Myth and meaning: ‘Corbynism’ and the interpretation of political leadership

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Abstract
In its contribution to the study of political leadership, this article provides a distinctive analytical lens: political myth understood as meanings which animate a leadership project. Heavily constitutive of political leadership at a particular moment in time, political myths are important for understanding the resilience of a leadership project and the judgements of its actors. We demonstrate a way of applying this concept through an analysis of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership from 2015 to 2020 and the identification of four key elements of the ‘Corbyn myth’: a ‘mould-breaking’ stance on policy, a return to class politics for Labour, heralding a ‘left wave’ sweeping the world, and the moral and political repudiation of the Iraq War. Each element clearly emphasises the explicit rejection of New Labour. Our analysis provides a holistic account of the Corbyn project with greater specificity about the meanings attached to Corbyn’s leadership by supporters.

Keywords
Corbyn, Corbynism narrative, labour, leadership, myth

Introduction
‘Political leadership’, it has been argued, ‘is about the leadership of meaning as well as the meaning of leadership’ (Grint, 2016: 242). In other words, in addition to who a leader is and what they do, and how both of those are judged, we should consider the meanings that constitute a leadership project. Heavily constitutive of political leadership at a particular moment in time, political myths are important for understanding the resilience of a leadership project and the judgements of its actors. Our aim in this article is to consider the meanings that constitute leadership with a focus on what we term the ‘animating myth’ of political leadership. ‘Myths are not lies’, wrote the philosopher Mary Midgley, ‘nor are they detached stories. They are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world. They shape its meaning’ (Midgley, 2011: 1). Both before and since Midgley’s work, the concept of ‘myth’ has been theorised and the etymology of the term re-examined. Yet its application within political science has been limited, including within studies of political leadership. Edelman’s The Symbolic Uses of Politics averred that ‘leadership

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is re-created historically by writers and interest groups, as it is created contemporaneously by followers’ (Edelman, 1985: 94). Yet while leadership narratives are of course studied closely in political analysis, rarely is this – to return to Grint’s phrase – about the leadership of meaning. More typically it is a leadership tool – an important element in exercising and then remembering leadership.

Political myth, we argue, is different. Building on the philosophical work of Midgley and of Bottici (2010), we see myths as crucial for understanding claims to relevance and legitimacy from political leaders at a particular moment in time. ‘What makes a political myth out of a simple narrative’, Bottici wrote, ‘is the fact that the work on this narrative can, in a certain context and for certain subjects, come together and produce significance. Significance is always particularistic in the sense that what is significant for me here and now is not necessarily so in another context. At the same time, the sphere of significance always refers to some possibility that what is significant for me here and now can also be recognised as significant by somebody who shares the same conditions’ (Bottici, 2010: 178). Political myth, then, is distinguished (as a political concept) from narratives or symbols by the significance produced by, and for, those who create it. It should be noted that this significance can be shared by some, but also appear irrelevant and insignificant to others (Bottici, 2010: 243). We argue this is particularly important for the study of political leadership – with implications for the cohesiveness of a leadership project, its resilience, and the judgements reached by political actors. Studies of leadership, in the past focused on either the leader as personality or the art of leadership, now increasingly understand, ‘leadership as an interactive process between leaders and followers; institutions and their rules of the game; and the broader historical context’ (Rhodes and t’Hart, 2016: 6). The concept of political myth – and the creation of it by people at any given time – speaks directly to that interaction.

To apply the concept to the study of political leadership, we analyse Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party from 2015–2020. In those 5 years, Corbyn won two internal leadership elections and lost two general elections. Even before his (landslide) leadership mandate was confirmed, Tony Blair’s former press guru, Alastair Campbell, said that ‘with Corbyn, I’m afraid I can see only the route to defeat, and much, much worse . . . it is horrible to watch’ (Campbell, 2015). The 2015 contest was ‘late-summer delirium’, a long-standing political commentator wrote (Toynbee, 2015). Metaphors of mindlessness were interrupted only briefly by the surprise gains Labour made at the 2017 general election. Corbyn suffered appalling leadership poll ratings for much of his tenure (Ipsos MORI, 2019), and moments of real crisis – with mass resignations of colleagues, a long-running failure to tackle recurrent accusations of antisemitism (Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), 2020), a vote of no confidence, and constant media criticism. A journalist and supporter of Corbyn, Owen Jones, reflected that over the first 18 months or so of Corbyn’s time as Labour leader he:

had rarely been seen as prime ministerial material – if, that was, you defined ‘prime ministerial’ in the conventional, stuffed-shirt, shiny-suited, PR-friendly sense. It was already clear that if he was going to stand any chance . . . that definition had to change. (Jones, 2020: 127)

For supporters of Corbyn, new meanings had to be attached to his leadership – meanings more significant than what they considered ‘conventional’.

In applying the concept of myth to political leadership, this article is structured as follows. First, we present a distinctive analytical lens for the analysis and evaluation of
political leadership. Political myth has not yet been applied as a concept for understanding what animates a political leadership, nor has it been understood as something important for the resilience of a political project and the judgements of actors. This is our contribution to the ongoing development of scholarship concerning political leadership.

Second, we demonstrate a way of applying this concept in leadership analysis through the identification of four key elements of the ‘Corbyn myth’, themselves comprised of numerous mythologeme (elements of myth). In a detailed empirical study of the ‘Corbyn myth’, we add to our understanding of a leadership which has now come to an end – and can be more comprehensively understood. Our analysis spans four interconnected dimensions: Corbynism’s ‘mould-breaking’ stance on policy; a return to class politics in Labour; heralding a ‘left wave’ sweeping the world; and the moral and political repudiation of the Iraq War. All four factors clearly emphasise the rejection of New Labour. Our analysis provides a holistic account of the Corbyn project while offering specificity about what was distinctive about Corbyn’s leadership. In the conclusion, we consider the legacy of the Corbyn myth.

**Myth and the study of political leadership**

In their summary of recent leadership analysis, Rhodes and t’Hart note that after a scholarly hiatus, the study of political leadership has returned – with multiple angles for examining what leadership is, how it is exercised and what effect it has on politics (Rhodes and t’Hart, 2016: 17). We consider two particular approaches in what follows, one a resumption of a framework, the other a more recent development: namely ‘statecraft’ analysis and the Leadership Capital Index (LCI). We then expand on our understanding of political myth and explain how it can be applied to leadership analysis. Our approach, as with the authors of the LCI, seeks to contribute to the understanding of ‘how and why political leaders emerge, endure and are eclipsed’ (Bennister et al., 2017). The distinctiveness of political myth lies in the ‘leadership of meaning’ (Grint, 2016), from the initial group (or ‘pattern’) of meanings that constitute political leadership – providing purpose and significance for the project – to how those meanings shaped leadership strategies. One persistent analytical distinction in the current literature is between evaluative and explanatory approaches to leadership analysis (a distinction partly inspired by a reading of *The Philosophy and Methods of Political Science* (Dowding, 2016)). The former offers a framework for judging performance; the latter provides possible explanations for why leaders act, don’t act, succeed or fail. In this article, we utilise political myth for the explanatory approach.

The LCI is broadly situated across both evaluative and explanatory approaches. The authors noted that ‘there is not much depth and texture to our current understanding of how and why exactly the political fortunes of leaders wax and wane’ (Bennister et al., 2017: 6). The concept of leadership capital offers a comparative tool for gauging a leader’s status at any moment in time. ‘Anchored’ in ‘three presumed sources of leadership capital: skills; relations; and reputation’, (Bennister et al., 2017: 7) leadership capital is ‘not so much an attribute of an individual leader as a warrant granted by their constituents, peers and the larger public. It is about how others see and evaluate political officeholders performing leadership’ (Bennister et al., 2017: 4). As such, the LCI can help us understand – through a range of metrics – the extent to which a leader is positioned strongly or weakly in relation to the sources of leadership capital. Through analysis of polling, surveys and election results (internal and external) as well as judgements
regarding ideological coherence and communicative performance, the ups and downs of a leader’s political journey can be better understood. The measure of ‘capital’ can offer an explanation for a leader’s premature exit from office, or their apparent longevity in managing good times and bad. It can also provide an evaluative tool, for example, in a situation of ‘low’ leadership capital from the beginning of an actor’s tenure:

The ‘misfit’ leader whose leadership capital never really ‘gets off the ground’ and who soldiers on with low ratings and without a credible mandate for leadership, until they are cut down. Possible candidates include disaster-prone leaders like United States president Gerald Ford. (Bennister et al., 2017: 18)

The LCI is a flexible model, and particularly suitable for comparative work. Of course, the concept of ‘capital’ itself – as an aggregation of different perceptions from different actors – has limitations in its explanatory power. A leader may well have incredibly low opinion ratings, but to understand why that’s the case, we would need to ask different questions. For example, what narratives exist about that leader? What beliefs do those narratives appear to rest upon? How is the credibility of leadership framed in that particular historical context? This connects to ontological assumptions, which need to be further fleshed out as the LCI model develops. As Rhodes and ‘t Hart claim, ‘we have to understand how reputations are formed. They are not given, objective facts’ (Rhodes and t’Hart, 2016: 12). By this Rhodes and t’Hart (2016: 12) included the ‘narratives constructed by the leaders and her followers . . . [which] hinge on myths and symbols’ – very much in the way Edelman (1985) discussed. Yet, as well as the stories leaders and their followers tell about themselves to forge a particular symbolic connection for the voting public, in relation to the LCI the same could also be said for how leaders are ‘seen’. Whether a leader appears to ‘command’ attention in a speech, for example, is itself based upon beliefs about what a leader should be. In a sense, and inevitably through the selection of (defensible) metrics of leadership power and performance, a normative framework of what leadership ‘looks like’ is constructed through the LCI – albeit one that incorporates a diversity of potential ‘capital resource’.

The statecraft approach (Bulpitt, 1986) has gained renewed attention in recent years after its application to the study of Thatcherism. Considered as an approach which ‘posits that successful leadership is all about gaining and retaining power’ (Buller and James, 2012: 540), statecraft approaches have analysed four key tenets to achieve that goal: winning elections, governing competently, party management and ‘political argument hegemony’ (Buller and James, 2012: 540). Application of the statecraft approach has led to some debate about what the framework brings to our understanding of politics. Griffiths has suggested that the ‘rediscovery of Bulpitt’s model involves its limited view of the goal of leading politicians: they are primarily concerned with winning elections and maintaining power as an end in itself’ (Griffiths, 2016: 738). Firmly focused on the explanatory rather than the evaluative potential of statecraft, Griffiths (2016: 738) judged that ‘statecraft’s mono-causal account of why politicians act leaves little room for alternative explanations’. Thus, statecraft theory makes ‘questionable claims about political agents’ motivations, [and] excludes alternative explanations’ (Griffiths, 2016: 741) as we seek to understand political behaviour and the potential explanations for it.

First, the (potential) differences between an actor’s motivations, strategies and then resultant outcomes (Randall, 2003: 19). Actors may be motivated by ideology, while seeking to make choices in a way which maximises their electoral chances. Similarly,
actors may be motivated by electoral success, while seeking to make choices which are ideologically distinctive, or isolate their opposition. That strategic decisions cannot be separated from an actor’s strategic context (Hay, 2002) surely means that little contemporary political analysis is ever likely to assume any ‘mono-causal’ explanation. Hayton, in a response to Griffiths, made a similar defence, suggesting that a range of considerations affect political decision-making, and recognising that actors hold multiple objectives (Hayton, 2016: 730–731). We add here a further point about the analytical distinction between evaluative and explanatory approaches, noted above. Taking the work of Buller and James (2012) as an example, the authors pose the question of how political scientists should ‘evaluate the tenure of a particular leader’ and what ‘criteria might we adopt for this purpose?’ (Buller and James, 2012: 534). While it may be the case that statecraft approaches have the assumption that winning office is an important and accepted objective for leading politicians (otherwise, why would it form a basis for evaluation?), it need not imply that statecraft theory explains why a leader acted in one way or the other. Statecraft could be – and is, in our reading of Buller and James – a tool for judging how a leader fared along a particular normative framework of what leadership looks like. Similarly, Ball (2005: 4–5) and Bale (2015: 61–62) evaluate opposition leadership performance along criteria which included ‘fresh faces’, ‘cohesion’, ‘visibility’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘adaptability’ – something also applied to Corbyn early on in his leadership (Diamond, 2016). Nonetheless, Bale posed an important question about leadership impact: does it not have ‘less to do with what they do than with what they are, or are seen to be’ (Bale, 2015: 72)?

This is where the concept of political myth enters the debate, helping us understand why leaders act in the way they do, whether they can weather political storms, and how their (crucial) group of followers perceives their leadership: strong and vital, or something increasingly weak and less relevant? The ontological basis for our approach is social constructivism. As Grint insisted, we consider political leadership ‘a social construct that is wrought from the interactions of people’ (Grint, 2016: 240). More broadly, this means accepting that actors – indeed, all of us – ‘make the beliefs and concepts on which we act and thus the social world in which we live’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2012: 44). The concept of myth is very relevant here. Those who constitute a political leadership project – from the actor or actors holding a leadership role, to the very actively engaged followers of a leadership – are acting on the basis of ‘a process of creative agency or (weak) reasoning’ (Bevir and Blakely, 2018: 35). They are narrating their perceptions of the world, and the beliefs they hold – quite literally, creatively explaining why they are placing their faith in a particular leadership.

These meanings become grouped together, constituting (in part) the social construction of a leadership project. As Bottici conjectured, ‘the basic performance of myth is to provide names. A myth is always “the myth of . . . ”. It is only by giving a thing a name that it can become “graspable” and therefore the object of a story’ (Bottici, 2010: 116). Bottici’s work was influenced by the German theorist Hans Blumenberg, particularly the concept of ‘significance’ – for Bottici, what distinguishes myth from other forms of narrative. For Blumenberg, significance is ‘a defence against indifference, especially indifference in space and time’ (Blumenberg, 1985: 109). This is the theme which drives Bottici’s understanding of political myth, ‘understood as work on a common narrative by which a social group provides significance to its political conditions and needs’ which stems from a ‘universal human need, the need to live in a world less indifferent to us’ (Bottici, 2010: 200). Such significance is ‘always particularistic’ (Bottici, 2010: 243) – in
other words, it may be important for some, and not for others who perceive the world differently.

This last point is particularly apposite when analysing – and understanding – political leadership. The subjective construction of meaning, Mary Midgley (2006: 188) argued, requires ‘some degree of empathy or sympathy with the people involved . . . [as] a vitally necessary cognitive tool for understanding any of them. We have to enter into their aims and intentions’. As with Bottici’s more recent work, Midgley noted that the concept of myth did not mean a lie but ‘an imaginative vision, a picture’ (Midgley, 2006: 277–278). ‘True beliefs need their imagery quite as much as false ones’, she noted (Midgley, 2006: 278). Human beings need to ‘map their world by imposing meaning communally on it in this way because of their highly complex social life’ (Midgley, 2006: 192). Pitching in for a political project – be it simply through voting for them, or taking on a more active role through attending events, campaigning, or sharing political messages – entails imposing meaning upon those actions. This is the philosophical basis for what we term the ‘animating myth’ of political leadership. We contend that it is significant in two key ways: first, the extent to which actors involved in that leadership have created ‘significance’ through narrating a myth helps us understand how leaders manage the inevitable challenges of political leadership; second, the meanings that constitute a leadership project are part of the ideational context of the political actors involved. They help orient actors, affecting their beliefs and judgements (Hay, 2011; Pike, 2020).

The Corbyn myth

Ever since Corbyn’s astonishing rise from backbencher to leader, political scientists have examined the ways in which his tenure has affected Labour’s beliefs and practices – from electoral campaigning to party management. Work has analysed the coherence of Corbyn’s ideological agenda and vision (Byrne, 2019); its connection with with Labour’s past policy programmes (Manwaring and Smith, 2020); Corbyn’s campaign successes compared to Conservative prime minister Theresa May’s campaign failures (Dorey, 2017); Corbyn’s management of the Labour Party, and its characterisation as ‘populism’ within a party (Watts and Bale, 2019); and how Corbyn’s arrival as leader affected Labour’s membership, including increased numbers of people joining Labour ‘who might be labelled ‘left behind’ economically (Whiteley et al., 2019: 95). Closest perhaps to our approach here – seeking to understand Corbyn’s leadership holistically, with a focus on the meanings constitutive of the leadership project – is the conclusion from Bolton and Pitts regarding Labour’s immigration policy, a position we consider further below.

The ‘impetus behind Corbyn’s bid for the leadership’, Bolton and Pitts suggested:

derived from the Year Zero narrative which quickly sprung up around his campaign. If victorious, so this story went, Labour’s supposedly irredeemably corrupt past . . . would be wiped out by a movement whose purity was guaranteed by that of its unassuming leader. (Bolton and Pitts, 2018: 60)

We adopt a less explicitly critical stance than Bolton and Pitts, who focus on the ideological underpinnings of ‘Corbynism’. Yet as with other work exploring the construction and passing on of narratives (e.g. Clark, 2019), there is some commonality in our approach in seeking to explore how Corbynism was constructed – and how interpretations of Corbynism, from within and without, were constitutive of the leadership project. While the concept of myth has been used in historical analysis of Labour’s past – and how
particular events are retold (see Jones, 1996; Lawrence, 2000), applying a framework of political myth to analysing the Labour leadership has not yet been attempted.

Corbynism always had within its coalition a diversity of Labour people, from the most powerful trade unions in the country, to Labour’s newest campaigning movement, Momentum. Brought together as the Corbyn ‘myth’, and understood holistically as a pattern of meanings that sustained a powerful – and twice winning – internal left coalition, allows for an analytical approach that reveals diversity, accepting that Corbynism cannot be reduced to any singular meaning. The following section of this paper outlines four key dimensions of Corbyn’s leadership. The novelty of the Corbyn project – derived from its ‘mould-breaking’ character – provoked disquiet but also sustained Corbyn through the internal challenges which followed. It contributed to the huge boost following the 2017 election, where against the predictions of many, Labour gained seats. In relation to Brexit, decision-making proved more cumbersome, triangulation more tempting, and major fault-lines in Corbyn’s leadership began to emerge. Many Labour members on anti-Brexit marches waited in vain for a lead from Corbyn. Yet Corbynism – the myths around the leader and his project – also emphasised a return to class. There was concern that an anti-Brexit position would threaten support in ‘traditional’ Labour seats that voted Leave in the 2016 referendum. Divisions in the Corbyn project opened up which the founding myths of Corbynism were unable to counter.

Mould-breaking

Corbyn’s predecessor, Ed Miliband, declared after the 2017 election that Corbyn had exceeded expectations because ‘he was giving people a sense that he had answers big enough, bold enough, honest enough, for the moment we are in. Whether you agree with all the answers or not, that is fundamentally the insight he has’ (quoted in Campbell, 2018). Alex Nunns, later Corbyn’s speech writer, averred that Labour’s members had been ‘afforded a chance to cast a verdict on triangulating politics and neoliberal dogma’ that typified British politics over decades (Nunns, 2018: 204). They had done so resoundingly, twice, by electing Corbyn. What we term ‘breaking the mould’ had two key elements: breaking the neo-liberal ‘Thatcherite’ mould that New Labour accepted, and overcoming Ed Miliband’s capitulation to ‘austerity-lite’ (McDonnell, 2013) and ‘controls on immigration’ policies (Perraudin, 2015). These were the ‘moulds’ of British politics it was claimed only Corbynism would break: refuting – unashamedly – cuts to public spending; and offering what could be a ‘significant change in how Labour approached immigration’ (Goodfellow, 2019: 196). During the leadership campaign, only Corbyn was perceived as opposed to the ‘watered down anti-migrant politics, the kind that had been de rigeur during the Ed Miliband era’ (Goodfellow, 2019: 196) while New Labour had ‘helped to embed anti-immigration ideas into British politics’ through its approach to asylum policy (Goodfellow, 2019: 128).

Overall, the meanings attached to Corbynism were of transformation. It was argued from the early 1990s that Blair’s New Labour project represented a capitulation to the neo-liberal ideology that preceded it, centred on the hegemony of global market capitalism and defenestration of the welfare state. Reforms were, at best, piecemeal. These meanings shaped the drafting of the 2017 manifesto; one Corbyn aide argued the document ‘had to be transformational. There had to be a vision, of a different society. One that’s not just tinkering. We needed to show that politics does not have to be like this’ (quoted in Cowley and Kavanagh: 183). Labour broadly succeeded in the 2017 campaign,
‘despite having started with a strategy which even one of the campaign team described as “a leap of faith”’ (Cowley and Kavanagh: 435). Andrew Murray, the long-serving Chief of Staff to Len McUskey, General Secretary of Unite the Union, and an advisor to Corbyn, saw this element of the Corbyn myth as relevant in demonstrating how far the project differed from the Miliband years. Miliband’s politics, Murray wrote, were ‘hedged with a commitment to be conventional, respectable and responsible just as more and more people were looking askance at political respectability, and wondering where conventional economic responsibility had got them’ (Murray, 2019: 143).

Despite evidence that when Labour fought the 2015 general election, there were ‘genuinely big differences between the main parties’ fiscal plans’ (Crawford et al., 2015), the Corbyn myth focused heavily on an acceptance of Conservative cuts under Miliband’s leadership. As with New Labour, the language may have been of ‘fairness’, but the policies followed the ‘mould’: the austerity paradigm (Nunns, 2018: 21). Afraid of the mostly conservative media, and with a view of elections as one of moving towards the median voter, rather than persuading voters to move closer to them, Miliband’s Labour was portrayed as following a similar playbook to previous Labour leaderships. On immigration, Corbyn’s supporters rallied behind the meanings attached to the project, even when policy appeared less than transformational. Labour’s 2017 manifesto said little on migration, setting it within the context of Brexit. There were changes in terms of language – ‘controls on immigration’ became ‘fair rules and reasonable management of migration’ (Labour Party, 2017: 28). Yet Labour committed to ending free movement when Britain left the European Union, and to replacing one scheme of conditionality – income thresholds for family migration – with another: ‘prohibition on recourse to public funds’ (Labour Party, 2017: 28). Labour’s system of migration management would be ‘based on our economic needs, balancing controls and existing entitlements’ (2017: 28).

Even so, what could make the difference with activists, particularly in the aftermath of the ‘immigration mug’ news story (Perraudin, 2015), was an ‘understandable trust that the leadership, which has a long history of standing with migrants, will deliver a better, fairer system on immigration’ (Goodfellow, 2019: 200). The significance of the meanings attached to the Corbyn project were more than a supplement to actual policies in party manifestos – at times the meanings mattered more to supporters as with Midgley’s argument around the interpretation of complexity. Those meanings – anti-racism, a refusal to be cowed by the hostile media – were consistently upheld by Corbyn’s supporters from 2015 to 2020, despite cautious changes in policy, and moments where the leadership’s initial instinct was to support Conservative immigration legislation, as with the 2019 immigration bill seeking to end freedom of movement (Stewart, 2019). Towards the end of Corbyn’s tenure, activists organised to push Labour’s immigration policy closer to the meanings attached to the Corbyn leadership, achieving changes at the party’s 2019 conference (Savage, 2019).

However, the biggest challenge to the ‘breaking the mould’ aspect of the Corbyn myth came from Brexit. One Corbyn supporter who led an anti-Brexit campaign summed up the disappointment:

Corbynism’s strength lay in its rejection of triangulation and centristism. But on Brexit, the leadership swung in the wind. Its initial policy after the referendum was one of acceptance . . . [then] the party entered its tortuous ‘all options on the table’ phase, until eventually – following Labour’s collapse in the 2019 European elections – it openly supported a public vote. Even then, it refused to say how it would campaign in a referendum, and pushed back hard when we took support for Remain to conference that year. (Chessum, 2020)
Focusing on the meanings of the Corbyn myth helps to understand why Brexit had the potential to cause internal rupture. One could argue Corbyn’s posture was ‘mould-breaking’. Blair was an infamous Europhile, while ‘Remain’ was associated with the political establishment. Corbynism did not necessarily sit easily.

Yet from the standpoint of the majority of Labour people (though not all), the Brexit agenda was a Conservative one, driven by politicians who prioritised restricting migration. The Vote Leave campaign was subject to intense scrutiny in more left-leaning media following the referendum. Agreeing to Brexit appeared very far from ‘mould-breaking’. With a record of what could be called ‘soft’ Euroscepticism, Corbyn’s position appeared unclear. His own policy record – and his place in a wider tradition on the Labour Left that saw the EU as a capitalist club, integral to a ‘Wall Street-City-Brussels consensus’ (Murray, 2019: 4) – collided with the Corbynism that would surely stand up to a Conservative-media consensus, and recognise, on the basis of party democracy, the overwhelming support for the EU within Labour (Bale et al., 2019: 66–68). Corbyn’s reluctance to oppose Brexit went against the grain of Corbynism as a leadership project, if not the past hostility to the EU from those at the top of the Labour Party.

The return of class

Another aspect of the Corbyn myth concerned the return of class politics. Corbyn talked about class repeatedly during the 2015 leadership contest, and the support of the major trade unions as well as his long-standing attendance at symbolic events of the labour movement – notably the Durham Miner’s Gala and the Tolpuddle Martyrs Festival – gave his campaign an ostensible working class focus. Corbyn’s supporters, Murray (2019: 153) insisted, ‘were radical and class-oriented, but not class-rooted’. Class in the Corbyn myth is, ‘a site of contestation and struggle’ with ‘little evidence to suggest that Corbynism, as a left project, revolves exclusively or even mainly around class’ (Maiguashca and Dean, 2020: 58). Corbyn’s supporters had different views of class, although we argue it remained integral to the Corbyn myth. Labour’s 2019 manifesto – unlike its 2015 manifesto – made a number of references to class and the working class. ‘The Labour Party was founded to give working-class people a voice in politics’ it was noted (Labour Party, 2019: 81), and Labour committed to putting ‘class at the heart of Britain’s equality agenda’ (Labour Party, 2019: 66). The focus on class saw a pledge to ‘give working people a voice at the Cabinet table by establishing a Ministry for Employment Rights’ (Labour Party, 2019: 60). The putative head of the Employment Ministry was the then Member of Parliament for North West Durham, Laura Pidcock. Pidcock became a regular contributor to the relaunched Tribune magazine – which brought a renewed interest in class politics to Labour’s factional debates. ‘For many years starting with the Thatcher governments but continuing through the New Labour years, talking about class in political circles was almost taboo’, Pidcock claimed in a Tribune article entitled ‘It’s Time to Talk About Class’:

Certainly, within the political mainstream, class was considered an anachronism, best left in the past. For Thatcherites, class was a prison to be escaped . . . For New Labour, the association with class, and the working class in particular, was seen as an electoral liability. (Pidcock, 2019b: 48).

Addressing the position of class within Labour, Pidcock suggested that there is ‘among our own supporters, a sense that the Labour Party using the term “working class” isn’t going to help win over the people who would never identify that way. It is
seen as backward-looking’ (Pidcock, 2019b: 48). Attempting to project the shared agenda of the class-rooted and the class-oriented, Pidcock argued that Corbynism had changed Labour so that it:

now foregrounds class politics and that we will go into a general election to speak for our class . . . we should be unashamed about that. It does not mean excluding anyone from our ranks. Tony Benn was born into privilege but fought for working-class interests most of his political life. (Pidcock, 2019b: 50)

What Pidcock (2019a: 39) called the ‘culture shift’ within Labour saw Corbynism fuse an active retelling of the past (notably emphasising Corbyn’s long attendance at the Gala) with a complementary economic prospectus directed at working-class communities and British industry more generally. This was the ‘return to class’ element of the Corbyn myth.

Ash Sarkar, a contributing editor at Novara Media – an online news outlet, prominent in both Corbyn-supporting Labour circles and within debate on the left more generally – argued during the 2019 election campaign that traditional definitions of ‘working class’ failed to capture large numbers of young people who supported Labour. ‘The problem with reducing the actually existing diverse working class to a homogeneous cohort of older white Brits with regional accents is that it’s fundamentally misleading’, Sarkar wrote. ‘It doesn’t tell you much about either the concentration of wealth or would-be Labour voters, and indeed nothing at all about how to meet the material needs of working-class people’. People needed to look beyond the ‘avocado toast’, Sarkar warned, as ‘young people make up the majority of the UK’s income and asset-poor’ (Sarkar, 2019). Seeking to encompass more wage-earners into a wider understanding of ‘working class’ is not, of course, an unusual argument on the left. A decline in the number of manual workers as a proportion of the workforce (Evans and Tilley, 2017: 7) has long encouraged rethinking the politics of the working class.

Yet there were fault lines. The focus from some elements of the left was on traditional forms of working-class organisation and established electoral geography (e.g. Lavery and Trickett, 2020) – in other words, ‘traditional’ Labour seats and the beliefs and practices embodied in trade. Another focus of the Corbyn left was on the economic and social circumstances of younger voters – regardless of where they were. Tribune, a presence in the Corbyn media landscape alongside Novara, included contributions representing something closer to the traditional view. Tribune’s editor, writing in the aftermath of the 2019 election defeat, declared Corbynism ‘hadn’t managed to change the broader political landscape outside Westminster. There was no sign of an uptick in class conflict; trade union membership continued to stagnate. Days lost to strike action were minimal’ (Burtenshaw, 2020: 27). Electoral success required ‘rebuilding social institutions – the basis of working-class community across Britain – to stem the tide of atomisation’ (Burtenshaw, 2020: 27). By this argument, Corbynism could have led to a newly energised and active working class if the leadership had made bolder strategic choices. Foremost among them, of course, was being willing to support Brexit.

It was on Brexit where the ‘return to class’ dimension of the Corbyn myth was under greatest strain. A broad encapsulation of the working class meant grappling with the invidious choices of the Brexit dilemma. The party (eventually) opted for a pro-referendum position. Yet within the more ‘traditional’ parts of the Corbyn coalition, Brexit was viewed as something ‘heartland’ seats voted for. ‘As Corbynmania faded’, Burtenshaw
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(2020: 29) argued, ‘elite liberal interests set about shifting the debate away from class questions . . . Instead of challenging the Brexit culture war, their intention was to force the Labour Party into it’. Corbynism was, therefore, being exposed as fatally out of touch with the working classes. Alongside faces from the ‘Blairite past’ associated with anti-Brexit campaigning, ‘rather than being seen as a break with so much of what post-industrial communities hated about New Labour, Corbynism came to be seen as similarly distant and associated with the same aloof attitudes’ (Burtenshaw, 2020: 30). There could be no ‘return to class’, so this argument ran, if on Brexit the Corbyn project ignored the perceived views of the working classes.

The left wave – From Syriza to Sanders

Corbynism was frequently linked to the presidential campaigns of long-serving United States Senator Bernie Sanders. Sanders himself warmed to the theme, saying in 2017 that what had ‘impressed’ him was Corbyn taking on ‘the establishment of the Labour Party, he has gone to the grassroots and he has tried to transform that party . . . and that is exactly what I am trying to do’ (quoted in Roberts and Asthana, 2017). Corbyn aides – in common with many past political projects – were keen to replicate Sanders’ success at mobilising voters (particularly the young). They visited the United States, and links were forged between Sanders’ team and Corbyn’s (McTague, 2016). In common with the transatlantic Third Way of the 1990s and early 2000s, Corbynism was positioned as part of a global trend – a left wave with a narrative of breaking the mould, taking on the politics of tired compromises, and responding to the 2008 financial crisis with ideological clarity rather than timidity. Integral to the story were Corbyn, Sanders, and the youthful political parties of Syriza in Greece (then in office) and Podemos in Spain (Mason, 2016).

Corbyn himself framed his 2015 victory as a larger political wave. ‘What happened this summer with the leadership election was nothing short of a political earthquake’, he insisted, ‘according to the script, socialist and social democratic parties were in decline. Social democracy itself was exhausted. Dead on its feet. Yet something new and invigorating, popular and authentic has exploded’ (Corbyn, 2015a). In 2016, after his second leadership election victory, he reaffirmed that:

it’s not about me . . . or unique to Britain but across Europe, North America and elsewhere, people are fed up with a so-called free market system, that has produced grotesque inequality, stagnating living standards for the many, calamitous foreign wars without end and a political stitch-up which leaves the vast majority of people shut out of power . . . In Britain it’s happened in the heart of traditional politics, in the Labour party which is something we should be extremely proud of. (Corbyn, 2016)

What were the characteristics of the ‘left wave’ that featured particularly heavily within the Corbyn myth? There were ideological similarities, particularly with regard to economic policy. Yet perhaps more significant within the Corbyn story was the political style of these new projects, and a focus on the movement politics they espoused. To some commentators, this represented a unity of ‘upstart insurgents’ (Parker and Pickard, 2015).

In terms of style, it started with physical appearance. Attacks on Corbyn’s choice of clothing by then Prime Minister David Cameron, and sensitivity around whether Corbyn’s choice of hat looked ‘Russian’, are well known. Yet his supporters, too, commented on
his appearance. This ‘instantly signalled a rejection of the modern political fetish for presentation’ (Nunns, 2018: 108). In contrast to his opponents, Corbyn was unpretentious and not afraid to appear as if he hadn’t considered his appearance for more than a few seconds. Corbyn’s attire did change after 2015. The brownish blazer, a feature of his backbench days, gave way to navy suits, white shirts and red ties – a conventional look for Labour Party politicians and advisors. But his appearance had by then been cemented into leadership narratives. For Nunns (2018):

Corbyn looked like a man from a time when politics was about substance not spin. But his informal dress and preference for open necked shirts also reflected – in a quirky, British way – the European anti-austerity look sported by Alex Tsipiras et al. (Nunns, 2018: 108)

Even when the suit was donned, Nunns continued to observe that his shirt was ‘worn without a tie, in keeping with the European anti-austerity look’ (2018: 6). Varoufakis himself, in his version of the events of the Greek debt crisis, used appearance to dramatise the transformation of Syriza from anti-establishment mould breakers to accountants ready to concede to Brussels (Varoufakis, 2017: 467). While appearance was far from being the most significant aspect of the Corbyn myth, it adds significance. Here were a group of like-minded ‘anti-system’ political insurgents, joined by their shared rejection of the conventional, boring technocrat, ill-suited to leading a movement.

And it was the story of movement politics that provided the key element to the shared left wave, ‘the crystallization of a new left politics aimed at gaining political power’ (Mason, 2019: 263). Corbynism was part of something bigger: ‘from Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela to Spain, Portugal and Greece, Leftist success has been propelled in large part by new movements of the young’ (Seymour, 2016: 77). It was a movement, driven by young people, where campaign events had ‘the atmosphere . . . more like that of a music festival or a dramatic sports final than fuddy-duddy party politics’ (Nunns, 2018: 3). Corbynism brought people to Labour who had a different understanding of the meaning of the political. According to one Corbyn aide, their constituency party had been ‘apolitical. It’s people who are councillors, mainly . . . They just go out, they deliver leaflets, they don’t even really want to talk about politics in meetings’ (quoted in Nunns, 2018: 117). Of course, many Corbyn supporters would soon discover that elections often entailed going out and delivering leaflets, but their expectations of ‘politics’ were not as ‘party workers’ but as political campaigners who sought to reshape politics and society.

Writing on Podemos, Owen Jones argued there were important lessons to draw from the Spanish party’s success. ‘The left . . . needs a flourishing ecosystem of movements, inspiring people, politicising them . . . Grassroots, community-based movements are essential’ (Jones, 2015). Furthermore, politics needed to be truly participatory. Many Podemos rallies, Jones noted, ‘emphasise involvement from the floor; panels often don’t have a chair’ (Jones, 2015). Left wave movements would encourage the flourishing of many groups, along with debate and the co-creation of their politics. Momentum, the organisation run by Jon Lansman which grew out of Corbyn’s 2015 campaign, sought to integrate this style of movement politics. Yet, the stumbling block remained organisational. To be part of a left wave movement meant participation, and within political parties, more democracy when it came to decision-making. This was central to Corbyn’s initial pitch to his party (Corbyn, 2015b: 15). But the temptation to ‘manage’ the party remained. Even Momentum struggled to live up to the promise of the Corbyn myth,
offering activists only one candidate to support in a ballot on who to back in Labour’s 2020 leadership contest (BBC, 2020).

**Repudiation of Iraq**

The legacy of the Iraq War has shaped the Labour Party. From when Blair began on his path to the invasion of Iraq to today, a multitude of narratives regarding the war have affected Labour’s political trajectory and key leadership decisions – notably parliamentary votes on military action. The Corbyn myth – particularly its vehement rejection of Blairism – had a distinctive and uncompromising attitude to the war. As Patrick Porter noted, there are diverse interpretations of the decision to go to war. Porter identified five: the dominance of America over Britain, and Blair in particular (the ‘poodle’), ‘inadvertent escalation’, a personal mission by Blair himself, and then two opposites – that Britain went to war in good faith but the case turned out to be flawed; and that Britain’s motivations were ‘secret and diabolical’, focused on oil interests (Porter, 2018: 6). Prior to the triumph of Corbynism, each narrative had some credibility within the Labour Party. Miliband believed a combination of good faith, American influence and bad decisions explained the war (Miliband, 2010).

The Corbyn myth was constructed quite differently. In a statement to *The Guardian* during the 2015 leadership campaign, Corbyn insisted Labour had taken the country to war ‘on the basis of deception’, vowing to apologise to the British and Iraqi people if he was elected (quoted in MacAskill, 2015). The Corbyn myth treated the war as integral to Blair’s leadership and to ‘Blairism’. Comments from Nunns are indicative. In one write-up, Nunns wrote that Blair:

> looks like the Tony Blair of 1997 might look eighteen years later – if, in the meantime, he had helped launch an illegal war killing hundreds of thousands of people, shattered an entire region of the planet and given rise to ISIS – except a little bit worse. (Nunns, 2018: 195)

For opponents of the Iraq War – and there are many – the anger is understandable. Important for the Corbyn myth, however, is that the language is constructed to oppose, to isolate, and to define Blair and his supporters.

Blairites, Nunns wrote, ‘were the ideal villains’, their ‘thinking had become inflexible, their presentation stiff. Having once been associated with the future, they now harked back to a past tainted by war, financial crisis and party atrophy’ (2018: 65). Under Miliband, the then Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander claimed that:

> if you look at the ledger with a 10-year perspective, the negatives outweigh the positives. Of course, I don’t regret the removal of Saddam Hussein, the relative safety of the Kurds compared with their previous position. But given the lack of post-conflict planning, the insurgency that followed the action in 2003, of course the negatives outweigh the positives in my judgment. (quoted in Sparrow, 2013)

The decision, taken under Miliband’s leadership, to support David Cameron’s military action – along with France – in Libya was also cast within this frame (Sparrow, 2013) Alexander’s arguments were in keeping with the ‘good faith’ narrative identified by Porter. They were a long way from the arguments of Stop the War Coalition (StWC), the organisation which campaigned against the invasion of Iraq, and which included Corbyn and many individuals central to Corbynism.
Andrew Murray, who along with Corbyn chaired StWC, believed

one of the longer-term consequences of that huge protest [against Iraq in 2003], and the dismissal of it by the New Labour administration, was the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the Labour leadership. If Corbyn stands on the threshold of Downing Street today, it is because he stood on the stage in Hyde Park back in 2003. (Murray, 2019: 81)

Corbynism meant the repudiation of the Iraq War as morally and legally wrong. Murray considered Corbynism to have attained political hegemony within Labour on international questions (2019: 94). What is clear is that the moral repudiation of the Iraq War was important for the success of the Corbyn project within Labour – with long-term effects. In terms of supporters rejoining Labour after the 2015 election defeat, data from the ESRC Party Members Project indicated that their ‘visceral dislike of Blair, both for shifting the party away from socialism and for participating in the US-led invasion of Iraq, leaps off the page’ in ‘write-in’ responses from a survey of party members (Whiteley et al., 2019: 96). Corbynism ensured a reckoning within Labour – one that had, even following Miliband’s election, been postponed. Disavowal of the Iraq War, and a commitment to prevent ‘future Iraqs’, are now ingrained within the Labour Party’s consciousness.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that political myth constitutes and shapes leadership, affecting strategy, decision-making, and the perceived successes and failures of individual leaders. Drawing on a case study of Corbyn’s leadership, the main features of the ‘Corbyn myth’ were presented, analysing how the myth influenced beliefs and practices. The Corbyn myth, in comparison to rival imaginative frameworks within Labour, proved formidable. Jon Lansman described the rise of Corbynism as ‘exciting . . . what’s not to like about that, even if you’re a middle-of-the-road Labour Party loyalist’ (quoted in Nunns, 2018: 224). Corbyn suffered appalling leadership poll ratings with voters throughout his tenure (Ipsos MORI, 2019). While Labour’s electoral woes did not begin with Corbynism, post-2019 election analysis revealed that leadership was most frequently cited as the reason for voters no longer supporting Labour (Ashcroft, 2020). Yet Corbyn’s leadership endured.

In an extraordinary turn of events, Corbyn was suspended from the Labour Party in October 2020 and then reinstated the following month. Aspects of his legacy and performance as leader, the failure to tackle antisemitism foremost among them, have begun to be addressed by Labour’s leader Keir Starmer. Yet Starmer’s 10 leadership pledges committed to perpetuating Corbyn’s ‘breaking the mould’ approach – particularly on economic policy and migration (Starmer, 2020). The Iraq War still featured prominently. On class, the 2020 leadership contest was ‘compared to Monty Python’s Four Yorkshiremen sketch, as the contenders compete with each other over who has the most humble background’ (Wheeler, 2020). The challenge for the contenders in the 2020 contest was certainly not to reject the Corbyn myth. It was to demonstrate that the same ideas could be attached to an electorally viable project framed by a conventional leadership figure. A crucial question surrounding Starmer’s leadership is whether he will begin to contest the ascendency of the Corbynite myth within the party. The Corbyn myth, and the meanings attached to it, still have enormous currency.
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