



Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics

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Up-to-date analysis of how Corbyn rose to the head of the labour party, and his prospects for staying there

Jeremy Corbyn, the "dark horse" candidate for the Labour leadership, won and won big. With a landslide in the first round, this unassuming antiwar socialist crushed the opposition, particularly the Blairite opposition.

For the first time in decades, socialism is back on the agenda--and for the first time in Labour's history, it controls the leadership. The party machine couldn't stop him. An almost unanimous media campaign couldn't stop him. It is as if their power, like that of the Wizard of Oz, was always mostly illusion. Now Corbyn has one chance to convince the public to support his reforming ambitions.

Where did he come from, and what chance does he have? This book tells the story of how Corbyn's rise was made possible by the long decline of Labour and a deep crisis of British democracy. It surveys the makeshift coalition of trade unionists, young and precarious workers, and students, who rallied to Corbyn. It shows how a novel social media campaign turned the media's "Project Fear" on its head, making a virtue of every accusation they threw at him. And finally it asks, with all the artillery that is still ranged against Corbyn, and given the crisis-ridden Labour Party that he has inherited, what it would mean for him to succeed.

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Author : Richard Seymour

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From Reader Review Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics for online ebook

Tara Brabazon says

It is always unfair - but deviously delightful - to read a book backwards. No -I am not recommending starting from the last page. But I do enjoy reading a book in the context of events the author could not predict and didn't expect.

This is a solid history of labourism, particularly as the Labour Party flirted with the attractive but acidic Blairite mistress. The surprising and accidental rise of Corbyn is inserted into this history. There is also attention on anti-austerity politics and the fragmentation of the mainstream media.

The book did not predict Corbyn's extraordinary success. Seymour thought it was a transitory flash in the left wing pan. He was wrong. But the book is provocative and important in its wrongness.

Who could ever predict the popularity of a Jeremy Corbyn ringtone? Once we understand this popularity, we may be able to not only predict - but make - a better future.

Steph Bennion says

The background to the history of the Labour Party was interesting, but as an analysis of what is happening with the party today under Corbyn's leadership it wasn't as in-depth as I hoped. I thought the conclusions drawn were fairly obvious to anyone who cares to take a dispassionate look at Westminster today, but it's a neat summary nonetheless.

Bryn Hammond says

Situates Corbyn, against UK Labour Party history, in the system as she is run today. In no way biographical. Written 'from a position of sympathy' but pessimistic. Seymour isn't a sentimentalist about the Labour Party and busts a few myths, I understand, about what 'real Labour' ever was. He offers a critical analysis of 20thC Labour, its contingent life and its compromises. Against this history, Corbyn does not look like he has much to reach back to... on the other hand, as his supporters say, parties change; while Seymour gestures towards a more plural left as a possible way out of traps in future.

Probably the first time I've read a book on current politics; I was convinced after several of Richard Seymour's online articles, whose analysis was excellent. I wondered whether this (published in May) might be obsolete with the speed of politics, but aside from the need for a post-Brexit edition, passages only seemed more poignant -- not off-track.

James says

If a week is a long time in politics, that probably holds true for political books doubly so. This book's biggest flaw is that very march of time. It was written in a world where Corbyn had just won a frankly surprising victory to take just shy of 60% of the membership vote. It was not written, though, in a world where Corbyn had just fought an acrimonious coup from within the majority of his own PLP; a world where Cameron's Brexit referendum was lost (or won depending on your point of view) and he resigned in embarrassment. So much has changed since this book was written that it's a good thing that, relatively, so little of this book is actually about Corbyn and his odds of leading the party to electoral victory.

Instead the majority of the book is a history of the Labour party through the prism of Corbyn's victory, starting with a brief recap of his selection victory, and once you recover from the fact that the title is pretty misleading it's a fascinating exploration of Seymour's thoughts on the mistakes that the party has historically repeated each time it's gained power. He riffs on ideas that the PLP has always been generally to the right of its membership with examples throughout the past leaderships of Blair, Milliband and so on; and that each time the party gains power it sometimes manages to throw it away again. This leads to the final section where Seymour weighs up the challenges that Corbyn's leadership faces ? both inside and outside the party ? and whether he believes Corbyn has the ability to push through and overcome them. It feels a little like Seymour was nervous of writing this section and ended up putting all his effort into the history section and left this analysis to just the last forty pages. And, again, even in these last few pages Seymour seems to lose his nerve again and leaves us with a slightly limp maybe, it's possible, but not likely, who knows.

Nick Turner says

Recently Labour member Ruth Davis wrote a moving blog about how she was shouted down and harassed at a meeting of the local Labour Party after she had the temerity to call for a more civilised debate around the future of (hopefully soon to be ex) Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn. Among other things she was branded a 'traitor'. Among the Momentum types, this, along with 'Blairite' is considered the greatest insult. It is an accusation which shows the reckless moral certitude and arrogance which many on the left have held for generations, namely that it is they who are principled and that those on the soft or centre left are lapsed socialists who have 'sold-out' in pursuit of power.

Just such a credo runs through the Richard Seymour's latest polemic. Seymour, whose previous writings include a hatchet job on the deceased Christopher Hitchens and, from the look of it, his own Wikipedia page, details the history of Labour's elected representatives compromising the moves ideals to gain office.

He is entirely correct. The Parliamentary Labour Party, as well as, until recently, the leadership of most trade unions was significantly to the right of the people they sought to represent. Seymour provides an erudite and elucidating account of Labour's infatuation with the right, from the National Government of Ramsey MacDonald, to Wilson's continual mediation between the right and left wings of the party to Neil Kinnock's fight to expel militant. Of course this history culminates in the triangulation of Tony Blair and New Labour.

For many on the left New Labour was a philosophically vapid election winning outfit which would compromise any tenet in pursuit of power and cuddle up to any media magnate or right wing authoritarian who could help them achieve it. Those progressive gains which were made during the Blair/Brown years were suppressed lest the Daily Mail hear about them any send middle England fleeing back to the Tories. As such, a healthy record on reducing poverty and public service reforms, was spun as 'hand ups not hand outs' and increasing competition in the public sphere. In doing so Blair squandered his majorities and failed to reorder British politics in a more left leaning direction. Shifting the Overton Window of accepted discourse

is more easily achieved in power. Blair left it where he found it. It is a mistake George Osborne has not repeated as his rhetoric on austerity has pushed it steadily to the right.

Seymour refrains from all out cynicism on New Labour. He seeks to place the movement in its economic and historical context and explains some of its fundamental beliefs. He does however see Blair Mandelson and their ilk as opportunistic interlopers who seized the Party and used it for their own ends. They were disdainful of the membership, relegated the party conference to a pageant and never missed an opportunity to start a fight with the unions. "If principle only leads to defeat," Seymour bemoans in a passage tellingly on the benefits of electoral defeat, " why not turn to electoral professionals, media operators and brutal party managers". The clear insinuation being that, with Blair, that's effectively what Labour did.

That Blair might have been motivated by political ideas other than those of the most extreme Bennite wing of the Labour Party does not appear to occur to many on the left nowadays. In much the same way, it appears to be the belief of Corbyn's inner team that his MPs problems with the prodigal leader stem not from his inherent unelectability but from the belief that to live in Corbyn's Britain would be recessionary, reactionary and generally awful.

By the time Seymour muses on what the future might hold he is in full flow. Hilary Benn is not a principled man who happens to believe in helping the people of Syria, rather than letting ISIS kill them, he is a mendacious warmonger. Corbyn is being undermined by a minority 'rump' of malcontents (read 82% of the Parliamentary Labour Party) who are "just lashing out". In this you can see reflected the continual assertions by perhaps Labour's stupidest MP Diane Abbot, that the Corbyn Rebels are merely careerists. The belief that only you have principles and everyone else is just being opportunistic is as repellent as it is obnoxious.

One of the criticisms of Rosa Prince's biography of Corbyn (Comrade Corbyn: A Very Unlikely Coup: How Jeremy Corbyn Stormed to the Labour Leadership) was that it wholly failed to engage with the left wing political soup in which Corbyn swims and thus, failed to understand him. Seymour redresses this balance, this is not a book about Corbyn's schooling, girlfriends or the state of his flat but in failing to properly understand the wing of the Labour Party which has been running the show since the mid 1990's Seymour both underestimates Corbyn's critics and does them a great disservice.

Andy Flintoff says

Educational and importantly impartial. Because it was impartial it gave a clear explanation of the UK national deficit which is the result of neoliberalism.

But it also explained that Corbyn probably won't win a General Election and even if he does he is surrounded by right-wing Labour MPs big business and their right-wing media friends. It didn't pretend to be optimistic. It was a very realistic look at things. It's a book chock full of facts.

Steffi says

Being a Bernie bro, I am also a Corbyn bro, I suppose. The fundamental lesson is the same: the left can actually win majorities if it runs on a genuine anti-austerity platform. The book 'Corbyn - the strange rebirth of radical politics' (VERSO, updated edition 2017) is a great reminder to that effect. Challenging the idea, as pundits had assumed, that the 'politicisation of the economy' would only benefit the nationalist Right (UKIP,

Trump, AfD). That's the Left's only option was to depoliticise the economy, accept the verities of 'globalisation', essentially TINA. They assumed the Left's only option was a defensive, centre-seeking strategy.

Corbyn (more radical than Sanders) politicised the economy from the left, promising nationalisations, redistribution, an offensive against the ultra rich, workers' rights, higher social spending etc. and, like Bernie, pulled a massive share of the electorate behind him.

Corbyn's success also points to the changed face of the working class: from white old men to the low and high skilled young urban 'precariat', men and women, migrants and non-migrants. Especially the young previous non-voters: turnout among 18-24 year-olds rose by 16 percent in 2017 (from 2015!).

The role of the media: 2016 study by LSE noted that 'most newspapers' had been systematically vilifying Corbyn, assassinating his character, ridiculing his personality and delegitimising his ideas and politics' (again, remember the media's uniform endorsement of Hillary while ridiculing Bernie's ideas [eg free education, universal healthcare] as absurd, at best). The crisis of political representation finds its echo in a crisis of the representation of the representation, distrust for the political establishment is mirrored in the distrust for the media establishment.

Key question: what's the relationship between these individuals and their party; i.e., Bernie's chief enemy remains the Democrat Party establishment, and Corbyn faces resistance as much from within Labour as from the Tories or UKIP, Germany's Social Democrat Party's establishment is blocking any internal left-wing reform (for which there is some appetite among the rank and file).

In order to answer this question, the book goes back to the beginnings of the Labour and traces its post-War ideological transformation. I think what's key is that the so-called 'golden era' of Labour/Social Democracy took place under very exceptional circumstances where business needed class consensus and government to intervene with an unusual rapid growth following the economy's total destruction after WW2. As soon as capitalism was back on its feet and UK businesses ready to enter global competition, the uselessness of Labour's/ Social Democracy's attempt to 'tame' capitalism became apparent. (Social democracy is always more successful in taming social welfare!) Nothing we didn't know since at least 1867.

Bottom line, though, is that there is no point in hoping for some kind of revival of Labour/ social democracy's golden era for the 21st century, like 'sustainable capitalism' or green or digital or humane capitalism (lol). The core of Labour is and has always been aligned with capitalist interests. At times these overlapped with labour's interest (wage led growth/ Fordism). Any candidate who pushes the envelope into radical territory - ownership, anti-war etc - will be destroyed by the 'comrades' first - with the generous support of mainstream media and usual pundits. Should the Labour left under Corbyn take power in 2022 (or earlier), possibly in times of post-Brexit recession, then there looms the danger of a Syrizaification of sorts. So the only way forward for the left lies in using the historic opportunity of the 'strange rebirth of radical politics' beyond the party, through expanding the boundaries of the anti-austerity discourse (eg Bernie's universal healthcare and free education demands) and building a decidedly anti-capitalist movement which will ensure that once in power the left can actually pull through with real change.

John Rennie says

I respect Richard's political opinions as he does not resort to lazy cliches but uses clearly set out arguments (something I find really difficult!). As a Corbyn supporting Labour member, I was looking for a decent look at how Jeremy got elected and what he will be up against. This book did that very well with a comprehensive history of the British Labour movement and a detailed analysis of the strengths and (considerable) weaknesses of the Labour Party. I didn't have much to disagree with in Richard's assessment of the prospects and options the left has through a Corbyn led Labour Party.

Sarah Jaffe says

This entry doesn't have the new cover, which is Corbyn in his big fur coat, and that's sad because the new cover is representative of the swag of the new edition. Its tone is not hopeful, it's something better—it's confidently critical. Can we win? What happens next? These are big questions, not just for Corbyn, but for the left, and this book does its best to shed light on them. Come for the victory lap of the new preface, stay for the hard fight ahead.

Anna S says

This book contains four sections: first, the story of Corbyn's leadership bid and election; second, a broad outline of trends in recent British politics and what it means for the party system; third, a concise but politically instructive history of the Labour party; and finally, a smart analysis of Corbyn's situation, about the limiting factors on what he can achieve and what it means for the wider, non-Labour left.

In fact, most of the book isn't about Corbyn at all, but about the Labour party. It's worth reading for the history of Labour alone, an illuminating two chapters describing its actual (as opposed to hagiographed) tendencies when it has won political power in the past. Political nostalgia is often for a time that never was and this segment of the book wipes away any misty-eyed tears, showing how the Labour right has always ensured it had an upper hand when dealing with its more left-wing activist base while relying on its support, often to its long-term detriment.

It's a pessimistic book. The final chapter talks about the prognosis for Corbyn's leadership, introducing the idea of a useful defeat: one from which you can learn something, and in this case, one which would assist left-wing regroupment outside the Labour party. In this he is more hopeful than I would be, but for sure we should be ready for Corbyn's eventual defeat and also ready to learn from it. Seymour's analysis here is spot on, talking realistically about what we can expect Corbyn to achieve while avoiding moralism.

The theme of the book is that Corbyn's real limitation is not his at all, but the historic present weakness of the left combined with the electoralist & constitutionalist politics of the Labour party. Corbyn really doesn't have that much room to manoeuvre, and we'll only be able to judge his true impact ten or fifteen years from now.

Delivered in the smooth prose style familiar to readers of the author's blog *Lenin's Tomb*, this is the smartest assessment of where electoral left politics are in Britain right now.

David M says

Salvage is one of the more interesting journals of the radical left right now. Not just politically righteous, but also cool as fuck, or at least trying to be; they boast China Mieville as a founding editor. I have to say I think 'Bleak is the New Red' is one of the most godawful slogans I've ever heard. On the other hand, I'm thinking of getting 'Your Hope Disgusts US' tattooed on the small of my back.

It's worth asking what their pessimism really amounts to. Is it more than just a hipster pose? They're not actually counseling us to abandon all hope. If they were, they wouldn't have come out so enthusiastically for Corbyn. Richard Seymour, another of the editors, has written a whole book on the man and his movement.

I think you'll find herein a very sensible balance of pessimism and hope. After all, these are, you know, the best of times and worst of times. Are we seeing a worldwide descent into hatred and sadism? Maybe. Then again, it's entirely plausible that in a couple years Bernie Sanders will be president and Jeremy Corbyn prime minister. By itself, of course, this would not be enough to stem the tide of catastrophe. Seymour is shrewd to point out that Corbyn's real challenge may only emerge if and when he wins power; will he be allowed to govern, or will it be a dreadful replay of Syriza?

If it's important to be cognizant of the limits of elections and reforms, it's also obtuse to be dismissive of popular movements that show real promise and vitality. This is a dilemma facing the radical left, and if there's any consolation it's knowing that most our dilemmas are teacup tempests compared to the main concern, which is the fate of humanity.

Anyway, Corbyn is good.

Jonathan-David Jackson says

If you love Jeremy Corbyn, read this book. I've never been so excited about politics in my life as I have been over the last year and a half, and I'm not even allowed to vote in the UK. The book is in four sections: 1) the story of JC's election as Labour leader and what immediately led up to that, 2) a history of the Labour party, 3) how the Tories got wrecked in 2017, 4) and what happens next. The second and fourth sections were very interesting and I'd recommend them to anyone, but the first and third sections were absolute bliss and gave me unrestrained *schadenfreude*, the sort of thing I'd like to hear as a bedtime story every night. Everyone said he was unelectable, then he got elected as leader twice. Labour was down 20 points and yet, with The Absolute Boy as leader we came back within just six weeks after the snap-election was called and stole away the Conservative's majority and turned them into a minority government. Jeremy Corbyn is the first and only anti-war, anti-austerity, pro-internationalism, pro-working class, pure-as-the-driven-snow (did you know he claimed the lowest amount in expenses out of any MP during the parliamentary expenses scandal? £8.95!) politician that's been on the national scene in the US or UK in my lifetime, and I am excited as hell to see him as the new Prime Minister in 2022 or - fingers crossed - even sooner.

Bernard O'Leary says

Richard Seymour makes his feelings about Corbyn known in the first sentence of his acknowledgements, in which he describes pitching this book in "a flush of enthusiasm after Jeremy Corbyn won the leadership of the Labour Party". I also have to make my feelings known about Jez - I'm not a fan. I like him and I like his policies, but I feel he's not competent at a national level. With that out of the way, I'm going to try to review this book, rather than reviewing Jeremy Corbyn himself.

My task is made easier by the fact that Corbyn barely appears in this book at all. Structured in five discrete chapters, Seymour's book spends a long time focusing on the road that lead to Corbyn's surprise win last year, and also examines the road ahead for the British left as a whole.

The first of these chapters is probably the weakest, telling the story of how a cobwebbed relic of the loony left stunned pretty much everyone by not just winning, but winning in a landslide. The information in this chapter is second-hand and doesn't contain anything you couldn't find yourself by googling. There's little discussion of the revamped nomination process that allowed the membership to overrule the rest of the party, and quite a lot of bitterness about "Project Fear", with the usual assumptions that anyone who criticizes Corbyn is doing so because they're a tool of neoliberal hegemony.

Fortunately, the rest of the book veers in another direction, looking at the deepening crisis in British, and questioning the nature of the Labour party itself. It is true that participation is declining, disillusionment is increasing, and that sometimes they really are all the same. As you might expect, Seymour spends a lot of time blaming Blair for a lot of this, which is fish-in-a-barrel stuff for a left-wing audience.

But he goes a step further and argues that Labour have never been a true party of the left. Apart from the miraculous post-war administration, each Labour government has more or less toed the capitalist line and delivered a programme that's not hugely different from what the conservatives would have done. And even Atlee turned the army on strikers in the 40s.

Labour, he argues, have always been a party of compromise, and always more liberal than socialist. Corbynites who think there's a chance to return to "real Labour" are in for a shock, because that party never actually existed. This historical argument is well-argued and well-sourced, although I kind of have the feeling from his other writings that Seymour's idea of left is pretty hard left.

The concluding chapter takes us back to Corbyn, here in 2016. This was written before the May elections, although the results don't really impact his analysis of the situation which, I have to say, I largely agreed with. Labour before Corbyn has two major problems (three if you count Blair): people blamed them for the crash, and they didn't stand for anything in particular. Seymour's right in naming incoherence as Milliband's fatal flaw.

He's also quite realistic about Corbyn's chances in the future. The Jezelution isn't showing up in polling, possibly because polling doesn't show the disenfranchised voters he hopes to win back, but also possibly because it's simply not happening. There's no reason to assume right now that Labour have an improved chance in 2020. Defeat might not only mean the end for Corbyn, but it may cause the party elite to assume that they lost because he was too left-wing, and that the party need to tack right.

Corbyn, he admits, may be a passing phenomenon in British politics.

The real point of Corbyn, he argues, is to facilitate a grassroots restructure, and establish Labour as the true home of the British Left. Even if he does lose a couple of elections, at least voters will be able to do more at the ballot box than decide who gets to implement Washington's policies.

There is some handwaving in this part. The biggest unasked question is this: what happens to Britain after 15 -- or even 20! -- uninterrupted years of Tory rule? It will be hard, for example, to save the NHS if the NHS is already gone. Wanting to win in 2020 is not short-termism. The political landscape could be unrecognisable in 2025, and Corbynism could be utterly irrelevant by then.

I guess the fact that I'm veering off into this discussion is a sign that the book succeed in its intent, which is to provoke a sober and honest conversation about the meaning of Corbynism. It's not a hagiography, it's not a hatchet job. It's not even really about the man himself. It's about the party and the people who elected him, and the challenges they face in delivering a programme of meaningful social change.

[review copy from Netgalley]

Nick Patten says

Timely read to understand the surge of Corbyn and his left-wing brand of labour in the UK. Seymour gives a clear vision of the history of the UK Labour party since its formation and many incarnations following the postwar 'golden years' of Attlee. He also shows us that Corbyn is nothing new under the sun, and very much a product of Thatcher and the Blair/Brown Third Way/New Labour era. He is not so much a radical as a return to Labour's roots, his modest manifesto more center-left than any of his continental equivalents. I think Seymour is right in pointing out that of the many problems Corbyn faces from the daily lashing of tabloids and the MSM to the constant haranguing of his own party - his real challenges would begin in the event of taking power, for the institutional nature of globalism and the entrenched mechanisms of government will not be friendly to any attempt at governing from the left.

Still, to me, he remains an exciting breath of fresh air in his moralistic and clear vision that mirrors the Sanders movement in the US, and shows us that an alternative to constant bowing to the market gods of globalized capitalism is not only possible, but incredibly popular.

Domhnall says

This is not really a book about Corbyn personally. It is about the significance of Corbyn's leadership for the Labour Party and for the Left in Britain. More importantly, it is written from the perspective of the radical Left, and evaluates events in terms of the prospects for shifting Labour and / or the country away from the dominant ideology of neoliberalism and towards more progressive and humane socialist policies.

In the process, it offers a potted history of British politics in the 20th Century and this alone is worth considering. Most commentators have absorbed a highly distorted storyboard to summarise our shared past. This often reads like a rehash of party political propaganda from the Conservative Party and from the Right generally. It flies in the face of not only the serious histories I have read but, more critically, of my own

personal memories, having voted in and followed British politics since a council election in 1972. In reality, my memories are in their turn selective and often call for correcting, but that makes me more critical, not less so, and it is useful to my mind to be reminded of what observers on the Left have to say. I am quite satisfied that the dominant ideology in British politics is based on a very distorted and false version of events.

Corbyn's achievement in winning leadership of the Labour Party by a landslide was a product of the abject failings of the New Labour project, which not only lacked the capacity to win a general election but also lacked either the capacity or even the will to provide an opposition to the Conservatives. What Labour's Right can still do, of course, is provide a vigorous opposition to Corbyn and the Left. For Corbyn to transform Labour into a truly radical party of the Left would require time and a huge amount of change. This cannot happen within the space of an electoral cycle - it would be a long-term process and much of it would take place outside of the narrow world that is professional politics. What he can do is present the Conservatives with effective and real opposition, and potentially also he can draw back to voting and the political process at least a proportion of the younger people and the more disadvantaged who have been most hurt by neoliberal policies of both Conservatives and New Labour and who have stopped voting altogether in their millions. That modest achievement will not result in a radical government of the Left - if it even produces a government - but Corbyn's supporters will have to confront, sooner or later, the realistic limits to what Corbyn can practically achieve with the hand he has been dealt. It is better to accept those limits and use the opportunity Corbyn presents of beginning to win the country over to a more progressive politics of the Left. There is no easy way and one leadership election never had the power to transform Britain overnight.

The corrective to this book's potentially gloomy realism is that its author sees things from a very left wing perspective - presumably reflecting his history in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). As he himself observes, the British are not that far to the Left and never have been. It seems likely to me that many of Corbyn's supporters are not anticipating revolutionary change, are not at all blind to the limits of power in our democracy and are not looking for miracles, let alone revolution. His decent politics - his personal style - are, for many, already an excellent thing to enjoy and the results that he possibly can achieve in his time as leader are highly to be desired. We never doubted the forces that are arranged against him. We are not less realistic than Seymour, we just have more of a glass half full attitude to his glass half empty one. In other words, we do not need Richard Seymour's parental advice that we must be more realistic. We were never starry eyed in the first place.
