1980-1; direct repression of unions in the car industry), or in state-owned industry (the defeat of the miners in 1984-5). These defeats progressively demoralised unionists and undermined workplace resistance. Across the private and public sectors, management bullying and authoritarianism has intensified. From the 1990s, employment growth has been in consumer services with low rates of unionisation and insecure contracts. There has consequently been a large decline in union membership in the private sector.

The weakening of workers' resistance continued after the 2008-9 recession. The (ostensibly) low rate of profit of firms resulted in acceptance by workers and unions of the inevitability of redundancies and wage cuts, with negligible resistance (something neglected in most left commentary). Poor jobs in consumer services (fictitious 'self employment', low wages, no security, zero hour contracts, no benefits or pensions) expanded massively. This eventually resulted in new union organising, mainly in London; but overall the 'gig economy' conveyed the message: workers must work harder for less pay because valorisation of capital requires it. After 2010, the cuts to state spending, public sector wages and services (section 4) were sporadically resisted by the unions, but separately by sector and with few successes. The government imposed the rule of value on workers in and users of services via the 'need' to reduce the debt and annual deficit, and to reduce taxes on capital. The debt was contested by the Occupy movement, and the low taxation of corporations by the Uncut movement. But neither had concrete, winnable demands, and they do not seem to have durably shifted public opinion.

Since 1985 the most militant collective struggles have been around environmental issues; the police repression previously directed at union struggles has been used with increasing brutality against environmental activists. While these initiatives have seldom achieved material changes, they have had considerable success in increasing public awareness of ecological problems.

Neoliberalisation of social reproduction, also, has led to increasing conservatism (Gough and Eisenschitz, 2006: Ch.6). Since the 1970s, cuts to services and their declining quality have encouraged people to see others as competitors for these services rather than collective consumers of them. The same is true for social housing as its supply has halved since the 1980s. Rapidly increasing housing costs have compelled individuals and households to work increasing hours; housing costs and the servicing of increased consumer debt make people reluctant to take industrial action or to leave poor jobs. Many public spaces have been privatised, or degraded, undermining a visible collective good. Changes in the housing market, and the need to move region for work, have weakened neighbourly relations. People's time and energy for social interactions and political



organisation have been eroded by the intensification of work and increasingly anti-social working hours; by declining provision of public services which requires greater domestic work, mainly falling on women; and by declining health services and unhealthy consumption and travel modes eroding physical health. Neoliberalism exhausts and demoralises, a direct material root of depoliticisation.

These economic and social changes have elicited greater ‘individualisation’, reliance on the resources of oneself or one’s family, and its correlate, a will to compete with others for jobs, housing and public services. Individualisation has been reinforced by intensified consumerism, now strongly mediated by social media: people’s sense of self-worth and creativity are increasingly (and precariously) sought through consumption, reflected in and reinforced by TV shows on property, lifestyle and holidays. In the last twenty years the rise of social media has enabled some new forms of connection and collectivity, but also severed and fragmented social life. Social media are a key site for the competitive promotion of the self, and its correlate, the denigration of others (Crary, 2013). The sense of collectivity given by friendship has been weakened by conversations with friends being constantly interrupted by examination of the personal screen (Murphy, 2019). The performance of competition in ‘reality shows’ on TV reflects and reinforces this individualisation.

Individualisation has led to increasing loneliness, depression and lack of self-esteem, which make it difficult to participate in collectivities. It inclines people to despise ‘the losers’ – the poor, the disabled, the mentally ill (Jones, 2016), reinforcing the centuries-old division between the ‘respectable’ and the ‘rough’ working class; the campaign of the coalition government in cutting benefits to these groups was extraordinarily successful because it resonated with changes in feeling originating in social life. Whether face to face or via social media, inter-personal relations become increasingly angry: frustrations get taken out on others in a way which does nothing to address the problems and undermines any sense of collectivity. One form of this heightened competition is with members of other ethnic or ‘racial’ groups.

In a dialectical reversal, people seek to counter the loneliness and precarity of individualisation by developing real or imagined ties to neighbourhood, ethnic group, nation or ‘tradition’; this ‘collective narcissism’ in turn reinforces racism and xenophobia. These have been central to the rise of the far right (section 7 below). In deindustrialised, poor regions, relations with neighbours have increased importance for material and psychological support. One can suppose that this produces pressure to conformity in political views; people in some Leave neighbourhoods reported that ‘everyone around here thinks the same’ about immigration, Brexit and Corbyn (Chakraborty, 2019a; Helm, 2019).

Neoliberalism has cumulatively changed popular views of the capacities of the state. State intervention into industry and labour markets to create (better) jobs has been discredited. Neoliberal fiscal policy involves tax cuts, especially for business, and cuts in spending, especially on benefits and public services, and eschewing of state borrowing even for investment. Forty years of this practice by governments have convinced most people that this fiscal policy is the only way to revive private investment: ‘there is no alternative’ (Elliott, 2019).

All this has altered perceptions of parliamentary politics and politicians. The failure of governments to resolve the stagnation of the economy since the 1970s, despite promises, has led to the view that politicians are useless and mendacious. A lack of understanding of how the economy works leads to political debate being conducted as slogans and sound bites, a form perfectly served by social media. There are hardly any public (or, one suspects, private) *discussions* of the economy or economic policy, that is, conversations which analyse *and* put concepts in question (Gunn, 1989). The social media create constant distraction which militates against sustained analysis of anything.

This has its correlate in a search for quick fixes. The discrediting of government intervention into the economy, combined with the chronic degradation of jobs and social life, has led to people looking to ‘strong, decisive, charismatic’ individuals to ‘sort things out’ – mayors instead of local councils, ‘czars’ instead of ministers, and party leaders rather than governments and parties. Paradoxically, while all politicians are discredited, one politician comes to be regarded as the saviour.

We see, then, that austerity does not necessarily result in opposition to capital or an austerity government; the opposite may be the case. This helps to explain why in 1935, in the depths of the depression, the Conservatives gained their largest ever majority. Neoliberalism in Britain over 45 years has cumulatively constructed individualism and competition within the working class; has reified the rule of capital through value categories; and has wiped social democratic and Keynesian regulation out of the popular imagination. The rise of the social media has tended to exacerbate these problems. This is an essential backdrop for understanding British politics since 2005, in particular the debate on austerity, the economic arguments around Brexit, and the appeal of xenophobia.

These changes in popular consciousness have evolved slowly but cumulatively over forty years. This consciousness is therefore likely to have developed differently in the lives of people of different ages. People over 60 experienced the defeats of the unions in the 1980s and have lived for decades under neoliberalism. Many have been materially, physically and psychologically ground down by neoliberalism and thus have no wish to fight it. Younger people had had less time to imbibe and develop neoliberal ideas, and to be ground down by neoliberal life, yet were confronted with the deprivations and injustice of austerity. We can suppose that this difference in experience contributed to the dramatic difference by age in the 2019 vote.

## **6. Disenchantment with the Labour Party**

The record of New Labour in office 1997-2010 produced increasing disenchantment with the party. Aside from some improvements to public services (Sure Start, nurseries) and introduction of a (low and unpoliced) minimum wage, the government pursued a neoliberal path. It was hostile to the trade unions and workers’ struggles, and left Thatcher’s anti-union laws intact. It did not reverse the huge rise in inequality under the Conservatives. It practiced repressive policing of protests and demonstrations. Its industrial strategy privileged the City of London and media and cultural industries: its Regional Development Agencies were too weak to prevent the decline in manufacturing. It used PFIs for new public sector investments, and failed to tackle tax evasion and avoidance, worsening pressures on public spending. The government’s bail out of the banks after the 2008 crash was not blamed on the financial system; Cameron was therefore able to blame the government debt on ‘Labour’s extravagance’, with lasting effects on people’s view of Labour.

In opposition in 2010-5 Miliband argued for austerity-lite, supporting some cuts but not others; this made it impossible for Labour to contribute to the movement against austerity. He instructed his MPs to abstain on the Universal Credit bill so as not to be seen as siding with ‘benefit scroungers’. When the demolition of local government, corruptly targeted on Labour authorities, began in 2010, the party failed to organise any coordinated resistance; Labour councils therefore became purveyors of the cuts. Thus the Labour leadership from 1997 to 2005 reinforced neoliberal ideas and failed to develop social democratic and collectivist ones. In the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 Labour argued for unity of the UK in alliance with the Tories; this caused a sharp drop in support for the party in the west of Scotland where the yes vote had been highest, and led to a wipe out of Labour in the 2015 Westminster election.

The party itself was increasingly tightly controlled from the centre. Blairite London apparatchiks were parachuted into Labour seats in the Midlands and the North, where they generally had little interaction with the voters. Disenchantment with Labour was reflected in declining election votes from 1997 to 2015 (Chakraborty, 2019b). This was the difficult starting point for Corbyn's renewal of the party.

## 7. The offensive of the far right from 2015 to 2020

The offensive of the far right from 2015 to 2020, via the 2016 referendum, its takeover of the Tory party, and its victory in the 2019 general election, is a new stage in the neoliberal 'class war from above'. As we have seen, the Cameron government in 2010-5 ratcheted up austerity, and failed to protect the environment or confront the climate emergency; it set an arbitrary target for net immigration, and migrants and refugees, including unaccompanied children, were blocked from entering the country; black immigrants from the 1950s and 1960s were deported; the Home Office became openly racist. But the Tory Right wished to go further on all these fronts. Its project has had two linked aspects (for a fuller treatment see Gough, 2019a).

### (i) Brexit for capital

The Tory Right has opposed Britain's EC/EU membership since the 1970s, disliking its social democratic aspects. The base of the Tory Right has been in finance, property and imperial corporations operating overseas, rather than in manufacturing, reflecting a long-standing split within British capital (Anderson, 1967; Fine and Harris, 1985).

For the far right, Brexit aims to abolish legal and political constraints protecting ecosystems, workers in the workplace, and the quality of consumer commodities. It avoids the ongoing moves by the EU towards increased coordination of corporate taxation, clamp down on tax havens (including Britain and its overseas dependencies), and increased regulation of banking. It ends Britain's net contribution to the EU budget. Note that ending immigration from the EU is *not* an aim of the far right.

Brexit is, however, contradictory for capital. Exit from the Customs Union will severely undermine manufacturing and farming within Britain, and possibly some sectors of finance. The representative bodies of capital have protested, but these protests have so far been ignored. My interpretation is that, first, much British-owned or headquartered capital does not produce within Britain but operates abroad outside the EU, and is therefore indifferent to EU membership: speculative finance, fossil fuels and mining, large scale construction, imperial agricultural corporations. Second, manufacturing within Britain is carried out overwhelmingly by transnational corporations, which already have other manufacturing sites within the EU, and the same is true for the retail banks. Transfer of production from Britain to the EU is therefore not too difficult. Opposition from capital to the Brexiteers has therefore been muted.

### (ii) Winning working class support for Brexit, and hence for neoliberalism

The Brexiteers could not win popular support by presenting their real aims. They have therefore used xenophobia and nationalism. In this they learnt from Thatcher's use of the war in the Falklands to regain public support after its precipitous drop in the recession of 1979-82, enabling her easily to win the 1983 election. The Leave campaign made two promises: end immigration from the EU (and implicitly from elsewhere); and end meddling by 'the Brussels bureaucrats' in British affairs – 'take back control'. From the Leave campaign through to the 2019 election, negotiations with Brussels were presented as a war against an enemy; MPs who tried to soften the withdrawal agreement were 'traitors'. The tendency of neoliberal life to elicit nationalism was

exploited. During the election campaign, the Brexit party produced an advertisement: a picture of Merkel, arm raised; 'We didn't win two world wars to be dictated to by a Kraut'.

These messages were stunningly successful. They powered the Leave vote in 2016, and the Tories' election campaign in 2019 centred on 'get Brexit done'. But, as section 5 suggests, these ideas are not a product of rightwing propaganda alone: they arise spontaneously through workers' daily life, particularly in a period of stagnation and neoliberalism. This argument is developed in the next section.

## 8. Why people voted Leave in 2016

The form of the referendum campaign was woefully inadequate for rational debate. The economic relationship of Britain to the EU and the institutions and policies of the EU are enormously complex, and the vast majority of people had no prior knowledge and understanding of them. Most Leavers *and* Remainers therefore voted on the basis of a single aspect which they (thought they) understood. The Irish referenda on abortion and equal marriage used citizens' fora to discuss the issues in depth. This would have been an improvement, though the fora would have had to run for a year or more adequately to tackle the issues.

A second major problem was that there were only two options in the ballot. Very few voters were aware that there were many different possibilities for Britain's relationship with the EU after Brexit.

In the referendum, there were three main reasons for voting Leave, each with important differentiations (see further Gough, 2017). These derive from the ideologies fostered by neoliberalism (section 5).

### (i) Xenophobia

This took two forms:-

(a) Material: 'Immigrants' are seen as competitors for jobs, services and housing. Neoliberalism, and the apparent impossibility of social democracy, mean that jobs, housing and public services are seen as fixed by 'markets'; workers then have to compete with each other for them. For people who had lived in Britain for some time, an 'obvious' form of this competition is to attempt to exclude immigrants. (A third of BME people voted to leave, presumably for this reason.) In some localities, this inter-ethnic competition is 'visible' in employment, housing and use of public services.

(b) Symbolic: Neoliberal deprivations and atomisation can make people yearn for stronger neighbourhood ties. For many older, British-born people, this puts a high value on white community ('collective narcissism'). This can be a nostalgic, rose-tinted memory. Immigrant cultures symbolically threaten this.

I hypothesise that these feelings were strongly differentiated by age group and type of locality:-

*Large cities.* In these, the competition for jobs, housing and public services between British-born people and 'immigrants' is not visible because the numbers of jobs, housing units and public service units are very large and spread across the city, and geographical linkages between residence and work are very complex. The large cities largely voted Remain.

*Large and medium towns and rural districts with large BME populations,* for example South Lancashire, West Yorkshire, Leicester, Luton, Dagenham. These localities have had large BME

populations since the 1960s. Employment, residential areas and social life are now strongly divided by ethnicity. White working class people may resent BME people for both material and symbolic reasons. Agricultural areas in East Anglia with large Eastern European populations are similar. All these localities voted for Leave.

*De-industrialised small towns, former coal fields, and rural areas in the Midlands, North and Wales.* These areas have a very small number of BME people and Eastern Europeans; the populations are overwhelmingly British-born and white. These localities are poor because the working class jobs have disappeared and young working class people have moved to cities; large proportions of the population are over 50 or retired. In these areas, anti-immigrant feeling is for symbolic reasons. These localities, too, voted for Leave.

These differences in xenophobia by locality correlate strongly with Labour's vote in the 2019 election: Labour largely maintained its vote in the large cities, but lost seats elsewhere.

#### (ii) Anti-state ideology

Neoliberalism has developed the popular view that the state, at whatever spatial scale, is ineffective in meeting people's material needs, and is in certain ways tyrannical, particularly in its taxation and 'bureaucracy'. Given the opportunity to decide whether to have a certain level of the state - here, the EU - people may then vote not to have it. For older people, this may be reinforced by British nationalism versus an EU 'controlled by Germans'.

#### (iii) Lack of understanding of the economic consequences of Brexit

To counter these views the Remain campaign, including the Labour Party, and backed by business organisations, argued, correctly, that leaving the EU would have dire consequences for investment and jobs within Britain. The Leave campaign claimed, falsely, that trade with the EU could quickly be replaced by new trade agreements with non-EU states. But the Remainers' dire predictions were not believed because they were not *understood*. To understand this crucial point requires analysis at three levels of abstraction (for a fuller treatment see Gough, 2019b).

First, for historical materialism, knowledge and understanding of social processes are always determined by people's social *practice*; the impact of discourses and the absorption and development of ideas depend on the materially-based social relations in which people regularly participate. In capitalism, economic knowledge of working class people (the 90%) is focussed on the markets in which they participate day-to-day – jobs in their industry and workplace, markets in the housing tenures relevant to them, and markets in consumer commodities. This gives knowledge of concrete markets in a particular place and time, and understanding of some underlying processes such as price determination by supply and demand. But workers have no involvement in decisions on capital investment and production organisation, since these are the prerogative of capital. They therefore have no practical knowledge of these decisions, nor understanding of the processes which drive investment and production.

Second, in consequence, most people do not understand the economic geography of modern capitalism, in particular that of the EU. Fundamental are economies of scale enabled by concentration of production in space; specialisation of production by workplace, firm and territory; the consequent international division of labour; thus international trade in inputs and final products in manufacturing and some services. These processes are powered by competition which is partly on the basis of cost but also on the design and quality of the product or service, that is, both price and quality competition. Since the 1950s, the EC/EU has sought to develop these processes in order to enhance productive accumulation of capital. Ignorance of these processes means that the

embedding of the British economy in the EU through the division of labour/trade and flows of labour power cannot be understood.

Third, it is a commonplace that the great majority of people are ignorant of the economic institutions and policy mechanisms of the EU: the Customs Union, the Single Market, agricultural, industrial and regional policies, industrial-technical collaborations, and regulation of monopoly and state aid to industry. This ignorance is often attributed to the complexity of these arrangements, to the 'remoteness' of Brussels, or to the chronic lack of coverage of the EU in the British media. But, more profoundly, the purpose of EU institutions cannot be understood without an understanding of the economic geography which they exist to regulate. For example, the Customs Union regulates the quality and specification of commodities because of the importance of these in high profit production (technical/design rents); and it upholds minimum standards in labour markets and ecology to promote quality competition rather than cost-cutting. Ignorance of economic dynamics therefore means that the importance of staying in the Customs Union for jobs could not be understood. This ignorance was exacerbated by the fading understanding under neoliberalism of postwar social-democratic economic regulation (section 5).

The result was that in 2016 and 2019 most Leavers, and even many Remainers, had no appreciation of the long-term damage that exit from the EU would inflict on investment and employment within Britain; the Leave appeal to xenophobia and sovereignty therefore had no counterbalance. As we shall see, this was crucial to result of the 2019 election.

I now consider how the Labour Party campaigned on its policies from after the referendum through to the 2019 election campaign. The party faced acute difficulties because of the ideological inheritance of neoliberalism, popular lack of understanding of the (macro) economy, the referendum result, and the domination of parliamentary politics for over three years by Brexit. These were compounded by the issue of Corbyn's leadership.

## **9. Presentation of Labour's economic, social and ecological programme**

Labour's programme offered some substantial benefits to firms producing in Britain: the National and Regional Development Banks; increased building work; regulations benefiting small business; improved worker training. But business disliked Labour's proposed increases in corporate taxation, democratisation of corporate governance, state ownership of utilities and phasing out of PFIs, and so offered little support.

To the 90%, the programme offered very substantial material benefits and empowerment in employment, the home and service use, and potential for active involvement in economic and social life. But we have seen that 45 years of neoliberalism have discredited social democratic policies, posing an enormous task for Labour. The difficulty of this task, however, varied considerably by policy area: some policies are easier to understand than others; some conflict with neoliberal ideas more than others; some require understanding and knowledge of the meso- or macro-economy (cf section 8), some not; in some the benefits are immediate, in others indirect or long-term. (For greater detail, see Gough, 2020.) Notable are:-

\* labour market policies: easy to understand, and popular since widespread poor wages and conditions are well known.

\* policies to increase productive investment: requires knowledge of patterns of investment and productivity, which very few have.

\* nationalisation of utilities: a popular policy, since everyone has experience of poor and over-priced services. But use of profits and investment under private and public ownership are not well understood. Subject to the objection from older people that nationalised services in the past had their failings.

\* new distinction between revenue and investment spending, funded respectively by taxation and borrowing: a crucial part of the programme, but hardly anyone understands it.

\* increased taxation of corporations and the rich: media coverage has always presented all taxes as the same (bad), with no distinction between taxation of business and people. Many therefore assumed that Labour's tax rises would fall on them. This was the biggest single problem in communicating Labour's programme.

\* increased taxes on business and the rich: existing taxes on business and the rich are little known; the diversity of mechanisms for increasing these taxes in Labour programme was confusing, compared with, for example, increasing income tax or VAT rate. Some taxes are open to the neoliberal objection that they would harm investment.

\* spending on public services: the benefits are easy to grasp. But spending on benefits is subject to the 'deserving/undeserving' objection (section 5). Spending on free services is open to the objection that beneficiaries do not need it (e.g. free university student tuition), and to envy.

\* increased borrowing for investment: at very low interest rates, this was a fairly easy sell, though subject to fetishisation of the government debt.

\* council house building and regulation of private renting: the outcomes were popular. But open to the objection that supply of private rentals might decline, as happened in the 1960s. Council renting rather than owner occupation conflicts with a deeply established cultural preference.

I hypothesise that the appeal of the economic and ecological programme was strongly differentiated by age. I suggested in section 5 that older people have developed more strongly neoliberal ideas than younger people. Younger adults would benefit strongly from the reformed labour market, housing policies, and university fee abolition. In contrast, people over 50 in employment may not expect that their job will improve before retirement. Most older people have lived in their home for a long period, the majority in either owner-occupied housing on which the mortgage has been paid off or in council housing, so Labour's housing programme offered little except home insulation. Moreover, older people are more likely to have the Methodist culture of living modestly, resenting hand-outs to the undeserving, and seeing government borrowing as contradicting their belief in saving. For them, the main benefit offered by Labour's programme was in improvements to the NHS and social care. These differences by age may account for the differences in voting in the 2017 election, where Labour's surge in popularity was centred on younger voters, and for the enormous difference in the 2019 election.

Overall, then, despite the popularity of some policies, the lack of understanding and neoliberal objections meant that Labour needed a systematic campaign to explain the policies. But from 2015, there was no such campaign, with the exception of the two election periods. Economic policy was developed by John McDonnell with the advice of policy forums on particular aspects, and one-off regional meetings of party members. Policies appeared from time to time on the party's website; but there was no attempt systematically to educate party members, for example by provision of simple explanations of each aspect of policy, and it is likely that most members had little understanding of the 'difficult' issues mentioned above. This made it impossible for local parties to educate the public on the economic programme. This crucial failure was doubtless partly due to the

many pressures of time on the party leadership after the referendum; but it was perhaps also due to an optimistic view that the obvious benefits of the programme would speak for themselves, and an underestimation of the neoliberalisation of popular consciousness.

This problem was compounded by the poor election campaign in 2019. The central slogan of the manifesto, 'It's time for real change', was vacuous. There was no campaign material (leaflets, cards) with the key points. There was no dossier on the Conservatives' and Johnson's record, Labour's strongest card, and the leadership refrained from attacking this record. Corbyn put strong emphasis on attacking the government's negotiations of a trade deal with the US, but this relied on leaks of meetings, and the eventual deal was hypothetical. Most damagingly, very little was said about the proposed rise in taxation of capital and the rich to finance increased public spending, which I have suggested was poorly understood by the public. There was no explanation of the overall spending plan, but a spaced succession of spending promises, which therefore appeared profligate. This was exacerbated by new promises made during the campaign. The carefully planned balance of tax and spend in the manifesto was upended by an abrupt promise of an extra £56bn to compensate for the deficit of state pensions of a cohort of women. The financial planning of utility nationalisations was confused by a promise of free universal high-speed broadband. This produced scepticism about the *feasibility* of Labour's programme. A symptom: opinion polls showed that the Tories were 'more trusted' than Labour with the NHS; this can only have been due to voters believing that Labour's programme was not feasible.

Support for Labour's Green New Deal involved rather different determinants. In the previous two years or so, multiple ecological disasters worldwide, the school strikes and Extinction Rebellion have effected a large shift in public opinion in Britain on the climate emergency. The Tories had an atrocious ecological record, and Johnson refused to debate the issue. The Green New Deal promised a million high quality jobs, and insulation of millions of homes. The impact of this may have been weakened by scepticism about the programme's funding by borrowing; and the economic logic, in which costs fall initially on the state but much larger financial benefits accrue to individuals, is poorly understood.

## **10. Labour's stance on Brexit**

In the 'debate' before the referendum, Labour argued for Remain on the basis that leaving the EU would severely damage trade and thus jobs. Corbyn attempted to deal with the xenophobia by arguing that the problem of immigration was due to poor wages and conditions, weak unions, and a lack of effective policing of employment law, all of which a Labour government would ameliorate.

The result of the referendum posed an unavoidable dilemma for Labour. The six most strongly Remain seats had Labour MPs, as did the six most strongly Leave seats. The majority for Leave was narrow, and the Leave campaign was known to have cheated in various ways. Labour could have continued to argue for Remain. But it decided to accept Brexit while pushing to remain in the Customs Union and with a 'close relationship' to the Single Market (free movement of people and capital), which would also avoid a new divide on the border in Ireland. This acceptance of Brexit was motivated by a desire to avoid arguing with Leave voters about the legitimacy of the referendum.<sup>2</sup> Over three years, Labour in parliament, alongside other parties, attempted to get May to incorporate at least part of its policy into the withdrawal agreement, unsuccessfully.

With either a Remain *or* a soft Brexit strategy, Labour had an enormous task of explaining the logic of its policy: to save production in Britain from collapse. As we saw in section 8, the great majority of the population had no understanding of the economic geography of the EU, the embeddedness of the British economy within it, and the rationale for (at least) remaining in the Customs Union. To begin to explain this, the Labour Party would have needed to undertake first a systematic education



of its members, and then systematic education of the public. This was not done. This failure was perhaps because the leadership thought that the government would agree a withdrawal agreement with the EU within a short time, or would adopt a soft Brexit approach to appease the 48% who voted Remain and to safeguard jobs within Britain. Neither of these things happened, for reasons I discussed in section 7. In campaigning for a soft Brexit, Labour could also have used more imaginative tactics, for example organising events outside the many vehicle factories where production was being run down because of an anticipated hard Brexit. The Tories are more canny: during the election campaign Johnson visited a factory every day and had his picture taken with ‘I love Boris’ workers. Labour’s push for a soft Brexit therefore took place solely in the unfavourable terrain of parliament, without the support of Leavers.

In September 2019 Labour conference voted for a new stance on Brexit, a compromise agreed between Remainers and Leavers: elect a Labour government, negotiate a better withdrawal agreement (i.e. the existing policy on the Customs Union and Single Market), then hold a referendum to decide between this Brexit and Remain, allowing Labour MPs to campaign for either, with Corbyn not declaring his opinion. We do not know how many Remainers voted for Labour as a result of this change (I suspect not a large number). But we do know that for many people in Leave seats this was *the major* reason for not voting Labour. The proposed second referendum was seen as Labour abandoning its commitment to Brexit. Over three years people’s reasons for voting for Brexit had remained largely unchallenged. Moreover, the vote for Brexit became a thing in itself, independent of its original motivations or content: this was the only time that voters had been consulted on such a major issue, so disregarding their view was insulting. Moreover, Brexit embodied British national pride, so reversing it was unpatriotic. The depth of this feeling was evidently not appreciated by Remainer MPs and party members in London and the south. Trickett and Lavery, two Northern MPs, warned on this, but their 36 page document was ignored by the London leadership (Stewart, 2019).

## 11. The Corbyn factor

Neoliberalism has produced an increased emphasis on party leaders (section 5); elections have become quasi-presidential. We saw in section 2 that strongly negative views of Corbyn were important in the election. From Johnson’s election as party leader, the negative views of Corbyn were relative to Johnson’s popularity.

(i) Labour’s changing position on the EU from Remain to soft Brexit in 2016, and to a second referendum in 2019, made Corbyn appear indecisive. In contrast, from 2015 Johnson stuck to his hard Brexit position. Corbyn’s handling of anti-semitic statements by Labour members was seen as weak leadership, even by people who did not believe him to be anti-semitic. The continuous undermining of Corbyn by Blairite and centrist MPs made him appear weak – ‘he can’t even control his own party’, whereas Johnson has been ruthless with MPs who differed from him.

(ii) The Tories’ and the far right’s social media attack on Corbyn certainly told lies about his lack of patriotism, for example that he was a member of Hamas. But it is true that he has a long history of opposing British imperialism (Ireland, the Middle East); the manifesto has some anti-imperialist policies; and he has sometimes been critical of actions by British soldiers – a major issue in the North which supplies a disproportionate number of recruits to the army. Opposition to British imperialism has been weak in the working class over centuries, and neoliberalism has led to increasing pride in ‘Britishness’. In his time as leader, it was impossible for Corbyn to win voters to anti-imperialism, particularly given the domination of political discourse by Brexit and austerity. It was therefore easy to portray Corbyn as unpatriotic, a hater of Britain, and a supporter of terrorism.

(iii) Corbyn's debating skills are undoubtedly weak. The campaigning that Corbyn had done all his life was rousing speeches to the converted, very different from debate with the right. Corbyn's decision to 'go high, not low' in debate with the Tories added to the impression of weakness. (The phrase was taken from Clinton in her contest with Trump: a bad omen.) He refrained from criticising Johnson's record, integrity and grasp of policy. In contrast, Johnson has always slandered his opponents, which (as with Trump) is read by many voters as a sign of 'a strong leader'.

(iv) Johnson's constructed persona as sexually promiscuous, careless about his children, thus macho; as a plain speaking, bar room, politically-incorrect loud mouth; as 'our mate Boris'; as a shameless liar; and as author of daft, expensive projects, rather than counting against him, were seen by many voters as a sign of his strength as a leader (compare Trump).

Of these aspects, Labour could only feasibly have changed (i) (by not changing Brexit positions) and (iii). The rest was fate.

## **12. A major tactical error – but with deep roots**

Labour gave its support to Johnson in October 2019 to call a general election, without which he could not have done so. This was foolish. The withdrawal bill had not yet gone through parliament, so Johnson could run the election on 'get Brexit done'. Labour was around 15% behind the Conservatives in the opinion polls, and Corbyn had a popularity rating of -50%. The leadership evidently thought that Labour could repeat its surge in 2017. But that was against May, who had called an election which had no point, and who had none of Johnson's charisma. A deeper problem was that the leadership did not understand the depth of feeling over Brexit among many working class voters outside London (section 10), nor the lack of understanding of the party's economic programme (section 9). This misreading may have partly arisen from the three main leaders of the party being London MPs, but more importantly from the party membership being sparse in the Midlands and North outside of the large cities.

## **14. Conclusion: why Labour lost**

My analysis has attempted to trace some of the dialectics of large scale and long term structures with the consciousness and activity of agents – citizens, corporations, and the two parties.

In capitalist democracies, parliamentary politics are inherently fetishistic and remote for the majority of the population. Governments have very limited effects on capitalist accumulation; the population does not participate in decisions on investment and production organisation and therefore has little understanding of them; a choice on government strategy is given only every five years.

The history of British capitalism and imperialism has produced capital which is unusually strongly focused on spatial mobility and sectoral flexibility, discipline and passivity of labour, and freedom from state regulation. Working class culture has a strong element of submission to the logics of value, and nationalism and xenophobia.

Under neoliberalism, changes in the economy, employment relations and social life have fostered individualism and weakened practices and ideas of collectivity. The discipline of value has been reinforced, and support for, and understanding of, the socialisation of production and reproduction reduced. Failures of the state have made 'a strong leader' appealing. The social media have, on the whole, reinforced these developments. Neoliberal austerity, and the absence of a feasible social democratic alternative, have fostered xenophobia and racism among the white working class,

viewed as a means of competition for jobs, housing and public services, or as a means of re-establishing white working class community and solidarity at the local or national level.

Labour's period in government 1997-2010 and in opposition 2010-5 reinforced neoliberal ideology, and also led to steady loss of working class support and membership.

In the early 2000s the Tory Right and the Brexit Party launched an offensive to leave the EU and thus deepen neoliberalism and give greater freedom to (some) sections of capital. The ambivalence of many sectors of capital allowed the Right to take over the Tory party. The Brexiteers sought to win support for Brexit from the population by using xenophobia and British/English nationalism, despite these being antithetical to the Brexiters' economic aims. This support drew on people's own experience and interpretation of life under neoliberalism, particularly their understanding of immigration, of the state, and of Britain as a nation and culture. The understanding of immigration was sharply differentiated between cities, racially-mixed towns, and old industrial areas.

Labour's response over 2015-19 made a number of errors. It did not seek systematically to educate the public on the economic implications of Brexit and different possible future relations with the EU. Labour's change of stance after the referendum was probably necessary, but the change of policy in September 2019 gravely weakened its message.

Labour's economic programme was not systematically campaigned for over 2015-9. During the election campaign the party did not make a priority of explaining its tax and borrowing proposals, and so succumbed to the objection 'where's the money coming from?'. It was thus unable to overcome the widespread acceptance of austerity as inevitable. It exacerbated this problem by making additional promises during the election campaign, reinforcing the impression that Labour was extravagant. On the economy and immigration, Labour had great success with younger people, but failure with older; and more success in cities than elsewhere.

Change in political culture under neoliberalism made a 'strong' party leader important. On this, Johnson scored heavily over Corbyn. Corbyn could have improved his image in certain ways, but the trope of his being 'unpatriotic' was impossible to combat.

The record of the government since 2010, and of Johnson, were Labour's strongest suit. But Labour's criticism of them, throughout 2015-9 and during the election campaign, was weak. A strong attack would also have helped to ameliorate the public's perception of Corbyn as a leader.

Labour made an error in September 2019 in agreeing to a general election when it had not effectively campaigned for its policies on Brexit and the economy, and when it was far behind in the opinion polls. This was partly caused by a misreading of the party's surge in popularity during the 2017 election campaign. But it also reflected a failure of the London-based leadership to hear and take seriously working class opinion outside London.

What are the lessons for social democratic parties seeking election to government in the present period? I have argued that decades of neoliberalism have produced for these parties a double problem of popular consciousness. First, people's experience of economic and social life has fostered an acceptance of neoliberal precepts, and erased understanding of social democratic alternatives. This is not merely a cognitive shift but a cultural one, individualisation: a reliance of one's own resources, self-promotion, and competition with and antagonism towards others. Underlying this is the ignorance of production organisation and investment dynamics arising from workers' exclusion from control over them. Second, these experiences, and the absence of a credible left alternative, have fostered a view that the most viable strategy for addressing economic, social and cultural problems is to reduce immigration, a view systematically reinforced by the far

right. Social democratic parties can address this dual problem only by systematic, long term education of the public on capitalist economics and its failures, and propaganda which demonstrates the failures of neoliberalism and the promise *and feasibility* of a social democratic programme. A precondition for undertaking this task is a recognition of the scale of the problem, that is, the depth of rightwing consciousness in the population. The left also needs to acknowledge that people's response to political-economic programmes is not based on a simple 'rational' calculus of their immediate benefits.

This of course is a very difficult task. The culture of working class self-education of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has long since withered. The media and the social media are dominated by the right. But some elements can be suggested. The main medium should be the internet. The party needs to educate its members in economics and its economic policy. It needs to have clear texts on its website, with a whole range from terse slogans and 'ten basic points' to long analyses and explanations. These need to be imaginatively dramatised in video. It should have open (though curated), permanent discussion fora on all aspects of policy. These party sites should be linked with the numerous left podcasts and videos, including the satirical and comic. Analyses and propaganda produced by 'sectoral' organisations and campaigns - trade union, ecological, housing, public service struggles, local economic initiatives - need to be re-broadcast and learnt from. In short, we need to start creating a networked ecology of left education and propaganda, which enables exchange between the party and local and sectoral ideas. This network would stand a better chance of influencing the public than the production of a text manifesto four weeks before an election.

## Notes

1. The 2019 manifesto also contained significant policies on foreign relations and the arms industry, Britain's most successful high-tech and export manufacturing sector. Leftward movement on these issues was limited by pressure from Unite which wished to maintain the skilled and well-paid jobs in the sector; this is a major difficulty for social democracy in Britain, France and the US. I do not consider international relations further in this article, except in relation to perceptions of Corbyn, since they have not formed a significant part of political debate since 2015.

2. The far left in Britain has long criticised the EU's neoliberal restrictions on state aid to industries and firms. Corbyn shared these criticisms, and this may have inclined him to soft Brexit rather than Remain. Some left commentators have argued, however, that a Labour government could have finessed these rules, as other states have repeatedly done.

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