CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Abstract The final chapter summarises the book’s main arguments. It also discusses how the study of the Labour Party under Corbyn in this book might be relevant to the study of politics in other countries where neoliberal economic policies and political centrism are increasingly being questioned.

Keywords Jeremy Corbyn · The Labour Party · Neoliberalism · Political centrism · Counter-hegemonic struggle

Summary of the Book’s Main Arguments

This book explored socio-politico-economic developments in the UK that finally led in 2015 to the resurgence of radical left-wing politics in the Labour Party. It analysed structural constraints on left-wing politics, the prospects of a radical Labour government gaining power, and the transformative potential of Labour’s economic and social policies under Corbyn. In sum, the central argument of the book is that the material, institutional and ideological conditions before 2015 opened political space for a left-wing Labour Party. Yet at the same time, dominant historical structures, characterised by economic neoliberalism, the disciplining power of transnational capital and conservative ideas and political institutions, still provide a ‘frame of action’ that severely limited the possibility of
a left-wing Labour Party coming to power. Labour under Corbyn was unsuccessful in its attempt to establish a counter-hegemonic bloc but, to a certain extent, it was able to challenge the political economic status quo and propagate alternative ideas and policies. Drawing from a neo-Marxist and neo-Gramscian framework, the book argued that Labour ought to adopt a long-term approach to counter-hegemonic political struggle so as not to shrink the space for progressive politics. It also argued that Labour’s policies under Corbyn contained important political economic ideas that aimed to redress structural economic problems and tackle contemporary challenges. The following paragraphs elaborate on these arguments.

Chapter 2 discussed the academic debate on parliamentary socialism and the Labour Party, and analysed the material, ideological and institutional political economic conditions before 2015 that both constrained and facilitated the Corbyn project. It briefly explored how changes in global economic conditions aided the rise of neoliberal economic ideas and policies to a hegemonic position in the late 1970s, and how the Labour Party’s post-World War II commitment to social democracy was eroded over time. The chapter also discussed how the electoral successes under Tony Blair’s leadership of New Labour helped to solidify the narrative that the Labour Party cannot shift ‘too Left’ without sacrificing its electoral chances. Nevertheless, the chapter argued that, whilst New Labour governments managed to expand public expenditures for socially beneficial purposes, they also led the UK further into an unbalanced, unequal and finance-led economy. Even though New Labour was politically successful in the short term, it consequently left Labour with no inspiring alternatives to austerity, neoliberal economics and finance-led growth to offer voters after the 2008 economic crisis.

Chapter 3 built on the discussion in Chapter 2 regarding how the material, institutional and ideological conditions before 2015 opened political space for a left-wing Labour Party. Nevertheless, the dominant historical structures characterised by economic neoliberalism, conservative ideas and political institutions, continued to provide the ‘frame of action’ that severely limited the possibility of a radical left-wing Labour Party coming to power, as evidenced by the results of the General Elections of 2017 and 2019. In addition to Labour’s strategic errors and other shortcomings, the UK’s preoccupation with Brexit stole the limelight away from Labour’s radical reform agenda in 2019. Ultimately, Johnson’s Conservative Party was more successful at creating a new right-of-centre
hegemonic bloc based on the propagation of populist Brexit narratives. Nevertheless, Chapter 3 argued that, to a certain extent, Labour under Corbyn was able to shift political debates leftwards and propagate alternative political and economic ideas in wider society. Furthermore, Chapter 3 highlighted the importance of political narratives and the interconnections between ideas and material realities, and reaffirmed one of the book’s main arguments that the Labour Party necessarily needs to engage in consistent ideological challenges to the status quo if it wants to drive transformative changes in society.

Chapter 4 discussed in greater detail how Labour under Corbyn challenged the neoliberal economic status quo. The chapter argued that it is misleading to characterise Labour’s economic policies under Corbyn as populist, nationalist or anti-business, or simply as ‘tax and spend’ policies that would fund an enlarged centralised paternalistic state. Instead, it argued that Labour’s economic policies aimed to redress structural economic problems such as inequality and uneven regional development, and to tackle contemporary challenges such as climate change and disruptive technologies. Labour also aimed to increase productivity, investments and long-term economic growth, as well as to promote economic democracy, devolution of power and progressive internationalism. If Labour had come to power its policies would likely have faced great opposition, such as from transnational capital groups and state bureaucracy. Possible implementation problems might also have led to further adjustment and development of the policies. Nevertheless, Chapter 4 argued that these policies contained important progressive political economic ideas that Labour after Corbyn and the Left could draw inspiration from.

Based on the discussions in Chapters 3 and 4, the book argued that Labour under Corbyn tried but failed to establish a rival historical structure to alter the form of state in the UK. Chapters 3 and 4 also discussed the future of dissent for Labour and the Left after the 2019 General Election. Chapter 3 pointed out some of Labour’s most important political challenges, which include convincing voters that its progressive economic policies are credible and winning over fragmented groups of voters. To form broad-based, cross-class, cross-region and cross-generational political support, which is necessary to win elections and push through transformative political and economic reforms, Chapter 3 argued that Labour might need to pay more attention to people’s identities and values, as opposed to only voters’ economic interests. Chapter 4 further argued that, even after Labour’s 2019 electoral defeat, it is important for
the Left to continue its engagement with national politics and support counter-hegemonic ideological struggles at national and international levels. Chapter 4 proposed that Labour and its supporters ought to develop strategies to popularise alternative economic ideas, campaign for progressive political reforms and foster transnational alliances. Labour and the Left could also increase its engagement with local communities to overcome the ‘cities and towns divide’, as well as step up its support for alternative economic initiatives. Arguably, having more successful examples of alternative economic practices and institutions across the country would help to justify national policies to promote economic democracy and alternative models of ownership in the future.

**Final Reflections on the Book’s Relevance to Other Countries**

The study of the Labour Party under Corbyn in this book contributes to scholarly debates on the interconnections between material, institutional and ideological structures at domestic and international levels, and on the possibilities of agents realising radical social transformations, given hegemonic structural constraints. It also supports the view that consistent ideological challenges to the status quo are an important part of a long-term counter-hegemonic project to drive transformative changes in society. This approach might be relevant to the understanding of politics in other countries where neoliberal economic policies and political centrisms are increasingly being questioned by left-of-centre (as well as right-of-centre) forces. As Chapter 4 argued, the present historical juncture has opened opportunities for the Left to popularise progressive economic alternatives, such as those developed by Labour during Corbyn’s leadership. The social and economic consequences of the coronavirus and serious contemporary problems, such as climate change and technological disruptions, arguably provide justifications for new approaches to economic policies and an increased role for the state in the economy. World-renowned economists, including Lord Nicholas Stern and Joseph Stiglitz, for example, have argued in favour of green economic recovery plans (reported in Harvey 2020). Moreover, the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recently claimed that ‘[t]he global political and economic system is not delivering on critical global public goods: public health, climate action, sustainable development, peace’ (cited in Al Jazeera 2020). He also argued that the coronavirus pandemic
has highlighted the immense magnitude of global inequalities, including highly unequal power relations between countries, and called for a fundamental reform of global governance to help rectify these problems (cited in Al Jazeera 2020).

There is cause to be concerned, however, that the present historical juncture might prove to be a challenging period for progressive forces. It has been argued that the far right’s ‘ultra-nationalist, racist, sexist and homophobic overtones’ might receive increased support from citizens in many countries where neoliberalism and liberal democratic politics are increasingly being questioned (Panitch and Gindin 2018, 11). As of early 2020, right-leaning forces have maintained, gained or solidified their power in countries such as the US, the UK, Brazil, Poland, China, India and Thailand. It is up to the Left in countries across the world to work towards popularising progressive political and economic alternatives that would tackle pressing socio-ecological problems, as well as promote social justice and greater equality. Given bleak future prospects and the overwhelming power of right-wing forces, the most important task for the Left is perhaps not to lose hope. The costs of giving up are simply too high.

References

Al Jazeera. 2020. “UN Chief: World ‘at the Breaking Point’ with Vast Inequality,” July 19. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/chief-world-breaking-point-vast-inequality-200718163541857.html.

Harvey, Fiona. 2020. “Heed Lessons of 2008 Crisis, Experts Warn Global Leaders.” The Guardian, May 20. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/20/heed-lessons-of-2008-crisis-experts-warn-global-leaders.

Panitch, Leo, and Sam Gindin. 2018. The Socialist Challenge Today: Syriza, Sanders, Corbyn. London: The Merlin Press.