

Building a New Left in Liberal Times

A bigger picture reveals productive ways forward for Labour

David Tyfield, Lancaster University

8/7/16

We live in quintessentially liberal times. And these are fundamentally inimical to a unified and powerful Left, even as they call so desperately for one. Seeing this helps us to understand the current predicament of the Labour Party, and, hopefully, offer more productive ways to go about trying to work through it.

Liberal times?

Yes, you read that right. Still reeling from the Brexit vote and with anti-immigrant and racist sentiment boiling over, you may be tempted to scoff at such rank absurdity. Yet, the re-emergence of liberal times is indeed what we are living through. And I do mean liberal, not *neo*-liberal, which, to the contrary, is precisely what is in its violent death throes.

These are quintessentially liberal times in several key respects (which I am busily outlining in detail elsewhere – but a political crisis will not wait for that book to be finished...). First, in terms of the utter dominance of capitalism as a political economic system, and on a global scale. In this respect, of course, I disagree (constructively, I hope) with prophets of [post-capitalism](#). It is neoliberalism that is on its last legs (if still wielding an axe). But capitalism is simply undergoing one of its periodic paroxysms that are its very lifeblood, not portents of its demise.

So these are liberal times, not social democratic times say, in that the class forces underpinning the latter (especially the national working classes of the global North, but also of massive Socialist and Communist states) have been systematically dismantled over the past 30 years; and because the most influential and ascendant class of the day is the new ‘middle classes’ of the global South, aspiring for and widely achieving improving standards of living and personal autonomy, just as those of the working and middle classes of the North fall.

But, secondly, these are also fundamentally liberal times because of the core dynamic of the current global (not just post-Brexit UK or EU) turmoil. This dynamic is driven by and in turn is driving the present turbulence, and in the process building a new political economic regime, through relentless and profound destructive creation. It is a process driven by aspiration and fear, in pursuit of individual liberties and flight from existential security threats (both of equal importance) respectively, with all the variety and differences in the specific situations that people (across highly unequal societies) now face.

It is thus a highly productive but *arational* process, propelled through the essential contestation of the very meaning of the core concepts of our understanding of (our) society, politics and selves even as these retain familiar labels: ‘state’, (‘middle’ or ‘working’) ‘class’, ‘public sphere’, ‘social contract’, ‘reason’ and ‘democracy’. And what it is producing is new common-senses that are both newly attendant to the multiple security threats of the day, and newly enabling of constituencies that are actively pursuing their self-interest using new-found liberties and capacities: novelty is everywhere, building a ‘new world’. Brexit exemplifies

this perfectly, in terms of the essential contestation regarding whether [accepting](#) or [rejecting](#) the referendum result is the ‘real’ or ‘true’ democratic response. Democracy itself is now in play to be [redefined and reinvigorated](#) – and it is liberalism that is playing it.

To see where we are, in other words, we must first see that liberalism is the very opposite of ‘bleeding heart’ or ‘reasonableness’. It is, to the contrary, an arational and entirely unsympathetic system dependent on the continual expansion of a highly self-conscious and self-aggrandizing commitment to (one’s) individual liberty that stirs up and is borne of immense turmoil and fundamental political transformation. But its (duplicitous) self-presentation as ‘reasonable’ and its rolling aspiration to give substance to this empty signifier is precisely what distinguishes it as a political regime. Hence it is the very outrageous affront to one’s liberty that elicits a new found recognition of what is at stake – “how much worse things could get, going down the same route” – and hence a renewed and invigorated ‘rational’ determination to defend, if not expand, both one’s liberty and ‘reason’ itself (both with new-found substantive meaning) in riposte.

Again, Brexit illustrates this perfectly: a spike in racial and xenophobic abuse elicits a massive pushback and not just from the ‘usual suspects’ (e.g. anti-racism activists), but the ‘reasonable majority’ who are thereby *formed* in that very act; or the threat to castrate British (and EU) trade and finance through a decade of uncertainty, expensive negotiation and new tariffs elicits a *popular* rejection, not just that of big business and the City – hence a new (quintessentially liberal) relation of identification of the broader ‘reasonable’ citizenry with these (currently profoundly tarnished) economic institutions.

But to the extent these responses ‘go too far’ as ‘betrayal’ of Brexit referendum result (e.g. over freedom of movement) there is a pushback in turn led by new and newly unshackled radical political forces, which are both too strong to squash and ignore but not strong enough to triumph altogether. Again, then, the ‘reasonable majority’ are forced to take on selective aspects from these radical positions (e.g. remainers accepting Brexit) while simultaneously actively distancing and differentiating themselves from them. Both defence of the status quo and selective adoption of new radical positions thus primarily feed not the parties at opposite ends of the spectrum arguing most vocally for either position but the emergence of a new and painfully-formed, and distinctively *liberal*, common-sense.

And so it goes on, with the Age of Liberalism thus also and inseparably an Age of Revolution (*Cf* Hobsbawm’s seminal account of the turn of the 18/19th centuries); and [Brexit is a revolution](#). No-one’s favoured view of the world totally wins out and no-one’s pre-existing ‘liberties’ are unchanged. But the *system* of governing through liberties is thoroughly transformed and re-established, through the arational process that has nonetheless never let go of its key weapon and strategic advantage: its monopolistic claim to ‘reasonableness’.

So liberal times. And of a particular hue, coloured by the new and specific ungovernable liberties and security threats of: ICTs, social media and new relations to (the use of) knowledge all around us; the unprecedented global challenges of looming environmental catastrophe; and the rise of massive populous and non-Western bourgeoisies.

Taking this perspective can immediately pour some cold water on the feverish heat of post-Brexit UK politics. It shows the [bigger historical forces at play](#), that the UK and EU is not where much of the most important action is (though the UK and EU do still matter significantly, not least to ourselves!), and that the Brexit vote is in many respects simply the

UK calling the Emperor's new clothes on a system that is [clearly profoundly dysfunctional](#) and in need of [commensurately radical reform](#).

Situating the turmoil in the Labour Party

Here, though, I want to focus on the current turmoil of the Labour Party, and the British Left, in the light of recent events from this perspective. For what this shows is that the grievance and recrimination currently raising temperatures to dangerous levels is systemically situated. In short, **the challenge is to rebuild a democratic Left politics – up to the challenges of the completely changed and now embryonic world and hopefully formative of it – in globally liberal times.** Instead of two wings [squaring up for a titanic fight](#), with only Pyrrhic victories in prospect, adopting this bigger perspective can offer some productive ways forward from the current impasse.

We must start by acknowledging that every political party is necessarily a coalition. On the Left, this has [traditionally been across a spectrum](#) from the wholesale rejection of capitalism to its mitigation and reform. Other dimensions of difference, pertinent today and in some respects overlaying that distinction, are between a focus on people or parliamentary power, and a focus on the 'end goal' in the longer term of Socialism or the proximal challenge of setting the executive and legislative agenda in the shorter term.

Such distinctions are profound and irreducible. There is no papering over them or possibility of tidy dialectical synthesis. But sometimes they can be managed. Today, however, they have emerged with a vengeance as they are placed over the context of global liberal emergence and its system-productive turbulence. For these liberal – and revolutionary – times tear the coalition of democratic socialism of the twentieth century apart.

The problem of the fundamental liberalism of the current system of political relations – its individualism and economism – to a project that demands solidarity and compassion should be obvious. But, crucially, the revolutionary aspect of the age is no less problematic for the Left, even as it is essential for its renewal in the longer term. For here a potent and growing thirst for a progressive Left alternative seems self-defeatingly to feed that very system logic of an emergent liberalism: the more idealistically imaginative, demotic, bottom-up, empowered and burgeoning the Left movement, the more it is rubbished, demonized, divided and isolated from actual electoral or political success, while a 'reasonable majority' is increasingly shaped in fundamental *opposition* to such 'hot-headed' or 'utopian' 'radicalism'.

The epochal revolutionary fervour thus, it seems, serves primarily to feed the beast of a resurgent liberalism to which it is fundamentally opposed; thereby feeding *greater* radicalism in frustration at deepening injustice, not least to the movement itself, possibly to the point of self-destructive self-parody. So how can we build a new Left politics in such an essentially hostile context?

We can now consider the fight over Corbyn's leadership in the light of these dynamics. To start with, we can crudely summarize the fault lines of that argument: on the one hand, a Labour 'right' of most MPs (and the broader electorate, including floating voters, who remain a national majority on the centre left); on the other, a resurgent Labour 'left' grassroots movement.

But, of course, there are crucial divisions within each wing. Hence [Momentum consists](#) of two wings that make curious bed-fellows: an ‘old guard’ of industrial working-class unions and battle-hardened hard left activists, and young metropolitan social movement organizers. While those calling for Corbyn’s resignation are split between genuine ‘Blairites’, who have undisguised contempt for leftism and are focused entirely on parliamentary power, and a ragbag centre left hoping for an electorally credible leader probably well to the left of Blair himself.

The essential contestation of these positions plays out in the incomprehension and incommensurability of their various stances and arguments, cycling through mutual vilification and ‘heat not light’ as social media amplify the loudest, angriest voices at both ends of the spectrum. The ‘left’ thus see only cynical, power-hungry, empowered and comfortable ‘elites’ trying to defend the status quo and their multiple economic and political privileges within it through a ‘back door coup’. They thus (appear to) discount (notwithstanding the brief respite after the murder of Jo Cox) the sincerity, sacrifices and effort of these MPs especially, and their common cause of social justice and opposition to rapine Tory austerity.

Meanwhile, the ‘right’ see only antediluvian and, at best, naïve, at worst, bullying mass movements, devoid of political nous and wilfully blind to the necessity of parliamentary power to have any actual positive effect in the world. They thus discount the profound crisis of legitimacy of the current parliamentary democracy as a *system*. This includes the corruption and corrosion of the levers of state power and hence the need to rebuild these upon foundations of new organizations of social activism and, more importantly still, passing involvement and everyday alignment; all negative legacies, we should add, of Blairism itself. And they fail to see that [‘leadership’ is precisely what many Corbynistas are rejecting](#), and what qualifies Corbyn in their eyes as the right man for the job.

Here, therefore, the ‘right’ sees the short-term imperative, but set only in the current and dysfunctional mechanisms of contemporary political relations and mechanisms; while the ‘left’ focus exclusively on the longer-term goal while ignoring how the ‘long-term’ is simply the unfolding of multiple ‘short-terms’ – a focus that is fed to some extent by mistaken belief that we are currently witnessing the final implosion of capitalism.

The inescapable disunity – and interdependence – of the Left

But stepping back from the fray to look at the broader picture reveals the following. First, the Left as a whole is *necessarily* disunited now because it has no settled core constituency, let alone one that is broadly empowered (if not dominant) and increasingly so, hence capable of setting a national political agenda (let alone a global one – and we also live in global times). To the contrary, the destruction of the Western industrial working class (and public sector) is the clearest political story of the past generation, and one now facing the renewed assaults of the ‘gig economy’ and the continued rise of much cheaper white collar labour in the global South. And nothing has – yet – been built in its place.

So there is no central foundation on which the coalition of a self-confident democratic socialism can be based. But, secondly, to this we must add the evident alignment of Labour right and left with the *real* dictates of the present as an age of liberalism and revolution respectively, with both ignoring the essential *interdependence* of these two essential characteristics of the present.

Hence the right see only – though they are justified to see – a society that is overwhelmingly disinterested in, if not hostile to, (or simply, beset by austerity, just too busy for) organized (and especially work-based) politics and social mass movements. Pragmatic accommodation to this reality is thus the only possible starting point for a Left party to enter Downing Street. While conversely, embracing the revolutionary zeitgeist, the left see clearly the need and potential for a ‘new politics’ but become intoxicated by the renewed sense of political possibility in ways that tend increasingly to speak only to the like-minded and thereby *reject* the broader public, catapulting the movement towards ever more strident rejectionism.

Against the right, therefore, this means that no leader is the Messiah who can save and unite the Labour Party and thereby the Left more broadly, and the country with it. The positions to accommodate and give voice to are simply too many, too disparate and too fundamentally opposed for a single individual to incarnate them all. And this before we factor in the external hostility of Britain’s right-wing press. The left – at least those looking forward at the new challenges of the 21st century, not backward at what has been irretrievably lost – are thus justified in focusing on a broad-based social renewal over the medium-term as a priority.

But this also can only achieve so much. In particular, a social movement cannot construct the new socioeconomic models from which a new genuinely mass movement, going way beyond activists, will have to be based; a process that cannot be short-circuited with ‘sufficient political will’. Nor can a revitalized social politics, or people power, substitute for the continuing necessity of challenging and, hopefully sometimes holding, executive power in the shorter-term. And this inescapably requires what the most strident voices on the left quintessentially regard as anathema: compromise of ‘principle’ in favour of ‘pragmatism’ that takes into account (\neq bends over backwards for) the incumbent structure of socio-economic power relations, and with electoral calculation in mind, including an electorally attractive leadership (i.e. to the *whole population*, not just the activist base).

As we have just seen, though, these two tasks are heinously complicated today for a Left party. The ultimate victory of the age of liberalism thus is precisely that it *uses* the revolutionary fervour, and particularly of the Left, as unwitting drone in the construction of an essentially Liberal regime, not least through enfeebling the Left by turning it on itself. And it does this by presenting the Left with a Hobson’s choice: accommodate and capitulate (viz. [‘with you whatever’](#)), or oppose in ways that feed the Dionysian beast underlying liberalism’s cool Apollonian façade.

But we do not need to accept this false choice. Indeed, from this perspective, the challenge for the Left today is precisely to do everything possible to straddle these twin perspectives, and to work together so as to use the existing situation in crafting a brighter, progressive future... or face being used by it to entirely inimical ends.

Spring cleaning in an earthquake

This challenge, however, takes us to the fundamental point: that what the Left as a whole must acknowledge is that we are in the midst of a painful learning process – a political education that will shake our preconceptions about politics to their creaking foundations. This centres on the painful admission that reality is not just imperfect (or a total bloody mess!) but *imperfectable*, and this because reality is *constituted* by the arational process of contestation for power, *not* a rational (if ‘dialectical’) process of reasoned argument and

politicized ‘praxis’ towards progressive futures of growing human enablement and communal happiness.

Indeed, reason, argument and knowledge itself are simply crucial manifestations of these thoroughly pragmatic and political imperatives, albeit ones with their own particular rules about logical contradiction, semantic sense and axiological hypocrisy. All claims are thus differentially enabling/disabling power technologies situated within and shaping complex systems of power relations that are to no-one’s total liking.

What does this abstract philosophising mean practically for Labour today? For the left of the Left, the political education takes the form of being forced to accept that their idealism and long-term political utopian imaginations – crucial and essential elements of any Left political movement, let there be no doubt – must be situated (and situated *primarily*) within a perspective that asks not ‘*why* is the world so bad right now, and *what* should it be like instead?’ but ‘*how*, given the incumbent world as it actually is (including one’s convictions regarding contemporary injustices), can we work *with* that world of present social and political relations, institutions and identities towards brighter futures in the longer-term?’ And where this includes preventing the actualization of very much worse futures, as under a Brexit, slash-and-burn Tory government. This is thus the lesson of adaptability and imperfectability without abandoning hope and conviction; or rather, resituating that idealism within a [fundamental strategic pragmatism](#).

But the right also has much to learn, even as their self-styled stance is precisely one of political ‘realism’. For the flipside of knowledge-as-power is that power without meaningful and genuine purchase on the lives of citizens, not just the Westminster (or Brussels, or Beltway) career bubble, is empty and rotten – and will, ironically and [tragically](#), fail the test of a liberal age even as it is trying its damndest to adapt to it.

The right *in particular* must thus actively re-engage with party ‘roots’ and build them anew, since the ground of social relations underpinning not just electoral victory but *the very legitimacy and strength of parliamentary democracy itself* is shifting beneath their feet, and with uncertain and troubling prognoses in 2016. And this even as a crucial aspect of this rebuilding is a justifiable call for a new relation of trust and autonomous judgement for MPs as well... but MPs and institutions of representative democracy that have won that trust anew.

But recall, all of this remains in the context of profound socio-political turbulence, hence a challenge situated within a violently moving terrain, like trying to spring clean (or, rather, [muck out the Augean stables](#)) during an earthquake. So the essential tensions will remain: anti-capitalist or reformist, long-term vs. short-term, people power vs. parliament. But perhaps by being aware of the systemic dynamics at play, they can be deliberately *harnessed* this time to the construction of a renewed Left movement *and* Party. For *both sides* speak crucial, if half-, truths that are actually dependent on the other for their fruition, even as they superficially appear opposed.

The alternative is how things currently stand: the systemic dynamics being ignored and then allowed to run out of control, tearing the multiple (not just two) positions of the Labour coalition asunder and leaving the road clear for a rabid Right that is no less rent by division but more ruthlessly single-minded in its pursuit of the levers of state power – and more systemically enabled by the emerging tide of liberalism and its *zeitgeist* of individualistic self-preservation.

Three practical steps

So finally, then, how can it be harnessed? I make three concrete suggestions:

- First, the forward-looking arms of both Labour right and left should talk to each other, constantly and deliberately, and at all levels: leadership, PLP, CLP and social movements around the Party. To the extent behaviour is ruled as unacceptable and a ‘betrayal’, therefore, it should be the very accusation of betrayal itself and the refusal of dialogue.

- Secondly, Labour does need a new leader; loss of confidence by the PLP is an untenable situation. But Corbyn is one man, not a whole movement (unless he is foolishly accorded cult status), and many of those objecting to him object to *him* and his lacklustre leadership, not his policies. So what is needed is a new centre or ‘soft’ left leader who is palatable to as broad a range of MPs and members as possible and who is clearly and explicitly determined to be Prime Minister and to speak to the entire British public, not just to their power base. But this new leader must be surrounded by a shadow cabinet (perhaps including Corbyn himself – a concession from Corbyn that would actually be ‘reaching out’, not just a poorly veiled threat to put up or shut up) that includes all wings of the Party and deliberately and explicitly so, with the *cabinet* then as the focus of decision-making, not just the individual leader.

- Finally, to work on bridging the divide between short-term parliamentary and longer-term socio-political renewal, the Labour Party’s own democracy must be reimagined as a model for national (and regional or city) democracy through experiments with, for example, [sortition](#) and citizen’s juries for the formulation of Party policy. For the present ‘electoral fetishism’ is transparently inadequate for the new political relations with knowledge emerging in an age of ubiquitous and instant social media and a highly educated electorate.

These three steps could substantially save the British Left from total division for a generation, seeking to harness the essential and irreducible diversity and contestation of positions – a systemic predicament that is no-one’s fault or ‘betrayal’ and is potentially massively productive – rather than being defeated by it.

Our watchword should be that none of us exhausts the relevant input into the renewal of a 21st century democratic Left in a world of such global complexity.

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