The idea of the Labour Left

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ABSTRACT

This article will challenge the Labour Left’s understanding of itself as a coherent tradition that is ideologically, teleologically and morally distinct from the so-called right of the Party. By analysing the concrete political positions of the three key post-war leaders of the Left—Aneurin Bevan, Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn—I will illustrate that the Left is not as distinct from the Right as it frequently claims to be and, furthermore, that the so-called ‘Left Tradition’ is itself ideologically contradictory. I argue that many of the confusions surrounding the Left/Right binary are rooted more in the use of vague and non-specific language than in concrete policy difference. As such, I propose an alternative method for understanding the Labour Left, one based on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘family resemblances’. This ‘model’ requires one to engage more critically with political language, but in doing so it allows one to understand the Labour Left as a more nuanced and complex phenomenon, one grounded more on reinvention and evolution than rigidity and tradition.

KEYWORDS

Labour Left; Aneurin Bevan; Tony Benn; Jeremy Corbyn; language

Part one: what we talk about when we talk about the Left

Introduction

The idea of the left holds much power over the Labour Party. Throughout its history, numerous conflicting figures have sort to prove their allegiance to the left, while the term ‘right’ is often hurled as an insult, as a sign that someone’s politics are a betrayal of the Party’s essence or even soul. Yet curiously, despite this almost religious need to be in communion with the left, Labour often finds it difficult to articulate precisely what the left is. The tension between these two themes of importance and vagueness was one identified by the Labour MP Richard Crossman in the 1950s. Musing on the nature of the left-wing Bevanite group of which he was a member he wrote, ‘what a mysterious thing “the Left” is? Why is this person Left and that person Right? What binds the Group together?’

In essence, this article will take up the questions that Crossman posed but expand them to cover Labour’s post-war history. As it is beyond the scope of this essay to investigate the entirety of what can be considered a part of the Labour Left, I will limit my discussion to three key figures: Aneurin Bevan, Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn, each of whom led and lent their names to the dominant left-wing movements of their respective eras, Bevanism,
Bennism and Corbynism. My intention is not solely to articulate and analyse the key political ideas which have underpinned these movements, but more crucially, to investigate how the Labour Left has historically understood itself. Naturally, there will be a certain amount of discussion of figures and ideas considered to be coming from the right of the party. However, I shall refrain from detailing how the Labour Right tends to characterise the left, and to as greater an extent as possible, allow the Left to speak for itself—whether this be through the writings of the three principal figures mentioned above and their contemporary supporters, or via more general histories of the Labour Party that have been written from self-consciously left-wing perspectives. In adopting this strategy, I will explore the shortcomings of what I consider the orthodox understanding of the Left—what I have termed the Tradition Model. Instead, I will offer an alternative Family Resemblance Model, one derived from the insights of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein which, I argue, provides a more coherent and healthier understanding of the Labour Left.

**Two Models for understanding the Labour Left**

In his recently published history of the Labour Left, Simon Hannah argues that what defines the Left is its ‘transformative agenda’, one that seeks ‘far-reaching economic, social, constitutional and political changes that challenge the existing power relations in society’. Hannah goes on to directly chart the progress of this tradition ‘from Bevanism, [through] the Bennite movement [to] Corbynism’, and further emphasises this point by writing that after the collapse of Bennism in the 1980s ‘the Labour left [was] put on the back foot for a generation- until 2015 and Jeremy Corbyn’s victory.’ Echoing the central thrust of this thesis, the trade unionist and former Corbyn adviser Andrew Murray writes that ‘the aim of the left … is a new society’, one that ‘will challenge the imperial world order’. Murray goes on to assert that the Left was represented by Bennism before being reinvigorated by Corbyn, writing in 2019 that ‘the left and the Labour Party are more closely entwined than at any point in history …. It is represented by Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party, although it did not start there and won’t end there either.’

This understanding of the Labour Left as a coherent tradition that has been passed down like a torch through successive generations of politicians, thinkers and activists is what I term the Tradition Model. Adherents of this view do not believe that when a particular figure is described as being a part of the ‘Labour Left’ that this term is being deployed as a mere empty signifier, with the individual in question being free to imbue the term with whatever meaning they desire. Rather, they believe that true adherents of the left tradition understand themselves as custodians of a particular set of values, ideals and political positions that they have inherited from former custodians and will eventually pass on to future ones. Thus, individuals do not get to unilaterally declare themselves a part of the left tradition. The key New Labour figure, Gordon Brown, for example, may well have co-edited an ‘anthology of socialism’—*Values, Visions and Voices*—which in his own words ‘celebrates the socialist tradition in Britain’, the values of which ‘endure and continue to inspire’ New Labour Party policy. But it is highly unlikely that any already established custodian of the left tradition will accept this kind of self-diagnosis as evidence of belonging, with Brown’s apparent plea for admission being rejected on the grounds that he failed to uphold key tenets of the tradition itself. Likewise, individuals
who have been considered part of the tradition can find themselves rebranded as traitors once their individual political ideas deviate too far from what is considered essential to the Left’s core. As we shall see, the most important left figure of his generation, Aneurin Bevan, eventually fell victim to charges of betrayal over his defence of the independent nuclear deterrent. None of this is to suggest that adherents of this view believe that the Left has therefore remained identical throughout its history—there is, of course, a certain room for ideological manoeuvre. But what they do argue is that there are certain identifiable traits that have reoccurred in, and defined, the various historical iterations of the Labour Left. Furthermore, these identifiable traits, which form the content of the tradition, transcend and take precedence over the individual attitudes of those who seek to embody the tradition. For example, ‘socialism’ is not an identifiable trait of the Labour Left because Bevan described himself as being a socialist. Rather, Bevan is considered an authentic representative of Labour Left because he believed in and successfully articulated the Left’s pre-existing commitment to socialism. Another way of putting this is to say that authentic adherents of the left tradition are considered beholden to a set of principles that exist, so to speak, above them. Finally, it is the transcendent content of the tradition that gives the Labour Left its sense of uniqueness, its authority to coherently say, ‘we are this and not that. We are beholden to this and you to that’. In short, it is what grants one the power to meaningfully say, ‘we are the Labour Left and not the Labour Right’.

This idea that the Labour Left is qualitatively different to the Labour Right is integral to this understanding. Hannah, for instance, understands the Right as countering the Left tradition’s ‘transformative agenda’ with their own ‘integrative tendencies’, that is, a desire ‘to weld the Labour Party to already existing state and social structures for the purpose of incorporating the interest of the labour movement into the establishment’.10 As he did with the left, Hannah offers a list of figures and organisations that have embodied and articulated what he sees as the right tradition of the party: ‘Ernest Bevin, the Revisionists and Progress’.11 In a similar vein, John McDonnell, in a forward to a recent collection of essays on Corbynism, wrote that ‘forty years after Eric Hobsbawm wrote of “the forward march of labour halted”—we have an incredible opportunity to put our economy on a new and better path’.12 Regardless of whether this statement bears any validity, it certainly contains within it the implication that the intervening Labour administrations from Neil Kinnock through to Tony Blair and Ed Miliband did not seek to advance ‘the forward march of Labour’ and were thus part of a different, non-left, tradition.

Keeping with this theme of division, the Tradition Model views the left and the right of the party as having differing goals or purposes. The Left presents itself as the authentic voice of the ‘working class’ or ‘the people’, while the Right, it claims, prioritises the needs of the ‘establishment’ (defined loosely as a set of institutions and forces which oppose ‘working class’ interests and power). In Defeat From The Jaws Of Victory, Richard Heffernan and Mike Marqusee, self-described Labour Left partisans,13 write that ‘at root, modern society remains divided into two classes with irreconcilable economic and social interests. This mission of the Labour Party is to represent and serve [the working class] and challenge the sway of the other’.14 As Labour was established to be the party of the workers and, likewise, as working class interests are presented as an authentic and worthy cause, the Left thus sees itself as both remaining true to the Party’s historic mission and being driven by an authoritative moral purpose. Thus, and on this understanding, to betray the Left means to betray the working class/people and Labour’s true essence. In
The Benn Heresy, for example, Alan Freeman writes that when Hugh Gaitskell sought to amend Clause IV (the Party’s commitment to public ownership of key industries) he was ‘in effect, saying that Labour should no longer be a socialist party. This implied it should no longer be a working-class party’. Nearly four decades later this feeling remained undimmed, with the Labour Left Briefing declaring that after Tony Blair finally removed the old Clause IV, his administration was now ‘Labour in name only’. While in a more recent example, the pro-Corbyn journalist Paul Mason accused the Labour MPs who passed a no-confidence motion in Jeremy Corbyn, of being opposed to ‘working class’ ‘counter-power’ and thus represented ‘the final defence line of the 1%’. Summing up so far, we can see that the three key features of the Tradition Model are:

1. Continuity: there is an identifiable, coherent, left tradition that runs through the entirety of the party’s post war history.
2. Division: the left and the right of the party are wholly ideologically and teleologically distinct.
3. Moral/ideological purity: the Left, by being for the ‘working class/people’ is both morally superior to the right and remains true to the Party’s historic purpose.

Alternatively, we can express the Tradition Model as such:

| The Left                        | The Right                          |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (Socialist, Transformative)     | (Social-Democratic/Revisionist, Integrative) |
| For the ‘working class’, ‘the people’ | For (or not against) ‘the establishment’ |
| Articulators:                   | Articulators:                      |
| Aneurin Bevan                   | Hugh Gaitskell, Anthony Crosland  |
| Tony Benn                       | Denis Healey                       |
| Jeremy Corbyn                   | Tony Blair                         |

As stated, I propose that the essential content of the Tradition Model is accepted (whether consciously or not) by most figures who self-identify as part of the Labour Left. However, I will argue that this understanding runs into many problems relating to its three central claims of continuity, division and moral/ideological purity, with many of these issues being rooted in the Tradition Model’s reliance on non-concrete, non-specific language.

In his 1946 essay, Politics and the English Language, George Orwell wrote of the causal link between unclear language and unclear thought. For Orwell, unclear language is when one writes with a ‘mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence’ and an ‘almost [indifference] as to whether … words mean anything or not’. Orwell is particularly critical of the use of what he terms ‘meaningless’ words, that is, words that ‘are strictly meaningless, in the sense that they not only do not point to any discoverable object, but are hardly even expected to do so by the reader’. We can see an example of this way of using language in Achin Vanaik’s essay on the life and legacy of Tony Benn. Vanaik seeks to answer the question, ‘so what did Tony Benn stand for?’, writing that Benn was a ‘committed Democratic Socialist’, a proponent of ‘industrial democracy’, who consistently fought ‘to rally support for all progressive causes’. All of these phrases are in a sense understandable, but none of them point to any concrete, identifiable, political proposals. For example, the assertion that Benn supported ‘all
progressive causes’ is a phrase that closer resembles a flash of Socratic wit than a coherent political statement—did Tony Benn support a cause because it was progressive or was a cause progressive because Tony Benn supported it? Vanaik tells us that Benn supported ‘industrial democracy’, but such a statement is virtually meaningless unless we are also told, in concrete terms, how Benn thought this would function and what it would look like. Finally, we come to the term ‘socialist’, a word that is deployed with absolute certainty throughout the essay as if writing that Tony Benn was a committed socialist is as clear as writing that Tony Benn was a committed carpenter. When someone is described as a carpenter everybody understands (or can easily find out) precisely what this means and the discussion can thus continue on firm ground. But the word socialist—perhaps the most fiercely guarded word of the Labour Left—does not function in the same manner. Instead, and to use Orwell’s phrase, it ‘[has] several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another’. For example, the socialism that Marxists speak of is fundamentally different from the free-market variety that was advocated for by Anarchists such as Benjamin Tucker, Josiah Warren and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. In short, the word socialist, when deployed without a deep explanation of context, does not point to any agreed upon concrete idea, and thus the discussion collapses into meaninglessness.

It is my contention that the Tradition Model—the view that there is an identifiable, coherent, Labour Left tradition which is wholly distinct from the Right—can only be sustained by utilising this kind of vague, non-concrete and meaningless (in Orwell’s sense of the word) language. For example, all three figures—Bevan, Benn and Corbyn—are considered to be part of an ideological continuum because they all proclaim themselves to be voices of ‘democracy’, ‘socialism’ or ‘the working class/people’. But in reflexively regurgitating these highly abstract terms one fails to observe that these three figures had extremely different, if not contradictory, understandings of these concepts.

Related to this is the issue of division. The Tradition Model sees the Party as a struggle between the left socialists and the right social democrats, with the former being understood as those seeking to overthrow capitalism and the latter aiming to create a more equal society ‘within a reformed capitalism’. However, this is a simplistic understanding, because again, when one looks beyond vague, platitudinous language to actual concrete political positions one can observe many commonalities between those of the so-called Left and those of the so-called Right. Furthermore, and again when one goes beyond the rhetoric, one observes that even the Labour Left has never truly been ‘socialist’, that is, if socialism is defined as seeking to overthrow the totality of capitalism. Rather, and as we shall see, both factions of the Labour Party have understood that capitalism will remain in some form, and thus, it is more accurate to describe both the Left and the Right as representing various shades of social democracy. This point was made by the key ‘New Left’ thinker, Ralph Miliband, who argued that the Labour Party could never ‘seriously [be] concerned with socialist change’, and that furthermore, the party ‘remains, in practice, what it has always been—a party of modest social reform in a capitalist system within whose confines it is ever more firmly and by now irrevocably rooted’. These sentiments were echoed by the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm who argued that Labour was fundamentally a social-democratic party in which ‘the left fights the right on comparable terms’.
Finally, there is this idea of moral and ideological purity. This issue has arguably become more prevalent in recent years with Matt Bolton and Frederick Harry Pitts arguing that during Corbyn’s leadership an ‘overweening sense of moral superiority became the sole determinant of what it meant to be a “socialist”’. As noted, this sense of moral authority is derived from the working class/people, yet apart from perhaps with Bevan, it is often what Orwell called the ‘idealised worker’ who is elevated by the Labour Left and not the ‘actual flesh-and-blood worker’. Advocates of the Tradition Model often define socialism as ‘working class’ power, meaning that when sections of the actual working class do not support or perhaps even oppose ‘socialist goals’ (however vaguely defined) the model’s internal logic is forced to declare them no longer part of the ‘working class’. This sentiment is of course never expressed so directly, but the essential point here is that the Left, by presenting itself as the voice of the working class/people, both takes its values from the actual working class and feels entitled to project its own values back onto an idealised image of the ‘working class/people’. Thus, the left leadership’s sense of moral authority is both derived from an external source and is self-generated. The confusion here is often not recognised, and as we will see, this issue has crucial implications when the actual working class/people wish to move in a certain direction, but the Left leadership wish for them to move in an altogether different one. Lawrence Black has documented the Labour Left’s long history of disappointment with the working class ‘for their failure to live up to the visions and hopes socialists had of them’. Hobsbawm, for example, complained of the ‘damned modesty of the British worker’s demands’, and in his famed article The Forward March of Labour Halted? lamented how the working-class had failed to challenge foundations of capitalism when ‘its movement should be in a position to provide a clear alternative and to lead the British people towards it’ [my emphasis]. That the workers might not want to bring down capitalism or advance more ‘revolutionary’ demands is not considered by Hobsbawm. As alluded to, this paternalistic attitude often merges with a selectivity, that is, with a tendency to deny those who do not have the correct Labour Left attitudes of their working class identity and thus their status as a valid subject for concern and solidarity. Tony Benn, for instance, in a diary entry pertaining to the 1984/5 miners’ strike, appears to excuse violence and arson attacks on working miners by those striking because ‘they are under great pressure and this is a civil war’. Likewise, Neil Kinnock’s leadership was described by Heffernan and Marquee as ‘without roots in the working class’. Considering that Kinnock was the son of a coal miner from the same community that Aneurin Bevan hailed from and that the two authors’ preferred leader, Tony Benn, was the son of a Viscount, one can only assume that ‘having roots in the working class’ is more about having the appropriate ‘left’ politics than actual lived experience. As we will see, this tendency to redefine the working class reached its apogee during the Corbyn era when, and as Jon Cruddas writes, there was a ‘quite conscious attempt to redefine the base of the left, by locating its key constituencies within an almost exclusively urban [middle class] cosmopolitan setting’. (For clarity, moving forward I shall always use inverted commons when referring to the idealised, conceptual, understanding of the ‘working class’ and write the word as is when discussing the actually existing social and economic group).

In criticising the Tradition Model, I am not suggesting that left-wing politics do not truly exist, or for that matter, that genuine working class politics are not important and valid. Likewise, in criticising certain aspects of the Left’s self-understanding, I am making
no claim that the Right of the party is therefore ideologically coherent, politically superior, or free from any of the more negative tendencies which are discussed in this article. My issue, rather, is with the conceptual framework that the Labour Left uses to understand itself, with my argument being that the orthodox Tradition Model is both inaccurate, in that it is sustained only by utilising vague and meaningless language, and unhealthy, in that it is predicated on division and the ungrounded assertion that one side of the party is inherently morally superior to the other. It is arguable, as we shall later see, that the Labour Left in the 1950s at least attempted to function as tradition in the manner described in the beginning of this section, that is, abiding to notions of custodianship and acting as if one is beholden to a set of values that transcend individual proclivities. However, by the time we reach the era of Bennism this ‘attempt’ at cohering to a genuine tradition has already begun to break down, while by the time we arrive at Corbynism it is all but impossible to speak meaningfully in these terms.

But if this is the case, and the Labour Left cannot rely on the authority of a tradition to meaningfully say, ‘we are the left and you are the right’, then does it necessitate that the term Labour Left is reduced to a mere empty signifier? That we are left facing a sort of conceptual anomaly by which the term ‘Left’ means nothing more or less than whatever anyone says it means? Patently, this is also false. Therefore, in place of this purely negative conception and in place of the orthodox Tradition Model, I shall advance an alternative framework for understanding the Labour Left, one which utilises the insights of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein pointed out that there are certain words and concepts which we commonly use, and understand, yet the precise meaning of these words cannot be expressed via identifying necessary and sufficient conditions. As an example, Wittgenstein, asks us to consider the word ‘games’—‘board-games, card-games, athletic games, and so on’. He then asks whether there is anything common to all before answering his own question—‘for, if you look at them, you won’t see something that is common to all, but similarities, affinities, and a whole series of them at that.’ A card-game has certain similarities to a game of football which in turn has certain similarities to a video-game, but while ‘you find many correspondences with the first group, many common features drop out, and others appear’. Thus, he concludes that a word such as ‘game’ is not supported by an unchanging set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather is defined by ‘a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing’. Wittgenstein terms these ‘family resemblances’, and I wish to argue that the word ‘left’ and by extension ‘socialism’ function in this manner. That is, there is no identifiable trait, or set of traits, that runs through and unifies all that is considered left or socialist. Rather, and to paraphrase Wittgenstein, when speaking of something as left, we are saying that it has some direct relationship to several things that have hitherto been called left; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call by the same name. Furthermore, we extend this concept ‘as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that one single fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres’.

This second ‘Family Resemblance Model’ I contend offers both a more coherent and a healthier account of the left. It explains how the Labour Left has changed so fundamentally (to the point of holding contradictory positions in different eras) over the last seventy-five years, yet there remains something we can still identify as the Labour Left.
Secondly, by not predicing itself on the notion of division, it allows one to see that certain ideas and values held by figures on the so-called Right not only merge with those held by figures on the Left but compliment and deepen the Left’s thinking, thus avoiding the often ungrounded moralising and bad faith arguments that cripple the Party’s ability to self-reflect.

Thus far I have only provided sketches of these two models, yet through exploring the politics of Bevan, Benn and Corbyn I hope to offer a clear picture of how they both function. The dividing line between the two is really over how one engages with language, with the Tradition Model being reflexive, and the Family Resemblance Model requiring one to adopt a critical approach.

**Part two—‘the left tradition’**

**Aneurin Bevan**

Although Aneurin Bevan is best remembered as the government minister who brought the National Health Service into existence, the principal themes which dominated his long and varied political career were poverty, property and democracy; themes which linked together to form the crux of his socialism. In his only full-length book, *In Place of Fear*, Bevan defines poverty as both material deprivation and as social and political powerlessness, a duel condition which he sees as ‘the normal state of millions of people in modern industrial society’.\(^{40}\) Wealth and political power, instead, are concentrated in the hands of those who own property, that is, those who control the means of production.\(^{41}\) Into this mix Bevan adds the third ‘force’ of democracy, specifically parliamentary democracy, the historic function of which ‘is to expose wealth-privilege to the attack of the people. It is a sword pointed at the heart of property-power’.\(^{42}\) From an analysis of these three ‘forces’ Bevan establishes a formula for understanding the direction of modern capitalism: ‘either poverty will use democracy to win the struggle against property, or property, in fear of poverty will destroy democracy’.\(^{43}\) Put another way, either capitalism will become socialism, or it will become fascism. Bevan published *In Place of Fear* towards the end of his career in 1952, but as his biographer Michael Foot attests, the words found within it ‘represented a political testament which he had formed in the 1929 Parliament and never wished to dilute throughout the rest of his life’.\(^{44}\)

Bevan’s political consciousness was sparked by the lived experience of his working class upbringing and solidified in Marxism, whose writings he described as having ‘all the impact of divine revelation’.\(^{45}\) The influence of Marxism on Bevan’s thought is further emphasised by his numerous biographers. Foot, for example, considers the aforementioned poverty, property, democracy formula to be ‘Bevan’s individual elaboration of the Marxist prophecy’.\(^{46}\) While John Campbell writes that ‘the foundation of Bevan’s political thought was Marxist: he saw himself not as an inspired individual but as a scientific socialist.’\(^{47}\) What Bevan took from Marxism was a commitment to class struggle,\(^{48}\) or more specifically, the idea that class struggle was the engine that moved history.\(^{49}\) For Marxists, capitalism is defined by a struggle between those who own the means of production (the bourgeois or capitalists) and those who are propertyless and thus must sell their labour to these owners (the proletariat or working class). These two classes are dialectical, that is, they come into existence simultaneously and are mutually dependent. Thus, the force
that will destroy capitalism—the proletarian revolution—- has been established, necessarily, by capitalism itself. And as Campbell writes, ‘from this fundamental analysis of the movement of history, Bevan never departed’.50

Although Bevan aligned himself with the overarching, theoretical, direction of Marxism, he was never dogmatic and remained content to jettison or deviate from the theory when he deemed it impractical or undesirable. As a young man he wrote that the Communist Manifesto ‘is today tactically valueless’ and that one misunderstands the spirit of its authors ‘if [one attempts] for one moment to give its findings the rigidity of a dogma or to make it anything like a touchstone for all time’.51 For Bevan, the advent of universal suffrage fundamentally changed the way in which class struggle could be waged, an evolution that he believed ‘classic Marxism’ had failed to appreciate or understand.52 Parliamentary democracy was now the means of achieving the proletarian revolution. Parliament, he wrote, was not a passive institution but ‘a weapon, and the most formidable weapon of all, in the struggle’.53 With the millions in poverty being able to elect their own representatives, for Bevan, it was inevitable that ‘the main streams of economic activity’ would be brought under public direction to serve working class interests.54

The issue of public ownership was of great importance to Bevan. After coming into power in 1945 the Labour government nationalised a number of industries but by the end of the decade, debates were emerging in the Party as to whether or not these early successes constituted the establishment of some form of socialism that needed to be consolidated, or represented just the first tentative steps on the path to building a true socialist commonwealth. Foot writes that Bevan took the second position, arguing that he ‘wanted the swiftest possible drive forward to establish the pre-eminence of the publicly-owned sector of the economy’.55 But despite the forcefulness of such declarations, it is important to recognise that Bevan did not advocate for total public ownership and instead was willing to accept the continuation of some form of private sector. In In Place of Fear, he wrote that ‘it is neither prudent, nor does it accord with our conception of the future, that all forms of private property should live under perpetual threat’.56, while, in a 1949 speech Bevan declared that ‘the kind of society we envisage, and which we shall have to live in, will be a mixed society, a mixed economy .... where we shall have for a very long time the light cavalry of private competitive industry’.57

In light of such views, we are left with the question of why Bevan’s advocacy of a mixed economy is considered part of the socialist left, while a figure such as Hugh Gaitskell, who also advocated for a mixed economy, is considered part of the social-democratic right. Perhaps the answer is that Bevan wanted the public sector to be the dominant sector of the economy. But if this is the case, then on domestic matters at least the difference between Bevan and Gaitskell, that is, the difference between Left and Right, is quantitative and not qualitative. This, however, goes against the assertions of the Tradition Model which, and in Hannah’s words, sees Bevan and Gaitskell as leaders of factions locked in ‘ideological warfare’.58 Yet surely ‘ideological’ disputes can only be sparked over matters of difference and not degree? It is here that we find the first example of the flaws of the Tradition Model. As stated, this model is predicated on the assertion that there is a coherent Left tradition that is wholly distinct from that of the Right. But in order to maintain such a position one must seek evidence in big symbolic gestures and ignore the subtleties of the principal figures’ arguments. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Labour Party’s Clause IV debates that occurred in the late 1950s. In short, under Gaitskell’s
leadership, a failed attempt was made to amend Clause IV of the Labour Party Constitution written in 1918, a document which was near sacred to many members of the Labour Party.\textsuperscript{59} But it is the content of this debate, and particularly Gaitskell’s and his fellow ‘revisionists’ intentions, which are often grossly simplified. Michael Newman, in an essay on Ralph Miliband and Tony Benn, writes that Gaitskell ‘apparently wanted Labour to abandon even its notional commitment to socialism’ (with socialism understood here as public ownership).\textsuperscript{60} Hannah writes that in seeking to amend Clause IV, ‘the Gaitskellites misjudged the situation and overstretched themselves—the idea of social ownership . . . still held a place in the heart of workers’ movement.’\textsuperscript{61} While Murray writes that the ‘Gaitskellite right, with Anthony Crosland, as its main thinker, had redefined socialism to exclude public ownership and class struggle’.\textsuperscript{62} These statements imply that the ‘revisionists’ social-democrats wanted nothing to do with even the idea of social ownership, a position which is then placed in direct contrast to the socialist, public-ownership championing Bevan. But this argument is so simplified that it is perhaps more accurate to describe it as false. What the revisionists opposed was that the original Clause IV was both extraordinarily vague and potentially misleading. As Gaitskell argued, Clause IV as it stood, implies that we propose to nationalise everything, but do we? Everything?—the whole of light industry, the whole of agriculture, all the shops—every little pub and garage? of course not. We have long ago come to accept . . . , for the foreseeable future, at least in some form, a mixed economy.\textsuperscript{63}

As we have seen, there is not a word in this statement that Bevan would have disagreed with. Furthermore, in the conference debate itself Bevan went on to play a unifying role. ‘I agree with Hugh Gaitskell yesterday’, he said, ‘I do not believe in a monolithic society. I do not believe that public ownership should reach down into every piece of economic activity, because that would be asking for a monolithic society.’\textsuperscript{64} In light of such statements, one can see that there is little basis for this supposed ‘ideological war’ between Bevan and Gaitskell on the importance of public ownership. In a more recently published biography of Bevan, Nicklaus Thomas-Symonds makes this point, writing that neither ‘Gaitskellites nor Bevanites would care to admit [that] Gaitskell and Bevan were not far apart on domestic policy. Both identified themselves as socialists’, and that beyond adherence to the respective leaders ‘it was not so easy to identify Bevanites as “left” and Gaitskellites as “right”’.\textsuperscript{65} As stated, one can draw a distinction between Bevan and Gaitskell by saying that the former advocated for more nationalisation and the latter for less, but neither advocated for the total eradication of all capitalist enterprise. Thus, it is more accurate to describe both men as being social-democrats, with Bevan being on the more radical end of that tradition. This can be seen not only in their mutual support of a mixed economy but also in Bevan’s advocation of the central ‘revisionist’ idea that public ownership should not be considered a socialist end in itself.

In his 1956 ‘revisionist’ classic, \textit{The Future of Socialism}, Antony Crosland wrote that there is often a confused between socialist ends and means, that is, the tendency to use the word to describe, not a certain kind of society, or certain values which might be attributes of a society, but particular policies which are, or are thought to be, means of attaining this kind of society, or realising these attributes.\textsuperscript{66}
Crosland’s chief criticism was of those who viewed the nationalisation of the means of production as socialism rather than just the means of attaining the kind of free and egalitarian society that socialists aspire to bring into existence. Using Marxism as a starting point, Crosland argued that the essential feature of capitalist exploitation was the separation of the labourer from their product. But crucially, he asked whether ‘this separation has anything whatever to do with the actual ownership of the means of production, or does it arise inevitably from the underlying technological fact of complex and large-scale factory organisation?‘ Crosland concluded that it must be the latter as regardless who owns the means of production,

both “confrontation” and “alienation” are inevitable; and someone other than the mass of workers must ultimately take production decisions . . . . the control centre is separated from workers; and the possibility of exploitation, and of all the other features of “capitalism”, is present.

Crosland’s book is usually placed in direct contrast to Bevan’s In Place of Fear, yet in the latter work one finds Bevan making the exact same point about the confusion of means and ends (with the only real difference being that Bevan made it four years earlier). ‘The conversion of industry to public ownership’, Bevan wrote, ‘is only the first step towards Socialism’, with the advance to ‘full Socialism [being] in direct proportion to the extent the workers in the nationalised sector are made aware of a changed relationship between themselves and the management’. Furthermore, and again like Crosland, Bevan warned that ‘there is at least as much danger of a rigid bureaucracy in private as in public administration. Remote control is the consequence of bigness, not of the nature of ownership.’ As with comparisons to Gaitskell, there is no suggestion here that Crosland and Bevan thus had identical views. Bevan clearly thought public ownership was the primary means of reaching socialism, while Crosland believed that along with a certain amount of public ownership, capitalism could be effectively managed by the government to achieve socialist ends. But again, the point is that these two figures were not wholly opposed. Rather, their thought often interweaves and compliments the other. Both shared the same fundamental belief that to reduce socialism to simply abstract talks about economic organisation misses the essential point. Crosland wrote that the goal of socialism was to ‘increase personal freedom, social contentment and justice’, a statement that is ideologically twined with Bevan’s belief that ‘there is no test for progress other than its impact on the individual’.

The final key area of Bevan’s thought that must be explored is foreign policy. The first issue for consideration is Bevan’s highly critical stance on military expenditure, with the most notable example being his resignation from the cabinet in 1951 over proposed cuts being made to the NHS to fund Britain’s involvement in the Korean War. Bevan’s critique was not motivated by pacifism but by the belief that the instruments of peace—in this case, the NHS—should not be sacrificed to build the instruments of war. In his resignation speech, he argued that ‘the defence program must always be consistent with the maintenance of the life of the British people and the maintenance of the social services’. But while it was the principle of NHS charges that drove Bevan to resign, he used his resignation speech to articulate a deeper message about the direction in which Labour should guide Britain’s foreign policy. Bevan spoke of the dangers of being ‘dragged too far behind the wheels of American diplomacy’, and instead argued that
Britain had ‘a message for the world which is distinct from that of America or that of the Soviet Union’. The core of this view reoccurs in In Place of Fear, with Bevan writing that there were ‘three conceptions of society now competing for the attention of mankind: the competitive, the monolithic, and the democratic socialist.’ For Bevan, both American capitalism and Soviet authoritarian communism were both morally bankrupt and structurally unsound, and thus Britain—under the democratic socialist Labour Party—had ‘assumed the moral leadership of the world’. Thus, Bevan believed that Labour had a profound responsibility to maintain its democratic socialist character (such as the preservation of its health service) in order to show the world a new, truer conception of society; one that did not fall victim to the excesses of its two superpower rivals. ‘There is only one hope for mankind’, Bevan said in his resignation speech, ‘and that hope still remains in this little island. It is from here that we will tell the world where to go and how to go there.’ Here we can see Bevan’s ‘third-way’, non-aligned, approach to foreign policy, but also his extraordinary patriotism. Despite Bevan’s criticism of Britain’s often capitalist and colonialist character, he still passionately believed that there was something inherent to Britain’s history, culture, institutions and people that established the nation as a shining light, a nation which others should seek to emulate. For Bevan, Britain was not just a great country, it would be the saviour of the world. Concluding his speech, he repeated that ‘there is only one hope for mankind—and that is democratic Socialism. There is only one party in Great Britain which can do it—and that is the Labour Party’. It is due to this pride and belief in his country that Bevan saw Britain as having a profound responsibility to the world. This sense of responsibility would often manifest itself in his belief that Britain should actively support less developed countries, but it also led him to adopt his most controversial position, his support for the hydrogen bomb.

During Labour’s 1957 annual conference Bevan spoke out against unilateral disarmament. For many of those who identified as the Labour Left, this was nothing short of an act of betrayal. Michael Foot wrote that ‘The Left of the Party looked for a moment as if it had exterminated itself’. Alan Freeman, author of The Benn Heresy, argued that although ‘Bevan died in 1960, Bevanism—the movement which dominated Labour’s left-right battle throughout the fifties, and which embodied all the hopes and aspirations of the forties—died that night.’ All matters regarding issues as morally complex as unilateral disarmament are likely to produce intense and emotional reactions, but Bevan’s position needs to be placed in context of the proceeding argument. As we have seen, Bevan viewed the world as divided into three competing forces. In order to carve out this third path Britain needed power to compete with its superpower rivals, and power—as unpleasant as it was for Bevan to say it—was found in the bomb. ‘We cannot simply turn our backs on the whole world scene’, Bevan told the journalist Geoffrey Goodman on the eve of a conference debate on the subject, ‘[but] that is what the support for unilateralism would mean, make no mistake.’ Reflecting on the fallout, Goodman wrote that

the issue of the “Bomb” was never, [for Bevan], a purely moral question. It all hinged on the practicalities of power. For that reason it was quite wrong to assume that “negotiating from strength” was necessarily focused against the Russians; it was vital for Britain to have a strength, however marginal, to negotiate with the Americans.
To claim that Bevan suddenly betrayed his own brand of socialism is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of his socialism. Bevan believed so passionately in the world-saving potential of ‘democratic socialism’ that Britain—as its chief articulator—needed to be able to compete on the global stage. In hindsight, Bevan’s view that Britain had the moral and geopolitical strength to lead the world to its salvation appears hopelessly naive, but it was undoubtably what he believed. Unilateral abandonment of the ‘Bomb’ would be to concede all power to capitalism and authoritarian communism, thus reducing the force of democratic socialism to a meek, passive and observing force. And this, for Bevan, would have been the true betrayal of socialism.

**Tony Benn**

When Tony Benn entered Parliament in 1950, he was not initially part of the Labour Left. He was invited to join the Bevanite group yet declined the offer, and after the resignation of Clement Attlee in 1955 he voted for the ‘right-wing’ Gaitskell over Bevan. Furthermore, his first tentative steps towards his contemporary iteration of the Labour Left were also to draw him further from Bevan by joining the campaign against the hydrogen bomb in the 1950s.

Benn’s true rise to leader of the Labour Left occurred in the 1970s as part of a broader feeling of discontent in the Party directed against the perceived failures of Harold Wilson’s 1964 to 1970 Governments. After the Conservatives’ victory in 1970, James Cronin writes that ‘there was a vague sense within the Party that Labour’s defeat had been largely self-inflicted, that the loss was perhaps a fitting rebuke for failures in government, and that it might require a rethinking of party policy and strategy.’ Echoing this sentiment, the prominent contemporary left-wing journalist, Owen Jones, has written that ‘the rise of a Bennite movement in the 1970s had everything to do with the collapse of the post-war consensus, abandoned as it was by the left and right alike as they tugged in different directions’.

The new direction undertaken by the Left of the party resulted in the formulation of the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES), which, while rooted in the thought of the economist Stuart Holland, saw Benn acting as its figurehead. The AES was designed as a response to the worldwide crisis of Keynesian capitalism. But combined with this, the Bennites also understood there to be a British-specific crisis, one which revealed ‘deep-rooted structural problems which have plagued the British economy and British society for the last century’. The British capitalist class, it was argued, had failed to keep the nation competitive. As Benn put it, ‘the lack of capacity, loss of markets to foreign competitors and contractions of jobs from which we now suffer follows years of low investment in British industry’. Thus, in order to revive the lost competitiveness the state must take hold of the national economy, while Britain, as far as it is possible, must withdraw from the global economy. In more concrete terms this meant the nationalisation of 25 leading companies, the establishment of import controls, and ‘the introduction of compulsory planning agreements of which the state would co-determine the content and level of production of both nationalised and private organisations’. A further key feature of the AES (and Bennism in general) was the demand for Britain to withdraw from the European Economic Community (EEC) and Common Market. As stated, the AES was predicated on the need for Britain to ‘retain control of the management of our economy’.
This however, Benn argued, would ‘not be possible as long as we remain in the Common Market’. For Benn, ‘the establishment’ engaged in a ‘systematic transfer of powers from the British Parliament to the Common Market’ to prevent a radical Labour government from actualising sweeping changes through Parliament. The EEC, he argued, had the ‘aspiration to perfect a market economy’, it was an undemocratic bureaucracy that was ‘wedded to capitalism’ and thus [represented] a major defeat in the long march towards democratic socialism. Critics immediately argued that taken together the AES proposals would amount to the establishment of a ‘siege economy’. But for Benn, the country was already under siege by the forces of global finance, with ‘the bankers’ and the government behind the fortress and ‘the British people, the trade unions, outside the citadel storming you’. For Benn, the AES would turn the siege ‘the other way round’.

As well as righting Britain’s economic woes, the AES was seen as an opportunity to increase workplace democracy. Like Bevan before him, Benn accepted the core of the ‘revisionist’ thesis that nationalisation was not a socialist end in itself. In Arguments for Socialism Benn wrote that workers control, or self-management, which is clearly the next step we must take if the existing public sector is not to develop into a corporatist nightmare permitting the worst forms of managerial authoritarianism to creep through the back door in the public service, public agencies and publicly owned industries.

However, when one looks at this idea of worker control in the context of the AES one notices a fundamental contradiction, one that led Jonathan Berman to conclude that ‘if ever implemented it would subject the working class to untold rigours and barbarities’. Bearman argues that the Bennite’s economic proposals are based on the belief that ‘British capitalists have abjectly failed and lost faith in their mission’, that is, by being preoccupied with finance and overseas investments they have failed to keep Britain competitive. Thus, as private capital has failed, ‘it is to be replaced by the dominance of state capital and planning’. Yet this creates an instant dilemma: if the central drive is to increase Britain’s profitability then if ‘wages [could not] be kept down British state capital loses out to rivals’. To solve this, the AES proposed that ‘in return for wage restraint, [workers] will receive the benefits of “responsibility for control [within] the workplace”’. But Bearman counters this by arguing that the AES was not really offering workers control over production. Workers were not being offered the chance to decide the overarching direction of the economy, rather, they were being compelled to manage industry as the State saw fit for it to be managed. Furthermore, ‘by saddling workers with responsibility for production in the workplace—though little power outside that—it would be workers themselves that administered their own exploitation’. As stated in part one of this article, the Labour Left, by presenting itself as synonymous with the working class/people, often assumes that the direction they wish to move the country in will inevitably be the same one the workers wish to move. The Bennite Left was no different, and furthermore, it is evident that if there was to be a disagreement between the State and the workers then it would be the State which takes precedence. In The Benn Heresy (a book written with Benn’s participation), Alan Freeman wrote that ‘above all, investment decisions had to be taken in consultation with government and, if necessary, vetoed by it. On the other hand, workers themselves, in the firms concerned, had to be drawn into the process’
emphasis]. From this statement, we can see that despite Benn’s rather platitudinous calls for ‘worker control’ the true decisive power would remain in the hands of the State bureaucracy. Continuing on this theme of control, Bearman draws an even more dramatic conclusion. He asks what would happen if the workers rebelled against Benn’s proposals to effectively turn ‘Britain into a large company’, or more simply, refused to accept the government’s veto? What if the workers didn’t want to be forced by import controls to ‘buy highly priced shoes from Northampton instead of cheap shoes from Seoul?’ Or what if wage militancy threatened the competitiveness of British industry? As Bearman concludes, ‘the bureaucrats would strive their utmost to maintain that competitiveness and, in the last resort, it would come to violence and suppression as they fought to sustain their command.’

In taking a closer look at the AES we can begin to see how different Benn’s leftism is from Bevan’s. Bevan, rather naively perhaps, believed it was necessary for Britain to remain a global power. Benn, on the other hand wanted to expose what he saw as ‘the fraud that lies at the pretence of Britain being a great power’. Bevan wanted for Britain to reach outwards, Benn wanted it to retreat into itself, detaching from multi-national organisations such as the EEC and NATO. Ostensibly this was to escape the forces of international capital, but as we have seen, Bennism, as expressed in the AES, was not seeking to end capitalist competition but rather replace private capitalism with State capitalism. Furthermore, Britain’s retreat into itself to become more competitive would have the unintended consequence of putting ‘renewed pressure on capitalists outside Britain forcing them to cut their own workers living standards, increase unemployment and so on’.

This discussion on the AES brings us to Benn’s complex and often ambiguous relationship with democracy. Benn undoubtedly considered himself to be a thoroughbred democrat. On initiating his 1981 deputy leadership campaign Benn outlined his ‘priorities’ as ‘PLP democracy, local government democracy [and] trade union democracy’. His opposition to the EEC was driven by his belief that membership amounted to the ‘sacrifice [of] democracy in Britain’. While more recently, Owen Jones, in assessing Benn’s legacy, wrote that ‘at the core of Benn’s belief’s was an unbending commitment to democracy’. The problem with such statements is that they fail to acknowledge that ‘democracy’ is an extremely vague, non-concrete term. Bevan, as we saw, was a staunch believer in the singular importance of parliamentary democracy. Benn, on the other hand, advocates for numerous democratic forces: parliamentary democracy, internal Labour Party democracy and extra-parliamentary democracy. The issue is that these three forces often conflict or contradict each other. For example, extra-parliamentary activity often seeks to discredit or disregard the conclusions of parliamentary democracy. Thus, while Benn consistently champions ‘democracy’ in the abstract, in practice he frequently preferences one democratic force to the detriment of another.

The first example of this occurred early in his career, during his struggle to be readmitted into the House of Commons after inheriting a peerage from his father. Benn argued that the entire episode was an affront to democracy. His constituents, 10,537 of them, had elected him as their representative and they were now being ‘unjustly denied their right of free choice in the member they have elected to represent them in the present parliament’ [my emphasis]. Here we can see that Benn is arguing that the highest or truest source of democracy lies within the electorate. But this was not a
position he consistently held, with Benn frequently advocating policies that would deny constituents their ‘free choice’. For example, in the 1970s Benn became involved with the ‘Outside Left’, a loose collection of groups who sought to ‘change the Labour Party’s constitution in order to secure their own policies’. Key to their goals was the introduction of mandatory reselection to ensure that MPs were more accountable to the membership. The motivation for these changes came from the belief that local parties were much further to the ‘left’ than many of their MPs and thus the Outside Left welcomed the opportunity to remove those who were considered ‘traitors to socialism’. While there was a certain realpolitik logic to these proposals they opened many questions about the nature of democracy. As David Kogan and Maurice Kogan write:

was it right that constituency activists should be able to unseat an MP who the majority of his constituents might re-elect? Was it democratic for these same people to attempt to control the voting behaviour of their MPs in Parliament by threatening to deselect those who did not reflect the views of constituency activists?

Chris Mullin, then a leading Bennite, wrote a pamphlet on reselection which ‘proposed 10 crucial issues around which [MPs] virtue might be assessed’ (such as EEC membership, defence expenditure and abortion). But while this proposal might increase internal party democracy, this is only possible by curtailing the ‘free choice’ of the wider constituents who may have held very different views about what constitutes virtue in an MP. As we have seen, Benn argued that it was a democratic injustice to remove him from the Commons as he had the votes of thousands of constituents. But carrying forth this kind of ‘democratic injustice’ is exactly what the Bennites were proposing to do to other MPs. In their view, the people had the democratic right to elect their representative, but the Bennites reserved a higher democratic right to overturn this as and when they saw fit.

One can observe this kind of democratic ambivalence in numerous other areas of Benn’s thought. One of the key reasons why the AES was rejected by the Labour hierarchy was because Britain had just voted to remain in the EEC ‘and that to institute import controls would effectively ignore and reverse that decision’. This willingness to unilaterally overturn a democratically reached verdict remained within the Bennite tradition. During the 1980 party conference at Blackpool, an event which Benn’s biographer Jay Adams calls ‘the crowning achievement for Benn and the left’, one of the motions carried was for the withdrawal from the EEC without a referendum. Similarly, in The Benn Heresy Freeman writes that Benn was outraged that the ‘democratically elected’ Labour government of 1964–1970 had been ‘denied the right to carry out the policies on which it was elected’. Once again, this implies that the electorate have the greatest democratic authority. But later in the book Freeman goes on to doubt the entire validity of electoral democracy by writing that ‘the parliamentary state of Elizabeth II claimed to speak for the electorate, but in reality spoke for the capitalist class’. Thus, and due to this supposed lack of democratic validity, Benn and the Bennites felt entitled to advocate the use of extra-parliamentary activity to overturn election results that they disagreed with. Freeman, for example, writes highly of the 1974 miners’ strike, of which he describes Benn as ‘almost the patron saint’. He goes on to describe the miners as being directly responsible for the fall of the Heath government, exercising ‘for a brief instant, the divine right to unseat governments which had until then been the prerogative of bankers, monarchs and Orangemen’. What Freeman leaves off his list of government-changers
is the electorate, the democratic force that Benn himself said has ‘the power to sack governments, which is the bottom line of democracy’. But combined with this power to ‘sack’ is the power to choose a government. And here we are left with another essential contradiction in the Bennite understanding of democracy: Benn bemoans the forces that prevent Labour from achieving its electoral mandate as ‘anti-democratic’, yet simultaneously, and in the name of ‘popular democracy’, he advocates forces that will deny other elected governments the right to carry out their democratic mandates.

It is in this ambivalent relationship with democracy that Benn differs most from Bevan. Bevan’s biographer John Campbell, speaking of the Bennite left, writes that

> the new left-wingers are a very different type from Bevan. Bevan was to the very core of his being a democratic socialist … he believed passionately in Parliament. The new socialists … on the contrary are essential Leninists; they believe in the party.

For Campbell, this ‘vital’ difference is driven by Bevan’s optimism. Bevan believed that due to the working class being the majority they would eventually elect a government that would wrestle power from the capitalist class and run the country in their interest. As Campbell writes, ‘democracy in [Bevan’s] view must inevitably lead to socialism.’

> The Bennite tradition, however, starts from the recognition that socialism will not be achieved in the foreseeable future by a majority vote of the electorate, and who therefore set themselves to acquire the power to impose it by controlling a party, which under a distorting electoral system, has a chance of winning power without a majority.

While Campbell’s argument has a certain power, it perhaps overestimates the Bennite Left’s conspiratorial nature. A simpler explanation of the difference between the two figures can be seen in their understanding of how democracy relates to socialism. For Bevan democracy leads to socialism; for Benn democracy is socialism. As Freeman writes, ‘Benn wanted to revitalise one of the oldest, yet most revolutionary ideas in the labour movement: that democracy demands socialism, and socialism demands democracy.’ Thus, on this definition, the sovereignty of the people is conditional; if democratic action does not support ‘socialist’ objectives (however vaguely defined) then it cannot be considered true democratic action and therefore can be discredited or even overturned. The core of this idea still remains within sections of the Labour Party. Historian Dimitri Batrouni, for example, quotes a ‘senior Labour special advisor’ during the Corbyn era as saying, ‘in the late 1970s there were two ways out of the then crisis facing Britain: Bennism or Thatcherism—the “British ruling classes” picked Thatcherism’. The fact that this figure does not believe it is relevant that the electorate also ‘picked’ Thatcher—three times—reveals much about how the Bennites understood democracy.

Related to these issues around democracy is the problem of whether the Left is attempting to articulate the aspirations and values of working class/people or reconfigure those aspirations and values to the correct ‘socialist’ orientation. Bevan certainly moved back and forth between these two positions. In *In Place of Fear*, he wrote that ‘the first function of a political leader is advocacy … he must articulate the wants, frustrations, and the aspirations of the masses … he should share their values; that is, be in touch with their realities’. Yet Bevan also wanted these same people to ascribe to his vision of socialism and was highly critical when they failed to do so.
1959, and after losing a third straight election, Bevan argued that the problem was that Labour was not getting their message through to the people, and that furthermore, the people had the wrong aspirations: ‘The problem is one of education, not surrender! This so-called affluent society is an ugly society still . . . it is a society in which priorities have gone all wrong.’ In the same speech Bevan lambasted those who fell for ‘the delirium of the television’ and took out large mortgages, promising that ‘when they realise that the refinements for which they should look are not there, that is in a vulgar society . . . then we shall lead our people to where they deserve to be led’ [my emphasis]. Here we can see that Bevan wanted to be both a representative and a reconfigurer. Benn too fluctuated between these two positions. But the crucial difference is that Bevan only attempted to convince people through his writings and oratory that his vision was superior, while Benn promoted polices that would actively seek to diminish people’s ability to choose a political vision that differed from his. For the sake of his preferred AES the referendum on Europe would have to be unilaterally reversed, while his support for mandatory reselection prioritises the democratic preferences of left-wing party activist over those of the wider constituents. Campbell’s insinuation that Benn was at heart a Leninist appears rather hysterical, but there is certainly a thread of unacknowledged and perhaps unconscious authoritarianism running through Benn’s thought.

**Jeremy Corbyn**

For many who understand themselves as being a part of the contemporary Labour Left, Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership represented the first time that the left truly had control of the party. In 2019 Andrew Murray wrote that ‘the left as a political movement and the Labour Party as an institution are more closely correlated than at any point in history’. Alex Nunns, in his Corbynite biography of Corbyn, *The Candidate*, stated that the election of Corbyn as party leader stood as the Labour Left’s ‘greatest ever success’. While Leo Panich and Colin Ley in their recently published *Searching for Socialism* consider the December 2019 election ‘the ultimate point to which the generation that formed in the 1970s had been able to carry the new left project’. To use the terminology of Hannah, after decades of Labour being in the hands of the ‘right-wing’, those with ‘integrative tendencies’, finally, those who had been fighting for the party ‘to adopt a transformative agenda’ were in control. Yet despite the boldness of such statements, it was under Corbyn’s leadership that the idea of the Labour Left broke down the furthest. For it is only possible to argue that Corbynism represented the fulfilment or truest expression of a coherent Labour Left tradition if one predicates their discussion on both extremely vague, meaningless language and an almost religious faith in Corbyn’s inherent left-wing credentials. But before this point can be made clear, first we must explore in some detail what Corbynism actually was.

Unlike Bevanism and Bennism which were primarily built on the titanic standing of their titular figures, Corbynism was not presented as Jeremy Corbyn’s unique political philosophy, but rather as a larger social movement of which Corbyn was the figurehead. Murray, for example, argues that ‘it is reasonable enough to address the roots of “Corbynism” . . . without dwelling overmuch on the actual living, breathing Jeremy Corbyn’. While Nunns writes that ‘Corbyn was swept to leadership by a fluid political
movement that cohered around him, burst its dam and became a torrent', 149 adding later that, "a movement, not a man" was one of the unofficial slogans shared by Corbyn supporters. 150

Initially, at least, this ‘movement’ was defined primarily by what it was against, namely, austerity and its interpretation of the political ideology of New Labour. For Corbynites, New Labour (and Blair in particular) represented a total betrayal of the Labour Party’s historic mission and values. This critique was not just ideological but moral. Hannah, for instance, titles a sub-chapter on Blair’s 1997 landslide electoral victory, ‘for what shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his soul?’ 151 While later in the book he describes the Blairite ‘right’ MPs as having traded opposition to food banks and tax cuts for ‘fat expense accounts, lucrative after-dinner speaking tours or seats on the boards of companies’. 152 This kind of moral outrage stems from the understanding that New Labour did not seek to (or even want to) challenge what Corbyn has referred to as ‘the failed dogmas of neo-liberalism … forged by Margaret Thatcher many years ago’. 153 The argument here is that after the breakdown of Keynesianism in the 1970s, the elections of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan saw the ushering in of a new dominant economic system, neoliberalism, one predicated on ‘massive tax cuts for the rich, the crushing of trade unions, deregulation, privatisation, outsourcing and competition in public services’. 154 For Corbynites, the essentials of this ideology were warmly embraced by New Labour and as a result ‘most of what Thatcher and Major had done would remain untouched’. 155 Thus, after New Labour’s capitulation to ‘neo-liberalism’, Corbyn’s leadership was presented as both returning the party to its true self and lighting a path to its future. As Nunn writes, ‘Corbyn managed to present a vision that felt both contemporary and a return to Labour’s core values’. 156 These ‘core values’, it should be noted, were not simply any values the party held before New Labour. While New Labour were certainly held with the greatest moral and ideological distain, they were understood to be merely the most virulent mutation of the ‘right-wing’ tendency that had long dominated the Party. Hannah writes that ‘Blair saw himself as destined to fulfil the revisionist project’, 157 while Murray views Blair as having accelerated Kinnock’s ‘reconciliation’ with Thatcherism, 158 going on to link Blair’s thought to the ‘discredited’ social-democratic ‘revisionism’ of Gaitskell. 159 Thus, all talk of returning to ‘Labour’s core values’ is really talk about returning to the values of the supposed Left tradition, particularly the values of Corbyn’s ‘ideological predecessor, Tony Benn’. 160

For Corbyn and his supporters, the neo-liberal consensus ended with the 2008 financial crash. 161 With the New Labour government falling two years later, the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition that came to power sought to solve Britain’s economic woes by instigating austerity measures. It was this that truly galvanised the Corbyn project. Batrouni quotes ‘a Corbyn supporting MP’ as saying that Corbyn ‘took the Labour Party from being a party of austerity to a party that is firmly anti-austerity. That was the first move towards a more radical politics’. 162 In directly seeking to challenge austerity, Corbynism presented itself as a substantive break with the ideology of previous Labour administrations, not just New Labour but what Corbyn called ‘the austerity-lite’ politics of Ed Miliband. 163 For Corbyn, austerity measures were not a necessary economic response to the crash but an active political choice to ‘run-down public services, slash the welfare state, sell-off public assets and give tax cuts to the wealthiest’. 164 Furthermore, the crash itself was seen as a consequence of the country prioritising the financial sector over
'the “real economy” which makes actual physical things'. In the words of John McDonnell, ‘society’s resources have been diverted away from productive use, and into low-productivity investments ... we chased the illusory gains of financial expansion, and neglected real wealth creation.' Thus, Labour under Corbyn would instigate what McDonnell called a ‘radical break with the past’, with the most concrete expression of this being found in the two election manifestos produced in 2017 and 2019. 

Corbyn’s supporters have been keen to stress the radical, anti-establishment nature of the two manifestos. After the leak of the 2017 manifesto, Nunns writes of ‘exhilaration at the audacity of the radical blueprint’, while Panitch and Leys state ‘that [the manifesto] included “landmark” measures whose radical nature was clear. When implemented, they would symbolise a new order’. Furthermore, and to heighten these claims of radicalness, the two authors write of how these policies would ignite ‘intense resistance’ from everyone from ‘shareholders and investors’, to the ‘deep state’ and ‘NATO’. This second point was also made by Hannah who writes that the proposals in that document were ‘considered dangerous radicalism by the establishment’. But what is curious to note here is how these authors—in the same books—also describe the same 2017 manifesto as not being radical at all. Nunns writes that Corbyn’s ‘economic policies could be judged to the right of those proposed in 1983 by the SDP—the rightest splitters from Labour’. Panitch and Leys also call the manifesto ‘hardly revolutionary’ and criticised it for not offering a ‘radical reorientation of economic priorities away from the industrial capitalist obsession with economic growth’. Continuing on this theme, Hannah approvingly quotes Corbyn’s own assessment that the manifesto was ‘depressingly moderate’. This second assessment appears more accurate, particularly if one compares it to the policies advocated by the AES, the 1983 manifesto or the February 1974 manifesto which promised an ‘irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families’. Instead, the 2017 manifesto contains no mention of the word socialism or any proposals to seize control of what Bevan called ‘the main streams of economic activity’. Public ownership was proposed for Royal Mail, energy supply (albeit, with little explanation of how this would happen and in what time frame), and for the railways, ‘as their franchises expire’. Despite the talk of a ‘radical break with the past’, many of Corbyn’s policies were strikingly similar to those of Miliband. Prior to the manifesto’s release, Owen Jones, for instance, pointed out numerous similarities between Corbynism and Miliband’s Labour:

[Corbyn’s] leadership effectively has the same fiscal rule as Ed Balls in the last election: balance the nation’s books, not borrow for day-to-day spending, but do borrow in order to invest. The leadership proposes a British investment bank: again, in the last manifesto. The key policy at the launch of Corbyn’s leadership campaign was equal pay audits. That was also in the last manifesto ... Labour would renationalise the railways, but this, again, beefs up Labour’s pledge under Miliband’s leadership. Labour would reverse NHS privatisation: again, Labour at the last election committed to repealing the Health and Social Care Act and regretted the extent of NHS private sector involvement under New Labour. Corbyn opposed the Iraq war, so did Miliband. The Labour leadership’s policy was to vote against the bombing of Syria, as it was under Miliband. 

While finally, and in an astute assessment, Jones writes that, ‘it seems as though Ed Miliband presented his policies as less left-wing than they actually were, and now the current leadership presents them as more left-wing than they actually are’. The crux of
this point was also made by the journalist Steven Bush, who argued that when you look to individual policies ‘Corbynism [was] really just turbo-charged Milibandism’. Perhaps the most radical policy, certainly in the 2017 manifesto, was the proposal to abolish university tuition fees. A bold policy, no doubt, but one that is more in the tradition of New Labour’s ‘education, education, education’ than any sort of Bevanite or Bennite attempt to capture the commanding heights of the economy. Likewise, the Corbynite vision of economic ownership as outlined in the Alternative Models of Ownership—Cooperatives, Municipal and locally led ownership, private ownership and (limited) state ownership is strikingly similar to that of the leading ‘revisionist’, Anthony Crosland. ‘The ideal (or at least my ideal)’ Crosland wrote, is a society in which ownership is thoroughly mixed up—a society with a diverse, diffused, pluralist and heterogeneous pattern of ownership, with the State, the nationalised industries, the Co-operatives, the Unions, Government financial institutions, pension funds, foundations, and millions of private families all participating.

In terms of foreign policy, one can again observe the desire to present Corbyn as a radical. Murray wrote that ‘Corbyn’s intention of changing the way Britain conducts its business on the world stage causes the establishment more angst than anything else’, and criticised those who sought to ‘[confine] Labour’s radicalism to its domestic agenda alone’. Nunns writes that Labour’s pre-Corbyn ‘elite’ have been ‘reliable servants of the state—pro-NATO, pro-nuclear’. Furthermore, and as we have already seen, Panitch and Leys considered NATO one of the forces which would offer ‘intense resistance’ to Corbyn. Yet all of these comments seem oblivious to the fact that Corbyn campaigned on two manifestoes which continued to pledge Britain’s allegiance to NATO and Trident, while simultaneously criticising how the army has shrunk in size and praising the UK’s defence industry for its world-leading innovation. When expressed in straightforward language, it is hard to understand how any of these continuity policies could cause such outrage to the so-called ‘establishment’.

This radical/non-radical confusion stems primarily from the fact that prior to assuming leadership, Corbyn advocated more orthodox Bennite foreign policy positions such as being anti-NATO, anti-nuclear weapons and anti-Europe. But this shift from holding ‘radical’ positions to advocating those of the status quo is hardly unique to Corbyn. Rather, this is a common path taken by most leaders of the Labour Party. Murray, in particular, acknowledges this pattern. He recalls attending a rally during Corbyn’s leadership campaign and reflects that these kinds of left-wing insurrections usually end in failure: ‘after a bold start, the new government . . . swiftly finds it expedient to compromise with the institutions of economic and political power’. Murray, however, is adamant that this did not happen with Corbyn, and in a way he is correct—Corbyn’s compromise with the institutions of economic and political power happened before he even formed a government. Thus, the question becomes: why was it that Corbyn was allowed to display Hannah’s ‘integrative tendencies’, abandon numerous Bennite Left positions, yet still be considered not only an authentic expression of the Left tradition but also—and as the opening paragraph of this section indicates—the truest fulfilment of the Labour Left?

To answer this question, we must first see just how far the idea of the left broke down under Corbyn. As mentioned briefly in part one of this article, it is arguable that the Labour Left in the 1950s at least partially functioned as a genuine Left tradition. As we saw earlier,
Bevan was considered by many to have betrayed the Left by abandoning the concrete principle of unilateral disarmament. And while I maintain that such a reaction was misguided and built on a fundamental misunderstanding of Bevan’s socialism, the incident shows that this iteration of the Labour Left at least attempted to hold certain unbendable concrete principles above the individual concerns of even their most titanic figures. This, however, was not the case during the Corbyn era. Corbynism certainly desired to ground itself in the authoritative power of a transcendent Left tradition, yet in actuality, it emptied the entire concept of meaning as there appeared to be little expectation that the movement was duty bound to uphold the concrete principles of its forbears. In short, one can say that Corbynism sought the moral authority of a tradition without the burdensome requirement of actually having to be beholden to one. Murray, for example, lambasts Kinnock for ‘[reversing] Labour’s previous hostility to the European Union and [embracing] Britain’s “independent” nuclear weapons’—yet he wholeheartedly praises Corbyn who campaigned to remain in the EU and backed Trident, twice. Likewise, Murray calls the “revisionist” removal of the old Clause IV the “scrapping of socialism,” adding that securing the change “[bent] the perception that Labour was “socialist” by any range of conventional definition of socialism.” But, Corbyn, who Murray unquestionably considers to have brought socialism back to Labour, made no effort to reinstate the old Clause IV. Thus, if Corbyn did not need the old Clause IV to lead an authentically socialist Labour party then inadvertently he has proved “right-wing” “revisionist” arguments to have been correct—i.e. that Labour’s “socialism” was never dependent on Clause IV. A further example of this tendency to allow Corbyn to adopt policies that would be considered “right-wing” if advanced by other Labour politicians can be seen in his stance on immigration. Bolton and Pitts write of how in 2015 Ed Miliband was heavily criticised by the Left for including “controls on immigration” as one of his key manifesto pledges and for printing these words on an official party mug. This incident was held up as “a totemic symbol of Labour’s moral decline”, with a pre-leadership Corbyn even arguing that any proposal to introduce any sort of immigration controls was “appalling”. Two years later however, Corbyn “fronted a manifesto pronouncing an end to the free movement of people from the EU—in real terms, the most right-wing policy on immigration the party had seen in generations”. It is not simply the about-turn on the policy that Bolton and Pitts want to draw their readers’ attention to, it’s the fact that Corbyn was able to do this ‘while not only escaping censure from the left, but rather being cheered to the rafters’. How such a thing is possible, they argue, is due to his supporters’ ‘absolute faith in [Corbyn’s] ethical infallibility’. One can see this kind of faith in Nunns’ book. He writes,

in its 2015 general election Labour supported free movement while giving the impression it would be tough on immigration; in 2017 Labour’s statement that freedom of movement would end was accompanied by some of the most positive language about migrants seen from a major party.

On this view, what takes precedence is Corbyn’s personality, his use of ‘positive language’, rather than his actual, concrete policies. As Bolton and Pitts write, ‘actual rights, sanctioned by law, were] cast aside in the name of Corbyn’s moral integrity.’

Another reason that Corbyn was able to be considered the fulfilment of the Left while simultaneously jettisoning numerous key principles once again comes down to language. The Left tradition, as Hannah writes, is defined by its ‘transformative agenda’. This word
occurs frequently in pro-Corbyn literature. Murray wrote of Corbyn leading a party now ‘committed to major social transformation’\(^{202}\); Nunns wrote that people flocked to Corbyn’s candidacy for the chance ‘to transform national politics’\(^{203}\); while McDonnell wrote of Corbyn’s ‘platform to transform society’.\(^{204}\) It is of course true that some of Corbyn’s policies would have been transformative. But were they so transformative that it makes sense to place Corbyn in an entirely different Labour tradition to Gaitskell, Wilson, Kinnock, or even Blair and Miliband? The evidence above suggests not. But in a deeper sense, one cannot even answer this question because the term in play—‘transformative’—is meaningless in the Orwellian sense of the word. To put this another way, a ‘transformative agenda’ is largely in the eye of the beholder. Hannah, for instance, views Wilson’s first government as being in the thrall of right-wing ‘revisionists’\(^{205}\) and ‘integrationists controllers’.\(^{206}\) But this was the government which also abolished capital punishment, legalised abortion and homosexuality and eased the law around divorce.\(^{207}\) Hannah, of course, acknowledges these achievements, writing that ‘it was the right-wing of the party, people like Crosland, Shirley Williams and Roy Jenkins who took the lead implementing these policies, not the left’.\(^{208}\) But using Hannah’s own definitions, the ‘right-wing’ does not seek to transform society. So how then do we explain these policies? Surely, millions of people being given the freedom to live and love as themselves without fear of state persecution is transformative? And surely the same can be said of giving women control over their bodies, or ending the practice of state-sanctioned murder? The same argument could also be made about the transformative effects of New Labour’s instigation of the minimum wage, Sure Start, devolution, and committing Britain to spending 0.7% of its gross national product on international development. As stated, I do not dispute that some of Corbyn’s polices would have been in some sense transformative. Rather, I dispute the exclusivity—particularly the fact that Hannah, and the Tradition Model in general, have made an absolute, objective distinction on the basis of a relative, subjective term.

The final area of Corbynism which needs to be explored is its ambiguous relationship with the working class. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of Labour’s defeat in the 2019 election was the loss of the so-called ‘Red Wall’, the solidly Labour voting, ex-industrial, traditionally working class areas in the midlands and the north of England. After such a mass defection, one would have expected Corbyn supporters to perhaps question how much Corbynism could be said to have spoken for large sections of the working class. But, as discussed in the introduction, the Labour Left fundamentally understands itself as being the working class, thus many adherents of Corbynism simply redefined the coalition of supporters who did back Corbyn as ‘the new working class’. Nunns defines this group broadly as ‘people employed in precarious jobs and the service industries. Combined with the overlapping categories of the young [and] the well educated’.\(^{209}\) Likewise, the Corbyn supporting journalists Ash Sarkar and Andy Beckett, see this group as primarily being made up of students, young renters in precarious employment,\(^{210}\) and urban dwellers.\(^{211}\) While none of these groups should fall outside Labour’s concern, it is not clear why Corbynites seem to believe that the indiscriminate categories of ‘young people’, ‘students’ and the ‘well educated’ should be prioritised over the traditional working class. The elevation of students particularly sits uneasily with the Labour Left’s self-described aim to first serve those most harmed by capitalism. People go to university for a variety of reasons, but whether one cares to admit it or not, attaining a
degree is highly likely to give one an economic advantage over one’s contemporaries who have not had the opportunity to pursue higher education. This is not to say that many students are not working class, or that many graduates do not end up doing low paid precarious work. The point is simply that they have a far greater chance of either avoiding this kind of work or getting out of it than their non-university educated peers. Thus, one must ask why those who are actively attaining the skills necessary to better negotiate and, relatively speaking, do better out of capitalism (or in Nunn’s’ view, the even broader category of the ‘well educated’) have become such an integral part of Corbynism’s understanding of ‘the working class?’ The answer appears to be that for Corbynism the true determinant for being a part of the ‘new working class’ is not one’s economic and social background but that one supports Corbyn’s policies. In an article on this theme, the journalist Sarah Jaffe writes that ‘the working class is being recomposed; that [Corbyn’s] Labour … is overwhelmingly popular among young people reflects that recomposition.’

Undoubtedly there were many genuinely working class people (as traditionally understood) who supported Corbyn, but in this statement we can first see the assumption that Corbynism—being so vocally ‘left’—must be the politics of the working class, and secondly, that because young people supported his politics they therefore must be a part of this group, with the realities of their background, lived experience and current or potential economic power being at best secondary issues.

In this indiscriminate rewriting of class one can observe how the Labour Left needs to understand itself as being one with the working class (it is their source of moral authority and historical authenticity), but also its tendency to view itself as automatically possessing the correct working class politics. Thus, it is the actual working class that needs to bend to the Labour Left and not the other way around. Jaffe warns Labour not to ‘over-correct’ in any efforts to win back its traditional heartlands, while Murray, in his analysis of the election defeat, explains the loss of these areas by writing that the problem ‘is that the labour movement has ceased to exist in many of these communities’. Whether this statement is true or not (or even has any concrete meaning) is up for debate, but what is clear is that blame for the rupture between traditionally working class communities and Corbyn’s Labour is placed squarely on the communities themselves. They simply do not have the correct ‘labour movement’ politics and thus presumably need to undergo a period of education before they can return to Corbyn’s true ‘working class’ politics. Taking these ideas a step further, Andy Beckett advocates that Labour simply abandon some of these communities: ‘Labour will probably have to accept that some of its old “heartlands” are gone for good. In the cities, and in growing southern towns such as Swindon … . Labour will have to build new ones’. Such a view is particularly striking when one considers Corbynism’s professed opposition to the ‘neo-liberalism’ ushered in by Blair and supposedly continued by Blair. It was these formerly industrial communities that took the brunt of these policies and arguably never recovered. That Beckett is advocating Labour turn away from these same communities (after first denigrating their inhabitants as xenophobes and fools who will likely become swept up by some ‘yet-to-be-formed vehicle for nationalism, or regional pride, or nostalgia’ reveals much about Corbynite priorities: it is Corbynism’s supposed purity that must be savoured, not necessarily those communities which fell victim to the ‘neo-liberalism’ it rhetorically opposes. In looking at the modern Left’s paternalistic and selective understanding of class we can see how far
the Left has moved since Bevan’s ideal that ‘the first function of a political leader is advocacy. It is he who must make articulate the wants, the frustration, and the aspiration of the masses . . . he should share their values; that is, be in touch with their realities’.217

Part three: conclusion: ‘it’s the verb that matters, not the noun.’

George Orwell wrote that inaccurate political language ‘is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind’.218 Therefore, he stressed that if one can get rid of these poor language habits ‘one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration’.219

This article has argued that the orthodox way the Left understands itself—what I have termed the Tradition Model—is both incoherent and unhealthy. It is incoherent because it is extremely difficult to identify concrete positions which have consistently defined its outlook, while it is unhealthy because it is predicated on division and the ungrounded notion that there are two mutually exclusive Labour traditions locked in constant ‘ideological war’ with each other. Instead, the Labour Left is a far more nuanced and complex phenomenon, one grounded more on reinvention and evolution than rigidity and tradition. Thus, I have proposed that it is more accurate to understand the Labour Left as a Wittgensteinian family resemblance. We understand Bennism as a particular expression of the left not because it was grounded in sacred, unbendable, ever-present, Labour Left principles of ‘transformation’ and ‘socialism’, but because it contained a ‘network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing’ with a previous expression of the left, Bevanism. Both Benn and Bevan believed in the importance of the old Clause IV, of gaining a certain control over the economy through the nationalisation of its commanding heights. But along with these similarities, certain themes in Bevan’s outlook drop out of Benn’s—i.e. belief in the supremacy of parliamentary democracy and acceptance of an independent nuclear deterrent. Likewise, Benn’s outlook added or placed greater emphasis on certain themes not present in Bevan’s thought—i.e. extra-parliamentary activity, the struggle for greater internal Labour Party democracy; radical opposition to the European project. This pattern is repeated when Benn is compared to Corbyn or Corbyn is compared to Bevan—there are similarities and differences, new ideas are advanced and old positions abandoned. Combined with this, and perhaps more importantly, the Family Resemblance Model allows one to see that the ideas of the Left have oftenthreaded with those of the Right and vice versa. Bevan and Crosland, for example, both advanced the importance of worker control, while Corbynism’s (generally) pro EU stance aligns it with the right-wing of the previous generation.

I have described the Family Resemblance Model as ‘healthier’ because rather than seeing two fundamentally opposed factions, it views the Labour Party in its entirety as a rich source of diverse concrete ideas which can be utilised to increase the effectiveness and validity of the Left. The key ‘revisionist’ idea that socialism will not be achieved by solely (and crudely) nationalising industries has been accepted by virtually all figures that identify with the Labour Left. Likewise, the attention shown to social politics such as racial justice and gay rights by ‘right’ figures like Roy Jenkins would become a key feature of much of the Bennite and Corbynite Left. Furthermore, this second model reduces the power of the Left’s often toxic charge that the so-called ‘right’ ‘betray’ the Party. One of the central ‘revisionist’ ideas was that Labour must react to actual political, economic and
electoral realities and not prioritise the chasing of unchanging ‘socialist’ shibboleths. But again, the core of this ‘right-wing’ argument is almost universally accepted by the Left. The Corbynite Left, in particular, was extraordinarily modest in its economic and foreign policy demands when compared to previous Labour administrations (even those led by so-called ‘right-wingers’ like Gaitskell, Wilson and Kinnock). But most supporters justified this modesty by arguing that the political/electoral landscape had so dramatically shifted that Corbynism was thus forced to make compromises. This is an extremely valid argument, but the issue I am highlighting is how ‘left’ figures like Corbyn and Benn are given licence to compromise their political ideals, while so-called ‘right’ figures like Gaitskell, Wilson, Kinnock and perhaps even Blair, are condemned as traitors for following the same rational impulse. One can betray a friend, one’s marriage vows, or even one’s country, but it’s difficult to understand how one can betray variable, subjectively understood and evolving concepts like ‘socialism’, ‘working class’ (as understood in its idealised form) and a ‘transformative agenda’. I have already discussed the problems with the latter two concepts as understood by the orthodox Labour Left, but if ‘socialism’ is understood as a form of politics that will replace the entirety of capitalism then none of these Labour figures discussed have been socialists. Bevan advocated for a mixed economy, Benn’s AES was effectively state capitalism, and furthermore, his rejection of Militant’s proposal to nationalise 200 companies in favour of the AES’s more modest 25 shows that even in a Bennite world there would be space for private property. Likewise, by the time Corbyn assumed leadership the Left had moved far enough from socialism’s maximal goals that Hannah even describes the 2017 manifesto as not being ‘anti-capitalist’. Thus, all these figures, by seeking to temper rather than eradicate capitalism are part of the social-democratic tradition, albeit on the more radical end. In these overreaching ideological matters, the difference between the ‘factions’ is one of degree not of kind. And thus, the basis for the toxic, moralising cry of ‘betrayal’ becomes severely watered down, if not entirely baseless.

As previously stated, none of this is to suggest that the Left and the Right are thus the same thing. There were clear, concrete, differences between the politics of Benn and Healey, and Corbyn and Blair. But while the Left and the Right are not identical, they are also not like oil and water; there is a certain, observable, interplay between the two historic factions. This interplay, however, remains largely unacknowledged by Tradition Model advocates who instead prefer to view Labour as an essentially Manichaean struggle between the good ‘left’ and the bad ‘right’. Division, disagreement and debate are necessary to the functioning of the Labour Party, but such debate is only meaningful if it is over concrete differences and not vague, ill-defined, subjectively understood, abstract concepts. Without this solidity of language, the debate will not generate any movement towards truth, clarity and understanding, because in a very real sense the debate has not even started. Without clear political language, one is almost compelled to see division where there is unity; similarity where there is subtlety. But most importantly, without clarity, there is no real communication. Individuals will not speak to, but past one another; so too will the factions of the Party, and so too will Labour and the electorate.

We began this study with the figure of Aneurin Bevan, and it is important to note that he identified and warned of many of the language problems that the Left would go on to struggle with. In In Place of Fear, Bevan writes that
the student of politics . . . must be on guard against the old words, for the words persist when the reality that lay behind them has changed. It is inherent in our intellectual activity that we seek to imprison reality in our description of it. Soon, long before we realise it, it is we who become the prisoners of the description. From that point on, our ideas degenerate into a kind of folklore which we pass to each other, fondly thinking we are still talking of the reality around us.  

Bevan, like Orwell, understood the dangers of language becoming disconnected from reality. Furthermore, he understood that language evolves: ‘Thus we talk of free enterprise, of capitalist society, of the rights of free association, of parliamentary government, as though all these things stand of the same things they formally did’. This article has focused on the Labour Left, but it has really been about how the Left’s understanding of its relationship to the Party is inhibited by the way it engages with language. The Labour Party is a social institution, and as Bevan wrote, ‘social institutions are what they do, not necessarily what we say they do. It is the verb that matters, not the noun’. Those who currently self-identify with the Labour Left and claim to be in communion with Bevan’s ideas would do well to remember this aspect of his legacy.

Notes

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4. Ibid., 164.
5. Murray, The Fall and Rise of the British Left, 191.
6. Ibid., 216.
7. Ibid., 30.
8. Ibid., 3.
9. Brown and Wright, Values, Visions and Voices, 13.
10. Hannah, A Party with Socialists in It, xvi.
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12. McDonnell, Economics For The Many, xviii.
13. Heffernan and Marqusee, Defeat from the Jaws of Victory, 2.
14. Ibid., 3.
15. Freeman, The Benn Heresy, 38.
16. Labour Left Briefing, quoted in Fielding, “New Labour and the Past,” 368.
17. Mason, “Corbyn: the summer of hierarchical things,” (Accessed 07/06/2020).
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21. Vanaik, “Tony Benn (1925–2014) ‘Committed Democratic Socialist,” 25.
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28. Hobsbawm, “Parliamentary Cretinism,” 66.
29. Bolton and Harry Pitts, Corbynism: A Critical Approach,77.
30. Orwell, Homage to Catalonia, 104.
31. Black, “‘What Kind of People Are You?’ Labour, The People and ‘The New Political History,’” 26.
32. Hobsbawm, “Parliamentary Cretinism,” 65.
33. Hobsbawm, “The Forward March of Labour Halted,” 268.
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37. Cruddas, “The Left’s New Urbanism,” 15.
38. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 36.
39. Ibid., 36.
40. Bevan, *In Place of Fear*, 22.
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42. Ibid., 25.
43. Ibid., 23.
44. Foot, *Aneurin Bevan: 1945–1960*, 20.
45. Bevan, *In Place of Fear*, 38.
46. See note 44 above.
47. Campbell, *Nye Bevan: A Biography*, xiii.
48. Foot, *Aneurin Bevan: 1945–1960*, 17.
49. Campbell, *Nye Bevan: A Biography*, 15.
50. Ibid., 15.
51. Bevan, quoted in Campbell, *Nye Bevan: A Biography*, 15.
52. Bevan, *In Place of Fear*, 39.
53. Ibid., 49.
54. Ibid, 50.
55. Foot, *Aneurin Bevan: 1945–1960*, 255.
56. Bevan, Fear, 144–145.
57. Bevan, quoted in Foot, *Aneurin Bevan: 1945–1960*, 255–256.
58. Hannah, *A Party with Socialists in It*, 97.
59. Jones, *Remaking the Labour Party*, 1–24.
60. Newman “Ralph Miliband and the Labour Party: from *Parliamentary Socialism* to ‘Bennism’,” 59.
61. Hannah, *A Party with Socialists in It*, 112.
62. Murray, *The Fall and Rise of the British Left*, 10.
63. Gaitskell, quoted in Jones, *Remaking the Labour Party*, 48.
64. Bevan, quoted in Jones, *Remaking the Labour Party*, 50.
65. Thomas-Symonds, *Nye: The Political Life of Aneurin Bevan*, 206–207.
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67. Ibid., 39.
68. Ibid., 40.
69. Ibid., 41.
70. Campbell, *Nye Bevan: A Biography*, 271.
71. Bevan, *In Place of Fear*, 128.
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76. Bevan, “Resignation Speech—23 April 1951.”
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86. Benn, *Parliament, People and Power*, 2.
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90. Jones, forward in Freeman, *The Benn Heresy*, ix.
91. Jobson, “A New Hope for an Old Britain? Nostalgia and the British Labour Party’s Alternative Economic Strategy, 1970–1983,” 674.
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97. Jobson, “A New Hope for an Old Britain? Nostalgia and the British Labour Party’s Alternative Economic Strategy, 1970–1983,” 671.
98. Bolton, Pitts, *Corbynism: A Critical Approach*, 131.
99. Benn, *Arguments for Socialism*, 163.
100. Benn, *Arguments for Democracy*, 16.
101. Benn, *Arguments for Socialism*, 164.
102. Ibid, 165.
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106. Benn, *Arguments for Socialism*, 42.
107. Berman, ‘The Anatomy of the Bennite Left.’
108. Ibid.
109. Ibid.
110. Freeman, *The Benn Heresy*, xiii.
111. Ibid, 40.
112. Bearman, ‘The Anatomy of the Bennite Left.’
113. Ibid.
114. Thomas-Symonds, *Nye: The Political Life of Aneurin Bevan*, 253.
115. Benn, quoted in Powell, *Tony Benn: A Political Life*, 157.
116. Adams, *Tony Benn: A Biography*, 389.
117. See note 112 above.
118. Benn, *The End of an Era: Diaries 1980–90*, 70.
119. Benn, quoted in Powell, *Tony Benn: A Political Life*, 184.
120. Jones, “Introduction” in Freeman, *The Benn Heresy*, xi.
121. Freeman, *The Benn Heresy*, 9.
122. Benn, quoted in Freeman, *The Benn Heresy*, 10.
123. Kogan and Kogan, *The Battle for The Labour Party*, 17.
124. Ibid., 13.
125. Seyd, *The Rise and Fall of The Labour Left*, 84.
126. Kogan and Kogan, *The Battle for The Labour Party*, 69.
127. Ibid., 27–28.
128. Ibid., 70.
129. Cronin, *New Labour’s Pasts*, 182.
130. Adams, *Tony Benn: A Biography*, 389.
131. Freeman, *The Benn Heresy*, 8.
132. Ibid., 31.
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135. Benn, quoted in Powell, *Tony Benn: A Political Life*, 176.
136. Campbell, *Nye Bevan: A Biography*, xvi.
137. Ibid., xvi.
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139. Freeman, The Benn Heresy, 20.
140. Batrouni, The Battle of Ideas in the Labour Party: From Attlee to Corbyn, 137.
141. Bevan, In Place of Fear, 35.
142. Bevan, quoted in Campbell, Nye Bevan: A Biography, 362.
143. Ibid., 362.
144. Murray, The Fall and Rise of the British Left, 210.
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147. Hannah, A Party with Socialists in It, xiv.
148. Murray, The Fall and Rise of the British Left, 154.
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157. Hannah, A Party with Socialists in It, 199.
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159. Ibid, 68.
160. Bolton and Pitts, Corbynism: A Critical Approach, 41.
161. McDonnell, Economics for the Many, vii.
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