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The Rise and Fall of Corbynism
Corbynizmin Yükselişi ve Çöküşü

Abstract

In an era when the traditional centre-left parties have constantly lost ground to rising right-wing populist movements, Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party was increasingly portrayed as a left-wing alternative to both pro-austerity incumbent parties that rule out redistributive policies and right-wing populism fuelled by the grievances of the masses targeting the traditional political elites. Corbyn managed to mobilize a vast section of the society by becoming Europe's biggest left-wing party in terms of membership and increased its votes in the 2017 election, especially by gaining youth support. Nevertheless, the 2019 election constituted an immense fall. Regarding his political discourse both during the electoral campaigns and the serious challenges he faced, Corbyn could be identified as a left-wing populist. To be more specific, Corbyn is a democratic socialist who usually resorted to left-wing populist means within a social democratic party, and failed in his efforts to transform both the British mainstream politics and the Labour in the end.

Öz

Geleneksel merkez sol partilerin yükselen sağ popülist hareketlere karşı sürekli zemin kaybettiği bir tarihsel evrede, Jeremy Corbyn'in İşçi Partisi, hem yeniden dağıtım politikalarını dışlayan kemer sıkma yanlısı iktidar partilerine, hem de kitlelerin siyasi elitlere yönelik memnuniyetsizliğinden güç alan sağ popülizme karşı bir sol alternatif olarak tasvir edildi. Britanya İşçi Partisi üye sayısı bakımından Avrupa'nın en büyük sol partisi haline gelerek toplumun geniş bir kesimini harekete geçirmeyi başardı ve 2017 seçimlerinde özellikle gençlerin desteğini alarak oylarını arttırdı. Buna karşılık 2019 seçimleri muazzam bir düşüşe sahne oldu. Corbyn, seçim kampanyaları sırasındaki siyasi söylemi ve karşılaştığı zorluklara verdiği yanıtlar bakımından bir sol popülist olarak tanımlanabilir. Daha açık ifade etmek gerekirse, Corbyn, sosyal demokrat bir parti içinde genellikle sol popülist araçlara başvuran ve sonunda hem İngiliz ana akım siyasetini hem de İşçi Partisi'ni dönüştürme çabalarında başarısız olmuş bir demokratik sosyalisttir.

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Introduction

Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the UK's Labour Party in September 2015 by a majority of members. Since then, he introduced organizational, political and even ideological changes and enjoyed an electoral success in June 2017 elections that surprised the British establishment. These developments have drawn the attention of political observers and researchers.

In an era when the traditional centre-left parties of continental Europe have constantly lost ground to rising right populist movements (in most cases their decline is more severe than that of centre-right parties), Corbyn's Labour Party was portrayed in popular political discourse as a left-wing alternative to both pro-austerity incumbent parties that rule out redistributive policies and right-wing populism fuelled by the grievances of the masses targeting the traditional political elites. Yet, the 2019 election resulted in the opposite direction, which paved the way for the decline of his political stance—popularly known as "Corbynism".

After the election, major questions arised, eager to understand the swift voting change in just two and a half years and Corbynism's failure to become an alternative. Those are still valid, yet unanswered riddles. At the end of his reign, the objective of this paper is to theorize the basis and content of Corbyn's post-New Labour restructuring programme by discussing to what extent it suited the propositions of social democracy, left-wing populism and democratic socialism, through testing Corbynism on many political challenges it faced over the last five years. This way, the research aims to contribute to the current populism literature by understanding the content of a particular left-wing movement.

Obviously, populism is a difficult task to analyse. As a thin-centred ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), the borders between left and right populism are generally intertwined and shallow (Grigoriadis, 2020). Consequently, different cases of populist movements usually assume similar typologies and tendencies. Especially the popular example of "hyper politicization of the national will" via elections and referendums (Sözen, 2020) is indicating how different populist parties mobilize their voters with the same tactics through a fierce "the will of the nation" discourse, including independence and survival as their main tenets (Erdoğan and Semerci, 2020).

As a resistance to this right-wing mobilization, "Corbynism" could be explained as a counter strategy to contain the left. Like the post-2010 period of Turkish main opposition CHP, where the party struggled to find a way between satisfying ideological red lines and develop an alternative roadmap (Boyraz, 2020), the Corbyn-era Labour also faced a similar kind of internal conflict and searched a brand new categorization of "the people" against the elites. This new categorization also shares similarities with the Spanish PODEMOS and Greek Syriza cases. In the PODEMOS example, similar to Corbyn's Labour, the party established a strict division between the "honest ordinary people" and "the caste" that ruined Spain's economy (Ramiro and Gomez, 2016). Tendencies to speak on behalf of the "non-privileged masses" and taking a staunch stance against austerity politics were both the shared principles of the Syriza government in Greece (Stavrakakis and Katsembekis, 2014) and Corbyn's consecuti-

ve election promises. Tekdemir (2019) explains this categorization of left-wing populism as the "fabrication of the people". Through the instrumentalisation of anti-elitism (Elçi, 2019), left-wing populists tend to construct an underdog/progressive position versus their right-wing rivals. Yet, the characterizations of the left- and right-wing populist politicians are not always different from each other. The notion of "common politics", i.e. leaders depicting themselves as the people who understand the need of ordinary citizens (Kioupkiolis, 2016) is commonplace in both populist factions. In that sense, while Corbyn assumes the role of being the "ordinary man sitting at the pub", an ideologically far different counterpart– Meral Akşener in Turkey can also invigorate the duty of being "the sister of the people" (Erçetin, 2020). In a nutshell, we believe that our research can lead the way and create an example for further studies with similar comparisons especially between the left-wing populist leaders.

After a short theoretical and conceptual overview, the rest of the study will continue with a broad analysis of the Corbyn-era Labour politics before evaluating Corbyn's political agenda during the Brexit process, post-2015 intra-party struggles and the 2019 elections. The last part of the research will assess the reasons behind the decline of Corbynism after 2019 and draw further conclusions.

A Short Theoretical Overview

The post-WWII European social democracy (SD) was characterized by a kind of corporatism based on industrial discipline, productivity, full employment and rising real wages. This corporatist social contract survived until the global economic stagnation that originated from the 1973 recession (Eley, 2002). The 1980s were marked by the electoral defeats of the social democratic parties against the centre-right parties which championed neoliberal policies for tackling the stagnation of the Western capitalism. As a consequence, SD adopted more "free market friendly" policies from the mid-80s on.

It was Anthony Giddens who thoroughly theorized the social democratic parties' inclination to adapt themselves to a version of SD in harmony with the requirements of the 1990s' neoliberal globalization. He proposed a "Third Way" that differed from both the old left and the New Right (1998). That new recipe, which reconciles SD with the primacy of the market, resulted from the end of the welfare state consensus, the decline of Marxism's appeal, and the economic, social and technological changes that took place after the 1970s (Giddens, 1998 and 2000). He summarizes the roles he assigns to the market, civil society and the state as follows (Giddens, 2000: 165):

> A market economy can only function effectively within a framework of social institutions and if grounded in a developed civil society (...) The good society is one that strikes a balance between government, markets and the civil order. (...) It is a mistake just to counterpose the state to markets. Without a stable civil society, incorporating norms of trust and social decency, markets cannot flourish and democracy can be undermined.

Giddens' arguments framed and theorized the pro-market orientation of European social democratic parties, especially the New Labour under Tony Blair's leadership. However, he was more like the explicator than the architect of the European centre-left's shift to the centre. The 'neo-revisionism', as Sassoon calls it, of the Spanish, Italian, British and Belgian social democrats represented a new stage of the historical tradition laid down by Eduard Bernstein, Anthony Crosland and the German social democrat leadership of the late 1950s (Sassoon, 2014: 733). Stressing that the neo-revisionists adopted 'the idea that capitalism would not be destroyed by a self-generated crisis, or by a revolution, or by the steady expansion of public property', Sassoon continues (Ibid.: 733-734):

> When the Socialist International was founded in 1951, its *Declaration of Aims* (...) did not hold back from declaring that the aim of socialists was the abolition of capitalism. The 1989 Stockholm Declaration of the Socialist International claimed freedom, solidarity and social justice to be the aims of the movement. The abolition of capitalism was not mentioned. (...) Capitalism was not a particular transitory phase in the historical development of humanity, but a mode of production which was subject to political (...) regulation.

In fact, it was the evolution of capitalism following the 1973 global economic crisis that shook the foundation of the SD. According to Esping-Andersen and Van Kresbergen, there was a 'rapid erosion of the institutional and organizational framework that made social democracy possible in the first place'. Since the social democratic model was based on the 'organized capitalism', changes like 'the demands of flexibility and the pressures toward differentiation' brought about by the 'post-Fordist' neoliberal capitalism weakened SD (Esping-Andersen and Van Kresbergen, 1992: 203). In the UK, policies like stakeholderism and the Third Way were intended to allow Labour to adapt to the priorities of the Anglo-Saxon capitalism such as 'shareholder value, short-term profitability, the mobility of capital and labour flexibility' (Thompson, 2006: 267). Stressing that Tony Blair's vision was about bolstering a mild version of individualism in conformity with globalization and undermining the traditional left's egalitarianism by emphasizing meritocracy, Thompson notes (Thompson, 2006: 268-269, 276-278):

> New Labour's stakeholderism was therefore a political economy that took seriously the New Right's desire to create a truly popular capitalism. (...) As for the goal of social equality, this should be about equality of opportunity, with emphasis shifted from the redistribution of income and wealth to the redistribution of possibilities. (...) If social democracy was to be renewed it had to go with the global flow and not struggle against the irreversible currents of international capitalism.

The successes Western European social democratic parties enjoyed in the 1990s were exhausted by the mid-2000s while the 2008-9 economic crisis completely discredited the idea of market-oriented SD. This made left-wing populism (or left populism) and democratic socialism more electorally appealing, although not near the levels that SD enjoyed over previous decades. The ideological differences between democratic socialism and left-wing populism are very blurred while the ambiguity of SD's boundaries with these two currents persists. Arguing that it is difficult to distinguish between left-wing populism and democratic socialism, March defines the Dutch Socialist Party, Scottish Socialist Party and Left Party (Germany) as parties that 'combine a democratic socialist ideology with a strong populist discourse'. He adds that 'left-populists present an idealized version of a social democratic society before it began to 'rot' under the influence of 20 years of neo-liberalism and betrayal by "mainstream" social-democratic parties' (March, 2007: 67). Left-wing populists pay less attention to 'doctrinal purity and class-consciousness' than traditional leftists (Ibid.: 66).

Corbyn's Labour

Having won the 1997, 2001 and 2005 elections, Labour fell from power in 2010. Following another electoral defeat in 2015, Jeremy Corbyn assumed the party leadership, although the legacy of the Blair era has remained still strong amongst members of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). The majority of the PLP, including a considerable number of MPs known as Blairites, rejected the new and leftist policies Corbyn tried to adopt (Crines, Jeffery and Heppell, 2018). They even openly challenged Corbyn's leadership in 2016. However, backed by an even increasing number of party members, Corbyn defeated this challenge by strengthening his popular support (i.e. the Constituency Labour Party–CLP) (Martell, 2018).

Prior to the 2017 election, expectations of Labour's electoral performance under Corbyn were not promising. A large segment of the corporate media and commentators, reflecting the views and preferences of the establishment, anticipated a comfortable victory for Theresa May's Conservatives (Dorey, 2017: 308-312; Stephens, 2017; Diamond, 2017) while centre-left and right-wing media coverage of Corbyn was nothing but hostile. The 'British press acted more as an attackdog than a watchdog when it comes to the reporting of Corbyn', and 'acted in an undemocratic manner' by portraying the Labour leader 'as a deviant enemy, rather than a legitimate political actor' (Cammaerts, DeCillia and Magalhaes, 2017). Nevertheless, Corbyn's 2017 electoral campaign successfully extended his party's popular support and counteracted the media's negative coverage targeting him since he first became party leader (Dorey, 2017: 308, 331-332). By mobilizing a vast section of the British society, Corbyn's Labour became Europe's largest left-wing party in terms of membership (Mouffe, 2018a; Crines, Jeffery and Heppell: 363-364) and increased voter turnout, especially by gaining more youth support (Dorey, 2017: 327-329; Diamond, 2017).

Yet, within just two years, Corbyn had to cope with one of the biggest divisive issues ever in British politics: Brexit. In addition to that, he was also exposed to intra-party divisions, allegations on "institutionalized racism" and, meanwhile, tried to promote his political programme, keeping the interests of the "many" but not the "few". The results of the 2019 election was a disaster comparing to two years ago. An exit Opinium Research (2019) poll suggested that it was the political stance of Corbynism itself that caused Labour voters to desert their choices to other parties and break down the Labour "red wall" in the North.

The majority of the Labour "aristocracy" see Corbyn as a "hard left" figure. The most recent split from Labour took place in early 2019, when eight MPs quit the party to form the "Independent Group" along with three other MPs who resigned from the Conservative Party. This new group primarily emerged in response to the endless Brexit turmoil that dominated British politics since 2016. However, the accusation that Labour had been 'hijacked by a hard-left clique' under Corbyn's leadership also played a part in the resignations (Stewart, 2019).

Mouffe (2016), who offers a significant attempt to theorize left-wing populism within a general context, argues that the 'post-political' consensus of the neoliberal era, which is characterized by the convergence of the established parties' policies, harms the foundations of democracy. She further develops these views in her 2018 book, advocating a new paradigm of 'left populism' to combat right-wing populist policies (Mouffe, 2018b). She views Corbyn's Labour as a successful example of left populism (Mouffe, 2018a). Labour's 2017 election mainfesto offered the appealing discourse of "For the many, not the few", implying that the party's goal was creating a new basis for recovering ordinary people's socio-economic conditions against the immoral practices of the right-wing populism (Mouffe, 2019). According to Mouffe (2019), the strategy of left populism represents a counter-hegemonic formation under the auspices of democratic socialism to counter the "fascist", "immoral" and "plague" depictions of right-wing populists. Other scholars, however, such as Dean and Maiguashca (2017), fiercely question Corbyn's populist credentials by claiming that his movement is merely a hybrid of social forces coupled with a well-networked left-wing coalition to create a melting pot for decentralist movements within the party.

Another attempt to build a theoretical framework for Corbyn's policies beyond emphasizing the return of traditional left-wing values comes from Martell (2018). His work identifies and explains the left-wing populist aspects of Corbyn's policies. Martell points to the anti-elitist (anti-PLP) struggle Corbyn had to pursue by successfully appealing to the support of ordinary people (party members) and discusses whether Corbyn's populism stems from his leftism or vice versa. He also highlights the 2017 election manifesto, in which Corbyn's populist content rests on his use of anti-austerity and redistributive agendas to fight against the corrupt elite. Martell describes this as "by the people populism", which aims to unify the UK's alienated middle-class through public involvement in economic decisions and by supporting greater class mobilization (Martell, 2018). To sum up; 'Corbyn is a democratic socialist but his policies are social democratic, for political as much as ideological reasons' (Ibid.: 5).

As Mouffe (2019) and Martell (2018) repeatedly point out, the 2017 election manifesto indeed consisted of elements of democratic socialism within a long-lasting social-democratic party setting. The manifesto argues about a "rigged system" formed by Conservative elites, criticizes tax evasion by the country's wealthiest and proposes a shift from private interests to the public sector through re-nationalization (Labour, 2017). The election manifesto was clearly a re-statement of Labour aspirations to mobilise support for an alternative against the Conservative's decade-long austerity measures. While the 2019 manifesto had the same focus, it can be considered more radical. During the 2019 campaign, Labour proposed a major expansion of the state ownership with a widespread nationalization in the energy, mail, bus transport, water and broadband sectors (Labour, 2019). Aiming to move the tax burden mostly onto private companies (who Corbyn usually attacks as part of the "elites"), Labour (2019) suggested a significant increase in government spending and borrowing compared to past manifestos.

During the 1990s, Labour was amongst the pioneering European social democratic parties in terms of adapting to free-market policies. British capitalism was historically and structurally prone to favour policies strengthening the self-regulating market as opposed to most of the economic systems in continental Europe, which were leaning towards corporatism. The Thatcher era's legacy further encouraged Labour's neo-liberal transformation. Consequently, even after four years in charge, Corbyn still had to act within the boundaries of a "generally accepted" version of social democracy. What made him a controversial figure in the eyes of the British dominant classes, the centre-left media (which is largely controlled by them) and the conformist wing of his own party is that he sought to pursue a set of social democratic policies that could be seen as normal during the "welfare state capitalism" era (the 1950s, 60s and 70s) but which are hardly acceptable for most social democratic elites today. On the other hand, these policy proposals were equally acceptable for Labour voters (at least in 2017) as clearly indicated by the promising increase in the Labour membership figures under Corbyn's leadership.

Apart from the increase in membership, one should also not underestimate the role of Labour's new party membership system. Drastic relaxations in the membership process and the "one member one vote" principle have greatly shifted the balance of influence from the PLP to extra-parliamentary sections, such as the Momentum movement, which fiercely support Corbyn (Crines, Jeffery and Heppell, 2018). Through Momentum and the new membership system, Labour's extra-parliamentary audience found an opportunity to shape the party's politics for the masses, setting the goal of "being a campaigning machine again" and creating a way for ordinary people to influence and change the party and the country (Klug, Rees and Schneider, 2016). This immense rise of the Corbynist grassroots movement has captured the attention of scholars for quite a while. Worth (2019) identifies it as the indispensable element of the "New Left" created under Corbyn. In his view, Momentum creates a Gramscian counter-narrative, constructs an alternative truth against the assumptions of neo-liberalism and forms a base for post-crisis protest politics against right-wing reactionary nationalism (Worth, 2019).

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Finally, Corbyn's own rhetoric is useful for discussing his populism. During his campaign for the party leadership, he frequently used a discourse which is the characteristic of both left and right-wing populists. During his speeches, he intensified his arguments of putting "people" before the financial interests of the elite, blamed the "elites" for not playing by the rules and regularly attacked the Conservatives as the "party of the rich" (Hodges, 2015). According to Watts and Bale (2018), Corbyn's leadership is constructed by defining his ideology as representing the "virtuous people" to delegitimize the elite of the internal and external establishment. In that sense, Corbyn takes an outsider status compared to the party's previous social democratic leaders. Corbyn thus positions himself as the antithesis of the New Labour politicians; a man characterized by "talking about the things that matter" when communicating with the masses (Turnbull and Atkins, 2016). He then becomes an authentic leader his supporters find genuine, as if he is a straightforward and ordinary man talking in the pub, whereas his internal and external rivals depict him as a dangerous, ideological zealot, hostile to anyone who disagrees with him (Iszatt-White et al., 2019).

Throughout the Western world, political leaders, movements and parties with similar ideological positions to Corbyn's are generally labelled democratic socialist. Hence there is no reason to deprive Corbyn of this label. When it comes to the political discourse he employed during the electoral campaigns (2017 and 2019) and at times when he met challenges (mainly within-party), one can easily identify Corbyn as a left-wing populist.

It thus seems plausible to define Corbyn as a democratic socialist who resorts to left-wing populism within a social democratic party. This study will next test this definition in relation to three distinct challenges Corbyn faced as the leader of the opposition: Brexit, internal party challenges and his holy war against the elites of British politics.

Brexit: Between Neutrality and Ambiguity

Of the three cases studied here, Brexit is the one that is by far the closest to confirm our above definition of Corbyn's ideology. By combining democratic socialism with left-wing populist rhetoric in a social democratic setting, Corbyn established an unorthodox leadership position. Simultaneously, he made it very difficult to take a definite position on Brexit while trying to respond to the interests of all sides within the Labour party.

On 23 September 2019, Labour held its annual conference, which was attended by more than 23,000 party members. However, this conference meant something more for Corbyn since anti-Brexit Labour members made a last attempt to make the party pro-Remain and support a second referendum. Corbyn's approach to a second referendum was not warm but the old "Third Way" camp refused to give up. This caused the usual annual party conference to become yet another confidence vote in Corbyn's leadership. Although the centrists still believed that Labour voters wanted the party to officially support Remain, the crunch conference vote ruled out a clear Remain campaign (BBC, 2019a).

Since 2016, the Brexit campaign became a means for Labour politicians to test party cadres' loyalty to Corbyn. It was also an instrument for party back benchers to challenge Corbyn's anti-establishment stance and his alleged unsuitability for the Labour leadership. For instance one former Labour MP, Chuka Umunna, who left the party due to different views over anti-semitism and Brexit (Stewart, 2019b), recently claimed that the real problem in the party was Corbyn's ideology and illiberal views (BBC, 2019b).

Regarding Corbyn's uncertain views over the Brexit vote, his old Eurosceptic arguments have been often referred to by his opponents. Vasilopoulou (2016: 221) dates the first glimpses of Corbyn's anti-EU position back to the 1975 referendum, when he cautiously opposed to the European Economic Community's economic policies, and campaigned to leave. Corbyn also voted against the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties, and criticized the European Commission to be an "unelected legislative body" (Wilson, 2016). Nevertheless, to act within the boundaries of a "generally accepted" version of social democracy and keep the party intact before the country's history-making decision, Corbyn eventually sided with the Remainers while staying prudent. Although he initially gave conditional support to Remain, he also stressed that the EU should be reformed in terms of the budget, competition law and workers' rights (Hertner, 2015: 1). Under Corbyn, Labour embraced the social liberal values of Remain voters without showing any promises of full support (Ford and Goodwin, 2017).

While endorsing the Remain side in the referendum, Corbyn argued that Labour should push for a more "social Europe" (Vasilopoulou, 2016: 221), leaving aside the key arguments his fellow party members raised for years to deepen economic integration with the EU (Blitz, 2017). However, in order to appeal to Labour's more social democratic base, he did not deny the importance of free movement and necessary immigration. During the 2019 election campaign, Corbyn supported a "Jobs first Brexit" (see Hobolt, 2018 for the term), citing the importance of the open trade between UK and EU and ruling out a "no deal" option, which again can be considered as another compromise to calm down things inside the party. Combined with his Eurosceptic past, Corbyn's tendency to stress more the employment rights and social aspects of the integration paradigm and his insistence on distancing himself from any rigid position, caused Labour to fall into a "sense of ambivalence" in the eyes of the public (Vasilopoulou, 2016).

Corbyn's lukewarm approach to the EU membership caused a feeling of mixed messages amongst the electorate (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley, 2017). Back in 2018, Mellon et al. (2018: 735) concluded that the youth electorate's support for Labour was extremely thin and that confidence could come to an end if Corbyn failed to offer a clear agenda. During the referendum, Labour voters were 65% for Remain while the UK's youth (18-24 age old voters) were 71% pro-Remain (Moore, 2016). These figures proved that, even though the new left youth movement was with Corbyn in his fight against corrupt elites and the establishment, they remained optimistic about the UK's future in the EU. Thus, whereas it was a political choice to side with the party's internationalists (Copus, 2018), by 2019, it became more of a political necessity for keeping the young masses together.

Before the 2019 general election, the Labour Party declared their rejection to the "no deal" option and offered another ballot choice of a brand new exit deal that aimed to maintain jobs and free movement along with the Remain option. For the first time, Corbyn explained that his version of Leave would be based on a "pro-trade relationship" (Clifton, 2019). However, he failed to clarify his stance towards his own proposed vote. Instead, he insisted that he would remain neutral in this debate (Mason, 2019). While campaigning on his new "third way" in the Brexit vote, he used fierce populist rhetoric regarding other parties and politicians. First, he characterized himself as the only leader willing to return power to the "people" by giving them a final say on Brexit (Corbyn, 2019). Second, he blamed right-wing populists for instrumentalizing the Brexit decision to make "sweetheart trade deals" with Donald Trump (Clifton, 2019). Third, he firmly ruled out Boris Johnson's nuclear "no-deal" option, criticizing it as the "worst possible scenario" (Labour, 2019). In this way, he responded to the ever-increasing internal pressures to settle down things inside the party until the election, similar to what he did in 2016.

Corbyn's call for a new vote did not, however, automatically reduce Labour's Brexit uncertainties because, when the 2019 election manifesto was confirmed, the ambiguities reappeared. Although the decision of a second referendum favoured the grassroots and Labour's social democratic base, the manifesto had a pretty radical agenda that conflicted with priorities of European integration (such as the rail privatization promise). Labour's ambitious nationalization agenda (Labour, 2019) clearly addresses the balance between the government and the market, and threatens the "organized capitalism" supported by the EU single market. This diffidence has long been recognized by voters, with one campaign poll suggesting that the public was losing its belief that Labour wanted to remain in the EU (Ford and Goodwin, 2017: 24). The latest indicators before the election also showed that two thirds (65%) of the public were still unsure about Labour's Brexit position (Abraham, 2019).

Labour after 2015: Conflicted Times, Harsh Allegations, Populist Positioning

During his tenure internal crises became a common feature of the Corbyn-era Labour Party. As mentioned earlier, party positioning on Brexit was a significant problem between the old party establishment (mainly the PLP) and the new left of Corbyn and his supporters. However, two other issues—criticisms of the way the party handled the so-called anti-semitic tendencies and the eradication of party centrists—meant Corbyn's democratic socialist credentials were constantly challenged by centrist elements in the party. Corbynism's response to these attacks supposedly involved populist elements.

Corbyn has largely failed to repulse the manipulative allegations of anti-semitism and this "failure" paved the way for increasing claims of populism which are very much identical to Mudde's (2004) explanation of the leader doctrine that emancipates the "oppressed peop-

le" and Hirsch's (2015) "anti-imperialist campism" where populist rhetoric ensures solidarity with the powerless beyond national boundaries. By equating Israel to the oppressor position and Palestinian people to the oppressed, left-wing populists tend to extend internal borders of the "people vs. elite" struggle (Holliday, 2019). Although Corbyn consistently denied an anti-Israeli stance, his past campaigns for the Palestinian cause and his constructed "saintly figure of the oppressed" image in Bolton's words (2020) made him vulnerable against accusations of being a populist on the matter.

When seven MPs decided to leave the Labour in 2019, one of the frequently cited reasons was the institutionalization of the anti-semitic behaviour. MPs claimed that the party was becoming more racist, bullying, bigoted and hijacked by the politics of the hard left (BBC, 2019c). Corbyn said that he was disappointed by the resignations and tried to shift the focus by pledging to continue with his policies that had "inspired millions". Other party members like Len McCluskey, however, went even farther and argued the incident had a "strong whiff of hypocrisy" (BBC, 2019c). Although Corbyn supporters repeatedly rejected claims of anti-semitism, there was consternation after Labour became the second party after the British National Party (BNP) to be investigated by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), which is the authorized public body to protect non-discrimination laws of the UK.

These accusations mainly focus on Corbyn's pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist views (Wagner, 2017). Scholars like Wagner (2017) and Klaff (2016) accuse Corbyn as being a populist hardliner, proposing militant and confrontational positions, and viewing Israel as the key site or agent of Western imperialism, in a world divided between "the oppressors" and "the oppressed". Obviously, the suggested populist element here comes from this distinction. Freedland (2019) claims that it provides the purest form of populism whereby Corbyn creates another battle between the virtuous masses and the corrupt elite. Within this Hard Left imagination, the elite are supposedly Jews and Israel, who are oppressing the innocent nations of the Middle East, according to the author (Freedland, 2019).

It is also important to remember that Labour's social democratic principles and credentials ensured a safe haven for Jewish party members for decades. Groups like the Jewish Labour Movement (JLM) and MPs such as Luciana Berger and Louise Ellman (who both resigned from the party due to the so-called anti-semitism) were significant figures of the party base. However, given the party setting, Corbyn's attempts to solve the problem were not deemed adequate by his opponents. A number of, mostly exaggerated accusations were made that he called a Hamas member "brother" (Rich, 2018), established an anti-imperialist block within the party (Klaff, 2016), re-admitted Vicki Kirby into the party after she had been suspended for "evil Israel" comments (Klaff, 2016) and defended a mural depicting ugly capitalists with Jewish features (Duncan, 2019). In response, Corbyn apologized for the mural and suspended Naz Shah, Labour MP for Bradford West, for anti-Jewish remarks (Klaff, 2016). However, Corbyn was criticized by his opponents for not committing to open a fully-fledged, party-level investigation on these accusations. Disciplinary measures that were focused on

individual cases and the apologies that were produced were portrayed to be insufficient by the pro-Israeli circles. UK's Jewish Leadership Council (2019) declared "enough is enough", while Labour's own Jewish group, JLM, withdrew support from the party administration in its 2019 campaign (Proctor, 2019).

After seven Labour MPs resigned, the then Deputy Leader Tom Watson stated that this should be a moment for Labour to think rather than cheer (BBC, 2019c). Corbyn, however, denied the allegations but failed to convince many. First, he defended his record on fighting racism and asserted that "he will defend it until his death" (Wax, 2019). Second, his supporters chose a more Trumpian approach by describing the anti-semitism claims as a "smear campaign against the leadership" (Stewart et al., 2018). They even accused the party of being "too apologetic" about the issue (Walker, 2019a).

Between 2015 and 2019 each internal battle has been characterized by anti-Corbyn rhetoric about the hard left hijacking the party. Watts and Bale (2018) describe this as "intra-party populism" in which both sides attempt to dehumanize and discredit each other. While party centrists criticized Corbyn for imposing his socialist agenda, the Corbyn camp usually chose to turn internal debates into a battle against the "elite establishment" of the party's MPs, who are accused of attempting to overthrow Corbyn (Watts and Bale, 2018). Deep down, this rhetoric is based on constructing the Corbyn-era Labour membership as the movement of "virtuous people". That is, an established image rooted in a historical nostalgia of "Labour against the elite", which also calls for an imminent need to return to the people in Labour's heartlands through grassroots politics (Watts and Bale, 2018). In short, the main tenets of the Corbyn-era left-wing populism have been delegitimizing the party "elite" and blocking their plots against Corbyn.

The internal battle mainly began after the referendum, when the PLP moved on a motion of no-confidence against Corbyn. Citing Corbyn's lack of enthusiasm during the referendum and his unsuitability as leader, Owen Smith, a centrist MP, openly challenged the party administration (Stone and McSmith, 2016). To strengthen the argument of an "elite coup against virtuous people", Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell described Smith's challenge as "plotting and conniving" (Cockburn, 2016) while Len McCluskey accused the counter-movement of being a "Westminster bubble coup" guided by sinister forces (Watts and Bale, 2018). To repel these attacks, Corbyn used the new "£3 supporters" and took advantage of the party membership rules that had already been changed. Through instrumentalization of grassroots movements like Momentum, he cemented his democratic socialist support within the party. Worth (2019) believes that these groups particularly helped Corbyn raise his leftist cause by acting as instruments to construct an alternative truth or counter-narrative opposing the neo-liberal centrists, and to counterbalance the PLP. Due to relaxed party membership rules, Momentum grew from around 35,000 to over 550,000 during Corbyn's leadership (Worth, 2019). Centrists, meanwhile, described Momentum as a "parallel organization" (Hodges, 2015).

Corbyn counterattacked during the 2019 party conference. Orchestrated by Momentum's leader, Jon Lansman, a motion to abolish the position of Deputy Leader was introduced at the beginning of conference to silence Tom Watson, a long-standing Labour centrist and open critic of the Corbyn reign (Rawnsley, 2019). However, party members and Corbyn eventually cancelled the vote because it disturbed the MPs, shadow ministers and party officials (Savage, 2019). However it was enough to push the party into another internal crisis before a crucial conference about the party's Brexit direction was held (Savage, 2019). The Corbynite left was criticized for being desperate enough to strangle the internal opposition rather than focus on the upcoming election (Rawnsley, 2019).

The 2019 Election: Corbyn's War Against the Establishment

The 2019 general election was both fierce and awkward since every political party claimed that they were anti-establishment, anti-elite and working for the ordinary people. Unsurprisingly, Corbyn's Labour was not different in this respect. Driven by the most radical manifesto for years, the Labour Party pledged the largest-ever expansion of the state ownership through energy, mail, bus, water and rail nationalizations, to be paid by tax increases on big businesses, and the biggest-ever increase in government spending and borrowing (Labour, 2019). Yet, the delivery of these pledges to the public was materialized with a rather populist discourse. In a reflection of Mouffe's understanding of left-populism as offering a counter-narrative to right-wing populism, Corbyn used populist rhetoric regarding two significant matters that are widely considered failures of the past Tory governments: Austerity and the NHS. To legitimize his intention to increase public spending substantially, Corbyn resorted to criticizing the austerity measures of the past governments. To convince voters, Corbyn described the Tories as the party of the "elites" and depicted the UK's political elites as "pro-austerity" (Massetti, 2018). Martell (2018) describes this move as "by the people populism" to attract middle-class voters in that the leader goes beyond the elites, bringing anti-austerity and redistribution back onto the agenda by claiming public involvement in the budget whereby high earners pay more taxes.

As the campaigning intensified, the populist rhetoric of the Corbyn movement also strengthened. Considering themselves as "the biggest people-powered campaign in history", Corbyn and his supporters attacked the "establishment elite" and accused Johnson's Conservatives of being the party of "tax dodgers", "dodgy landlords", "bad bosses" and "the polluters" to characterize elite industrialists as anti-environmentalist (Woodcock, 2019). Labour's tax strategy in the manifesto provided grounds for more arguments, such as its pledges to raise taxes on inheritance, private schools and capital gains, while its proposal to give employees 10% of the company shares alarmed industrialists (Neate, 2019).

Apart from promoting Labour as the real "people's party" by associating Tories with the elites, Labour's other widely used campaign element was the National Health Service (NHS), which was struggling after many cuts on spending and personnel under Tory govern-

ments. Chanting the slogan "Not for sale" at almost every campaign stop, Corbyn highlighted his own argument that right-wing politicians had a hidden agenda to privatize the NHS and open its market to US companies. Despite repeated Conservative denials, Corbyn insisted that Trump, Farage and Johnson had agreed to sell the NHS to large US drug companies and that Farage's decision to stand down Brexit Party candidates in Conservative constituencies proved this silent agreement (Reuters, 2019). Corbyn described this alleged right-wing plot to sell the NHS as the "Trump alliance" and "Thatcherism on steroids" (Reuters, 2019). Associating his allegation with the unhappy memories of the Thatcher-era privatization policies, Corbyn urged voters to block this unholy alliance between Trump and Johnson (BBC, 2019d). To add more theatrics to his allegations, Corbyn used Labour member NHS staff to circulate the dossier, which he proved that the NHS would be sold to the US. However, not all voters were enthusiastic about these allegations. Besides, the chief executive of the NHS, Chris Hopson, urged party leaders to avoid using the NHS as a political tool for misinformation and slogans (Walker, 2019b).

Another important political strategy that Corbyn used, and that can be considered a populist manoeuvre, was raising alarm about US interference in the election. Mimicking his right-wing counterparts (when Farage and Johnson claimed that the US had interfered in the 2016 referendum after Obama's visit to UK and his "back of the queue" comment), Corbyn accused Trump of meddling in the UK's internal affairs. Corbyn claimed that a radio talk between Trump and Farage, in which Trump suggested an election pact between Johnson and Farage to stop Labour, as a clear evidence of interference, and urged voters to prevent Trump's friend Boris Johnson from being elected (Tidey, 2019). However, this attempt to raise fears about foreign pressure seemed too similar to the Leave campaign's approach before the referendum. Corbyn's strategy was to depict Trump as the archvillain of rising right-wing populism and position Labour's local rivals as the villain's collaborators for constructing a counter-narrative by using the same methods with the right-wing populists. In Corbyn's words: "The fake anti-elitism of rich, white men, like Nigel Farage and Donald Trump, is farcical at one level but in reality it is no joke at all" (Spillane, 2016).

The Fall of Corbynism: A Concise Evaluation of the Election Results and Conclusion

The results of the 2019 election were devastating for the Labour Party. Labour not only achieved one of the lowest numbers of MPs in its electoral history, but the party also lost the working class heartlands of the North after decades. Surely, it was the end of the Corbyn reign and right after the election night, he declared a gradual process of stepping down from the leadership. Although Corbyn as a person does not seem to be a part of the political debates any longer, the endurance of Corbynism as a political direction is still a question mark. The brand

is damaged, but the changed party base does have a majority of Corbynites, and it is still hard for the centrists to put their flag on party leadership. It seems that transformation and internal struggles are continuing.

In this research, we tried to analyse and identify Jeremy Corbyn's ideology or the so-called Corbynism, which set the bar very high for the new left in the 2017 elections but, two years later, faced the risk of extinction. Our definition of his ideology rests on the fact that; during his party leadership, Corbyn remained a democratic socialist leader operating in a social democratic setting. The constant ideological clashes definitely showed itself in Brexit debates, inner-party allegations and leadership struggles. On all arenas, Corbyn resorted to left-wing populist means either for protecting his position or expressing his policies. The populist discourse he employed skyrocketed during the 2019 campaign and Corbynism became the resistance force against right-wing populists represented by Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage. However, the election results have indicated that if we need to evaluate the two populisms, the right-wing one seems far more convincing for the British people.

It is not the purpose of this research to make an election analysis of the 2019. Nevertheless, since the exit polls indicate that Corbyn himself is the reason of not voting Labour for many (Opinium Research, 2019), it is important to suggest some evaluations connected to the research findings. The 2019 election was one of the most fierce and divisive elections of the modern British political history. Generally identified as the last circle of the long-lasting referendum process, the stage was set as the final battle for Brexiteers and Remainers. Many depicted the vote as a single-issue process and even Corbyn himself blamed the Brexit for hijacking all the agenda while admitting defeat (Pickard, 2019).

The neutral position was one of the reasons that made Labour paralyzed. At the end, with this non-clarified stance, the party ended up by losing seats in both strong Remain and strong Leave areas. Labour's Brexit position was a product of the ideological clash between democratic socialism and social democracy within the party. While ideologies clash internally, it became harder for Corbyn to be critical for the EU, masquerading as a Remainer and honouring the referendum results at the same time. Hence, he took a rather ambiguous position and tried to legitimize his neutrality by using the populist rhetoric of "asking the people" or "being the only leader who sided with the people". It took a long time for Corbynism to find a way out from this exhausting attempt to counterbalance two opposite positions. Corbyn's stance failed to work on the electorate suffering from the "Brexit fatigue", no matter what political background they are coming from. In addition to the failure on Brexit, continuous inner-party clashes orchestrated by the face-off between democratic socialism and social democracy failed to give the electorate the best message. Voters lost confidence over Corbyn on bigger issues and decisions while he even seemed to struggle for making his own party members satisfied.

To make an analogy, we can say that Corbyn sent out two letters at the beginning of the campaign. One of these letters were for the "few" who he occasionally criticized for making profits over the rights of the working people and the other was for the "many" who he consi-

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dered as the victims of economic injustice and as the virtuous masses that were long underestimated by the elites. It is clear that the "few" got the message. Boris Johnson solely attacked Corbyn and his policies because of that. The "few" tried to demonize Corbyn as an extreme leftist demagogue and convinced many voters. Yet, it turned out that the "many" failed to receive the message and understand the content of Corbynism. Even though Corbynism put the ordinary people at the centre of the campaign and made anti-austerity policies and protection of the NHS the main pillars of the anti-elitist movement, Labour shed blood in the working-class heartlands. Future studies will show the main reasons behind this shift in the working class voting behaviour, but the results demonstrated that either the "red wall" prioritized leaving the EU (especially in the Labour Leave areas) more than any other issue, or they simply were not convinced that Corbynism is the right direction to deliver all the mentioned promises.

If Boris Johnson keeps his promise to deliver unpainful results for the post-Brexit period, Labour could see more of the current stalemate. The new leader of the party, Keir Starmer seems to be willing to return to the Blairite centrist basics. This research aimed to provide a detailed analysis of a left-wing politician and his policies, which raised the stakes for a long-contained ideology (democratic socialism) within a social democratic party. At the early days of the post-referendum period, when the country was not considerably divided and the Brexit positions of the parties were much blurrier, Corbynism created a significant alternative against the fading Conservatives. However, once the Brexit debate got more heated and internal/external challenges arrived, Corbyn stood as a democratic socialist leader who tried to act within a social democratic setting and usually resorted to left-wing populism. Today, left-wing populism is losing power but it is not out of the game yet (Venizelos and Stavrakakis, 2020). Although Corbyn's rise in 2017 eventually got sour in 2019, we hope that this work will shed light on future left-wing populism studies. The rise and fall of Corbynism, a short-lived but electrifying ideological current, will surely be a strong case for future comparisons with its counterparts and may even indicate some lessons for the practitioners.

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