Abstract The chapter provides an overview of the book. It discusses the methodological and theoretical framework, which draws on neo-Marxist and neo-Gramscian perspectives. A summary of the book’s main arguments and a chapter outline are also provided.

Keywords Corbyn · Coxian critical theory · Neo-Gramscian · Neo-Marxist · Eroding capitalism · State autonomy

Labour Under Corbyn: An Overview
After its defeat in the 2015 General Election, one might expect the Labour Party to shift ‘right’ along the political spectrum to attract more voters, according to the prevailing Downsian political common sense of the day. Therefore, it was a surprise when Jeremy Corbyn, a lifelong left-wing backbencher, won the Labour leadership election in late 2015, aided by strong grassroots groups that helped his campaign. Corbyn was heavily criticised by mainstream media and also by Labour members of parliament (MPs) who were dismayed by the party’s shift to the left. Labour under Corbyn proposed to reorient the economy to serve progressive socio-environmental goals and bring about an egalitarian transformation of society. Labour did unexpectedly well in the 2017 General Election; the party achieved a large increase in its vote share comparable to that which
saw Labour’s Clement Attlee become Prime Minister after the Second World War. Nevertheless, the rise to power of a left-wing government in the UK, a deeply conservative country, was undermined by various structural constraints. By the end of 2019 the Corbyn project was in terminal decline; Labour’s position on Brexit, strategic political challenges from the Right, and Corbyn’s unpopularity, amongst other factors, contributed to Labour’s devastating defeat in the December General Election, which was characterised by many seat losses in the so-called Labour ‘heartlands’. Corbyn stepped down as leader in April 2020 whilst Labour members engaged in tense debates about the party’s future direction.

Inspired by these developments, as well as by scholarly debates on the Labour Party and the prospect of ‘parliamentary socialism’, this book aims to provide an accessible yet critical analysis of the Labour Party under Corbyn’s leadership in the context of contemporary British political economy. It attempts to: (1) explore the socio-politico-economic development in the UK that finally led in 2015 to the resurgence of radical left-wing politics in the Labour Party; (2) analyse structural limitations on left-wing politics, the prospect of a radical Labour government gaining power, and the transformative potential of Labour’s economic and social policies under Corbyn. Given ongoing discussions about the future direction of the Labour Party, it is more important than ever to reflect not only on the immediate causes that led to Labour’s defeat in the 2019 General Election, but also on structural constraints on left-wing politics and democratic socialism.

The following section discusses the methodological and theoretical framework of the book, which draws on neo-Marxist and neo-Gramscian perspectives. A summary of the book’s main arguments and a chapter outline are also provided in this chapter.

Methodological and Theoretical Approach

This book adopts a qualitative research approach and relies on primary sources such as statistics, and also a wide range of secondary sources such as books, academic journals, Labour Party publications and reports by non-governmental organisations. Its underlying epistemological stance is that of critical realism; whilst subscribing to a foundationalist ontological position and the idea that structures constrain and facilitate agents, the study in this book also gives importance to how agents interpret
reality and shape these structures (Marsh et al. 2018, 193–194). Moreover, the book follows Marsh’s dialectical approach to the relationships between structure and agency, where material and ideational structures ‘provide the context within which agents act’ and can also have effects on agents even though they are not conscious of them (Marsh 2018, 207). Agents have their own preferences/objectives and interpretations of context, which shape their actions and the structures in an ‘interactive and iterative’ manner (Marsh 2018, 207–208).

The book also broadly adopts Robert W. Cox’s critical theory approach, which commits to exploring the possibilities of a different future. Based on historical analyses, critical theory seeks to clarify what are feasible alternative transformations that serve as ‘a guide to strategic action for bringing about an alternative order’ (Cox 1981, 130). Similar to approaches adopted by Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, Coxian critical theory subscribes to historical materialism and focuses on the dialectical process at the level of real history, which enables the study of how contradictions and opposed social forces may give rise to change and alternative developmental paths (Cox 1981, 133–134). Overall, the book draws inspiration from Cox’s conceptualisation of social forces, historical structures and the possibility for transformative radical change. However, to enhance this framework, the book also draws on various neo-Gramscian and neo-Marxist writings, as well as from relevant critical political economic writings, to analyse the Labour Party’s prospects of advancing a radical left-wing political agenda in the UK, as the following paragraphs briefly discuss.

First of all, it is important to ask whether the Labour Party should be viewed as an agent that could advance a radical political economic agenda in the UK, given that many neo-Marxists have warned of the limitations of using the state to advance anti-capitalist and socialist causes. In the 1970s, the famous debate between Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas on the nature of the state (see Miliband 1969, 1973; Poulantzas 1976) raised important questions about how, in addition to state managers’ generally sympathetic stance to the capitalist status quo (the ‘instrumentalist’ perspective associated with Miliband), there are deep structural constraints that limit the state from pursuing options that contradict capitalist interests, which means that changes in state personnel will not simply bring about radical transformation of capitalist society (the ‘structuralist’
perspective associated with Poulantzas).¹ There are some contemporary left-wing scholars, however, who have argued that capturing the state to advance socialist agenda should not be ruled out. For example, whilst accepting that there are elements of truth in both Miliband’s and Poulantzas’ theories of the state, Coates (2013) argued that left-leaning political parties could use the state to manage the capitalist economy in favour of the labouring class, and also to instigate social redistribution and institutional reforms (Coates 2013, 50). Drawing from Poulantzas’ work on the democratic road to socialism (Poulantzas 1978) and Panitch and Gindin (2017) also pointed to the importance of institutional reforms, particularly that of democratising state apparatuses to support alternative ways of organising the economy, such as by supporting collective property rights and further socialisation of the economy (Panitch and Gindin 2017, 178–182). For Poulantzas (1978), the central concern of the democratic road to socialism was how to combine social struggles within and outside the state in order to radically transform the state, its apparatuses and representative democracy, as well as promote direct democracy and self-management bodies in a comprehensive manner (Poulantzas 1978, 79, 83–86).

Chapter 2 expands on the discussion above by exploring academic debates on the Labour Party and the possibility of parliamentary socialism in the UK. Chapters 3 and 4 also draw on the work of Erik Olin Wright (2010, 2019) to help analyse the transformative potential of Labour’s policies under Corbyn. Wright (2010) argued that the state should be seen as ‘a hybrid structure’ containing contradictory non-capitalist and (predominantly) capitalist elements (Wright 2010, 190), and that it is an important site of struggle to push for transformative social change. This, however, does not mean that bottom-up practices to challenge capitalism should be ignored, but that the state could be used to widen space for bottom-up initiatives (Wright 2019, 64). Having ‘civil society-based collective actors’ and progressive political parties working together to ‘erode capitalism’ (Wright 2019, 121), as well as encouraging these collective efforts (Wright 2019, 142–143), is also important.

¹These are popular characterisations of the two perspectives that formed subsequent debates, which arguably do not capture the nuances in Miliband’s and Poulantzas’ arguments. The instrumentalist interpretation of Miliband’s work, for example, might overlook the importance of state elite’s ideological socialisation and ideology’s role in perpetuating capitalism (Konings 2010, 178–179).
As discussed previously, the book also uses a Coxian critical political economy approach to enrich its analyses on the nature of the state, the constraints imposed on the state by the global capitalist system, and the prospect of transformative radical change. Cox (1981) argued that agents cannot act absolutely freely as their actions are situated within ‘a framework of action’ or ‘historical structures’ that can be studied through a historical approach. It is further recognised that this ‘framework of action’—‘a particular combination of thought patterns, material conditions and human institutions which has a certain coherence among its elements’—changes over time and that critical theory’s central concern is to explore these changes (Cox 1981, 135). To analyse the current historical structures that are constraining the actions of individuals, the Coxian approach takes into account configurations of three main forces: material capabilities, ideas and institutions. It also introduces a dialectical element by studying emerging rival structures or configurations of forces that could lead to alternatives (Cox 1981, 135–136). On this issue, Marsh’s dialectical approach to the relationships between ‘the material’ and ‘the ideational’ provides supportive insight, as it highlights how both the material and the ideational constrain the actions of agents, and affirms that material reality does affect the effectiveness of narratives (Marsh 2018, 210–211).

Cox is famous for using his historical structures approach to study how the world order came about, and how it might change and be transformed through the interactions of social forces, forms of state and world orders (Cox 1981, 141). This may not appear relevant to the study of British political economy. However, the relevant insight from Cox is that social forces, forms of state and world orders are interconnected and that at each level dominant and rival structures of the three main forces—material capabilities, ideas and institutions—continue to operate (Cox 1981, 137–138). This is useful in the book’s conceptualisation of how competing social forces could give rise to a different form of state, and also helps to highlight how an analysis of the state, and of domestic politics, could benefit from taking into account domestic and transnational forces. These points are further explored below.

From a Coxian or neo-Gramscian perspective, the ‘form of state’ is based on the characteristics of leading social forces that managed to combine cross-class and factional interests and successfully form a hegemonic ‘historical bloc’. By highlighting how social forces shape the nature of the state, this theoretical conception of the state takes into account
state–civil society relations and supports the view that there can be different forms of state based on the results of political struggles (Bieler and Morton 2006, 90–92). Notably, analyses of social forces should also take into account seemingly ‘non-class’ issues such as ‘peace, ecology and feminism’ (Cox 1987, 353, cited in Bieler and Morton 2006, 90) and other forms of identity such as those based on nationalism, religion and gender (Bieler and Morton 2006, 90). Moreover, the concepts of ‘class’ and class identity should be historicised based on the process of economic exploitation rather than seen as a static category (Bieler and Morton 2006, 90).

Central to a neo-Gramscian analysis is the focus on rival counter-hegemonic historical blocs that engage in anti-capitalist transformative politics (for example, see Rupert 2005, 492). Neo-Marxist perspectives also provide additional insights on the conceptualisation of counter-hegemony. As Poulantzas argued, advancing democratic socialism would require a long process of modifying ‘the relationship of forces within the state apparatuses’ (Poulantzas 1978, 81–82), so the democratic socialist project ought to rely on broad-based popular alliances, such as women and ecological movements, to guard against obstruction from capitalist interests (Poulantzas 1978, 85–86). Whilst people are shaped by structural social relations, they should also be seen as ‘conscious initiators of actions’, whether as individuals or as collective entities (Wright 2019, 123). Although the institutional limits to social empowerment are fixed in stable capitalist democracies, it has been argued that there can be historical moments where these limits can be seriously challenged to establish mutually beneficial class collaborations (Wright 2010, 363–364). In these historical junctures, it is possible for the state to push through ‘symbiotic transformations’ or reforms that strengthen capitalism as well as support democratic socialist alternatives (Wright 2019, 110). Notably, Cox (1981) did not prioritise institutions over the ideological or material forces, and he recognised that ‘institutions may be out of phase’ with changes in ideas and material forces, which could undermine their hegemonic positions (Cox 1981, 137). Important to the construction of counter-hegemonic projects are also ‘organic intellectuals’ who can help to contest hegemonic ideas in society (Morton 2007, 92). However, organic intellectuals ought to be wary of their elitist cosmopolitanism tendencies and instead try to develop ‘national-popular’ strategies that are relevant to the socio-economic needs and cultural demands of the general public (McNally
Chapters 3 and 4 return to these issues in their discussions of the challenges that Labour faced under Corbyn.

Drawing on the framework discussed above, this book analyses Labour under Corbyn as an attempt to establish a counter-hegemonic historical bloc, and takes into consideration material capabilities, ideas and institutions that constrained and/or enabled the Corbyn project. The following chapters also explore structural economic problems that help to justify the need to reform the capitalist economy. Needless to say, however, that people perceive the causes and the solutions to their problems differently. Despite the potential of Labour’s policies under Corbyn to address structural problems in the British political economy, as Chapters 3 and 4 discuss, Labour did not manage to convince enough voters to support its transformative project. On this issue, the book makes use of Colin Hay’s (1999) distinction between structural contradictions and the narration of ‘crisis’, and different types of responses to the identification of crisis. This framework helps in the analysis of Labour’s failure to win power in 2019.

Another important insight from the Coxian perspective is how social forces can operate beyond state boundaries, whilst states can be seen as intermediaries between global and local forces (Cox 1981, 141). In the post-World War II historical juncture, for example, international economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank helped to propagate certain norms around the world. Certain state agencies such as ministries of finance also adjusted domestic policies to resemble generally accepted international norms. Additionally, since the 1970s one can observe the dominance of internationally oriented sectors over nationally oriented sectors, as well as a more prominent role for finance capital over industrial capital (Cox 1981, 145–147). The dominant position of finance capital in the UK and its regressive material consequences for society are discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 4 also explores Labour’s attempt under Corbyn to challenge the finance-led growth model.

Under contemporary global political economic arrangements, it can be argued that states are constrained from pursuing policies that deviate from ‘international norms’ that reflect neoliberal economic ideas, which include support for deregulation, free trade and foreign direct investment. These ideas and policies support economic globalisation and serve to aid capitalist accumulation (Lavelle 2008, 22). States are generally perceived as structurally constrained because uninterrupted capital accumulation relies (at least partly) on business confidence, and states might not pursue
certain policies due to fear of transnational capital flight (for example, see Rupert 2005, 486, and also see a brief overview of different perspectives on globalisation and state autonomy in Marsh 2018, 210–211). It has been argued, for example, that British governments have adopted neoliberal policies, such as privatisation, deregulation, lower taxes and a flexible labour market, due to capital flight concerns (Thompson 1996, 251). Chapter 2 discusses further how the New Labour and Conservative governments before 2015 subscribed to these ideas.

It is important, however, to note that the extent of states’ autonomy to choose what economic policies to implement is still being debated. For example, Hirst (1999) used empirical evidence to suggest that capital is not as ‘footloose’ as some believe, whilst states have some degree of independence when it comes to macroeconomic policies (Hirst 1999, 84–86). Consistent with the critical realist framework discussed above, the book attempts to analyse structural factors that constrain state actions, as well as how state managers interpret global structural constraints on the state. The book also draws on the ‘structurationist approach’, which conceptualises states and globalisation as ‘co-constitutive’ (Hobson and Ramesh 2002, 8), to better understand strategies that states may opt to pursue. Even though states are ‘embedded within, and shaped by, domestic and global social forces/structures’, they also have agency (Hobson and Ramesh 2002, 8). It has been argued that states may use their positions in the global, regional and domestic realms to mitigate, overcome or adapt to structural constraints, often by playing one spatial realm against the others. For example, the state might become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to halt domestic demands for trade protectionism. However, as a member of the WTO, the state would also be pressured to deepen its liberal economic policies. Overall, states can be shaped by domestic as well as global structures, but this does not completely take away its agency (Hobson and Ramesh 2002, 10–12). As discussed in Chapter 3, some support the UK’s exit from the European Union (Brexit) because it would allow the UK government to pursue neoliberal policies even more intensely. Chapter 4 also returns to the issue of state autonomy in its analysis of constraints on Labour’s policies to transform the British political economy.
MAIN ARGUMENTS

The central argument of the book is that political economic contexts before 2015 provided ideological, material and institutional conditions that opened political space for a left-wing Labour Party. However, 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. Chapter 2 discusses how Labour’s commitment to social democracy declined as Thatcherism and neoliberal economics rose to a hegemonic position in the late 1970s. It further argues that, although New Labour governments (1997–2010) managed to expand public expenditures for socially beneficial purposes, it also led the UK deeper into an unbalanced, unequal and finance-led economy. Despite its electoral successes, New Labour arguably left Labour with no inspiring alternatives to austerity, neoliberal economics and finance-led growth to offer voters after the 2008 economic crisis. In addition, it is argued that material inequality, the centrist political economic consensus and the hierarchical and elitist British political tradition contributed to democratic disaffection in the UK, and that this discontent was partly expressed in Labour grassroots’ support for Corbyn in the 2015 Labour leadership election.

Another central argument of the book is that Labour under Corbyn tried to establish a counter-hegemonic historical bloc and that, to a certain extent, it was able to propagate alternative economic ideas and policies. Labour challenged the primacy of the finance sector over the industrial sector, promoted alternative models of ownership, and put forward a bold green industrial strategy. It also challenged political norms through the promotion of extra-parliamentary forces and grassroots political mobilisation. Nevertheless, as indicated by the General Election results in 2017 and 2019, the dominant historical structures continued to provide the ‘frame of action’ that severely limited Labour’s electoral chances. Chapter 3 discusses how, in addition to Labour’s strategic errors in the 2019 election and other shortcomings, the UK’s preoccupation with Brexit stole the limelight away from Labour’s radical reform agenda. Ultimately, Boris Johnson’s Conservative Party was more successful at creating a new right-of-centre ‘hegemonic bloc’ based on the propagation of populist Brexit narratives.
Contrary to common portrayals, it is argued in Chapter 4 that Labour’s policies under Corbyn went beyond the promotion of a centralised state and conventional ‘tax and spend’ policies. Moreover, it would be misleading to characterise the policies as populist, nationalist, backward looking and anti-business. Labour’s economic policies aimed to redress structural economic problems such as inequality and uneven regional development, and sought to tackle contemporary challenges such as climate change and disruptive technologies. Labour wanted to increase productivity and investments in the economy, and to secure long-term economic growth. In addition, it clearly promoted economic democracy, the devolution of power and progressive internationalism. Labour’s policies were likely to face great opposition, including from transnational capital groups and state bureaucracy. If Labour had come to power, their policies might also have required adjustment and further development due to possible implementation problems. Nevertheless, the book generally argues in favour of Labour’s economic policies under Corbyn; the policies contained important political economic ideas embedded in progressive social goals, and were supported by valid economic arguments.

Whilst it is natural for the Labour Party to focus on winning elections, the book argues that the party also needs to adopt a long view of political struggle for radical change so as not to shrink the space for progressive politics. This is why, even after Labour’s bitter disappointment following its 2019 General Election defeat, it is important to guard against reactionary responses to shift the party back to the centre-ground. It is argued that, post-Corbyn, Labour and the Left could continue to popularise progressive political and economic ideas, support bottom-up economic initiatives and institutions at the local level, campaign for political reforms, and foster alliances at the international level. Chapter 4 briefly discusses how the post-coronavirus economic situation has opened up opportunities for the Left to promote progressive economic alternatives, although the political outcome is far from certain. It is up to the post-Corbyn Labour Party to navigate through the changing political and economic landscape and create broad-based political support in society to effect change.
Book Outline

Chapter 2 discusses academic writings on the Labour Party and parliamentary socialism. It then analyses the material, ideological and institutional political economic conditions before 2015 that both constrained and facilitated the Corbyn project. This includes discussions of the rise of the New Right and neoliberalism, as well as the emergence of ‘New Labour’ and the centrist political consensus that lasted many years. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the UK’s conservative-leaning political rules, norms and institutions, including its powerful right-wing mainstream media, and argues that they help to constrain the prospects of radical politics in the UK.

Chapter 3 focuses on structural constraints and political obstacles that Labour faced under Corbyn. In the first section, various factors that contributed to Corbyn’s victory in the 2015 Labour leadership election are explored. The second section then discusses conservative constraints that limited Labour’s electoral chances, as well as conflicts within the party. The third and fourth sections discuss Labour’s 2017 and 2019 General Election campaigns and results, including how Brexit complicated the situation in 2019. The fifth and final section further analyses Labour’s political challenges. Its analysis draws on Hay’s (1999) conceptualisation of crisis narratives and structural contradictions, as well as Erik Olin Wright’s (2010, 2019) work on democratic socialist transformation.

Chapter 4 focuses on Labour’s policies under Corbyn, which aimed to promote a radical transformation of the British political economy. The first section briefly describes how the chapter takes a different view to that of mainstream accounts of Corbynism in political science literature. The second section summarises important components of Labour’s 2017 and 2019 manifestos. The third section evaluates criticisms directed at Labour’s economic policies. The possibility of strong opposition to the implementation of these policies if Labour had come to power is also discussed. The fourth and final section draws on socialist writings and the book’s Coxian/Gramcian theoretical approach to reflect on Labour after Corbyn and the future of dissent for the Left.

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 centrisim are increasingly being questioned.
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