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CORBYNISM: A CRITICAL APPROACH

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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First Liberalism is identified with Capitalism;
then Liberalism is made to walk the plank;
but Capitalism is no worse for the dip, and
continues its existence unscathed under a new alias.

—Karl Polanyi

1

EXPLAINING 2017: THE RISE AND FALL OF AUSTERITY POPULISM

In the days following the 2017 General Election, British politics was awash with *mea culpas*. Self-flagellating apologies poured out of every paper, news programme and political website. Channel 4 newsreader Jon Snow epitomised the general masochistic tone the day following the result: ‘I know nothing. We, the media, the pundit, the experts, know nothing. We simply didn’t spot it.’¹ And he had a point. Ever since Jeremy Corbyn’s shock victory in 2015 Labour leadership contest, there was barely a pundit, psephologist or policy wonk who had not predicted electoral catastrophe. Yet it had not come to pass. On the contrary – Corbyn’s Labour had gained 30 seats, deprived a once imperious Theresa May of her majority, and, perhaps most startling of all, had won 40 per cent of the popular vote. At a stroke a whole plethora of political truisms disintegrated: Corbynism was a ‘movement’ more clicktivist than canvasser, Corbyn himself was electorally toxic, Labour faced a 1931-style demolition and the total collapse of its Parliamentary presence. Notwithstanding that

Labour did not win, and will likely need an even bigger push to win next time, all had proven to be categorically wrong – even the clicktivism proved moderately successful.² Once the ritual humiliation was over, and the MPs who had opposed Corbyn from the start had swallowed their pride, some sheepishly joining in with the chants of ‘Oh Jeremy Corbyn’, the experts and analysts began to collect the shards of their shattered worldview and rearrange them in the light of this new situation. How was this result possible? What had we all missed?

It was not as if historical precedent had not backed up the catastrophist thesis. There was 1983 of course, the last time the programme of the so-called Labour ‘hard left’ had been put to the test in an election. Electoral carnage and seventeen years of opposition had followed. But there were more recent warning signs too. In 2015, Ed Miliband had risked a slight shift to the left, banking on an upswell of support amongst a ‘squeezed middle’ after five years of Conservative–Liberal Democrat public sector cuts. It seemed like a plausible move – which was why the election result, when it arrived, was such a body blow. Cameron and Osborne had sold the need for cuts off the back of the government deficit and debt run up in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. Their explanation for the crash and subsequent debt was that it was the direct result of Labour’s ‘overspending.’ The only solution to such wasteful extravagance, they argued, was thus a severe bout of ‘austerity’, in which spending on public services would be progressively cut back until the government bank balance was back in the black. So successful was this narrative that Miliband had not been able to say a word during the 2015 campaign without the question of ‘the deficit’ being thrown at him. In order to try to fend off such attacks and carve out the space to be heard on his own terms, the very first page of his manifesto declared that not a single Labour pledge required a penny of extra borrowing. But even this display of neurosis

was not enough. When polling day arrived, the Tories won their first majority for a quarter of a century.

Come 2017, and Labour's prospects seemed even worse. The vote to leave the European Union (EU) set alight the inferno of nationalism, imperial nostalgia and anti-migrant revanchism that UKIP leader Nigel Farage had long been stoking, bringing down the Cameron government with it. The new Prime Minister was Theresa May, whose stint as Home Secretary was best known for her desire to create a 'hostile environment' for migrants, including ordering a fleet of vans emblazoned with the injunction to 'go home' to drive around ethnically diverse areas of London. In the weeks following her ascension to power, May had attempted to capitalise on the nativist spring unleashed by Brexit – railing against cosmopolitan 'citizens of nowhere' whose loyalty was to the international flows of capital, commodities and labour rather than to the 'ordinary working class people' rooted in local communities.³ She had interpreted the narrow 52–48% Leave victory in the most extreme way possible, promising Brexit voters that she would leave the Single Market in order to end the freedom of Europeans to live and work in Britain and restore a supposedly lost 'sovereignty' – whatever the cost. Her hopes of bringing the substantial UKIP vote into the Tory fold and gain a foothold in Leave-voting Labour seats seemed to have paid off by the time she called a 'snap' election in April 2017. May had built up a formidable lead in the polls. She had the vociferous and unanimous support of the rightwing press who, aroused at the prospect of 'hard Brexit', called for her to 'crush the saboteurs' and enact 'blue murder' on any opposition.⁴

The idea that a Labour Party led by Jeremy Corbyn – in the eyes of his critics inside and outside the party metropolitan, tax-and-spend, pro-immigration – could avoid electoral wipe-out in such unpropitious circumstances seemed implausible

even to some of his biggest supporters. Indeed, Len McCluskey, the head of the Unite union who had long been one of Corbyn's most steadfast backers, claimed a month before election day that keeping Labour's losses down to 30 seats would constitute 'success'.⁵ To make matters worse, Corbyn could not even claim to straightforwardly represent the 48% who had voted Remain, overwhelmingly concentrated in cities and younger demographics – his core constituency. Corbyn, like his mentor Tony Benn, had opposed British membership of the EU for his entire career. From the Bennite perspective, the EU was a 'bosses club' imposing neoliberal strictures upon the British nation-state, particularly through the political and economic infrastructure of the Single Market.⁶ Corbyn's internal critics suspected that his lukewarm campaigning during the referendum had its roots in this historic antipathy, which set him at odds with much of his own base, particularly younger voters, as well as the party's own democratically-decided policy.

This contradiction had been exacerbated by the post-referendum support shown by both Corbyn and his Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell for May's hardline position of leaving the Single Market and the Customs Union – neither of which had been mooted during the Referendum campaign. Corbyn thus seemed to have adopted what journalist Stephen Bush described as a '0% strategy'.⁷ His continued support for immigration and free movement alienated the 52% who had voted Leave, while his insistence on leaving the Single Market angered the 48%, both in terms of the economic consequences of such a drastic move, but also because many viewed EU membership as an expression of an open-minded, internationalist outlook. The combination of the deficit, immigration, and the nationalist energies unleashed by the Leave vote seemed insurmountable. Even as the Labour election campaign seemed to be gaining momentum and the

Tory effort very publicly falling apart, the conditions for Labour gains seemed so remote that they blinded everyone to what was happening on the ground.

Nearly everyone, at least. For the left's true believers, there was nothing surprising about the 2017 result when it came. It was what they had predicted for decades, if only someone had listened. Throughout the dark days of the Kinnock and New Labour eras, the so-called 'hard left' of the party had insisted that what the electorate was really craving was a no-holds-barred socialist party who would break with the neoliberal consensus and offer a real choice. When Labour lost elections as in 2015, this subterranean consensus suggested, it was not because they had moved too far to the left. It was because *they were not left enough*. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Miliband's problem was not that he failed to convince voters he took the issue of the deficit seriously. Nor was the bout of English nativism which Cameron had engendered (somewhat portentously, given what was to come) by raising the spectre of a Labour coalition with the Scottish National Party to blame. Rather Miliband's defeat could be explained by his failure to sufficiently differentiate Labour's platform from that of the Conservatives, falling back on what Corbyn himself described as an 'austerity-lite' manifesto.⁸ This belief helped fuel Corbyn's victory in the leadership campaign following Miliband's resignation. More than anything else, Corbyn's rise was driven by Labour members' sheer frustration at Miliband's failure to forcibly challenge the Conservative's narrative around austerity and the deficit, and exasperation that none of the other candidates for Labour leader – all tarnished by association with the Blair-Brown years and lacking credibility in their claims to authenticity and charisma – seemed to recognise the urgency of doing so. If nothing else, so the theory went, at least Corbyn could be trusted to deliver an unadulterated anti-austerity message.

From this perspective, Corbyn's performance in the 2017 election had shown this analysis to be right all along. For his fans, a properly socialist leader had put forward a properly socialist manifesto, in the teeth of ferocious opposition both internal and external – and the result had been anything but calamitous. Labour had run an energetic, positive, smart campaign. Labour thrived off a cleverly leaked manifesto, a series of simple policies that set the pace on radio news bulletins, Corbyn's unflappable debate performances and regional television coverage of a constant series of city-specific rallies.⁹ The quick-witted air war was backed up online and through unprecedented numbers of volunteers taking to the streets to engage potential Labour voters and getting them to turn out on polling day.¹⁰ Through the courage of the leadership and the commitment of those pacing the streets and flooding social media, Labour had overturned the austerity consensus. They had refused to kowtow on immigration numbers, bow to Brexit nativism or scapegoat those on benefits, so the story went. They had stood up against the forces of reaction which were on the rise across the globe. And they had had won the support of 40 per cent of the electorate in doing so, against all odds. This was vindication.

A romantic tale, no doubt – and not without an element of truth. Certainly the disintegration of Cameron and Osborne's austerity narrative was the crucial factor in Corbyn's success. Two years previously the deficit had strangled Miliband's campaign at birth. It was the most powerful adversary in British politics, squeezing the life out of every other issue. And yet, astonishingly, in the 2017 campaign the words 'debt' and 'deficit' were barely mentioned.¹¹ It was fought instead on the basis of sentiment, emotion, culture and 'values'.¹² There can surely have been no issue which has suffered such a dramatic change in political fortunes in such a short space of time. More than anything else – more than

Momentum's sterling electioneering, more than the mememakers pumping out jpgs and gifs, more than the fabled manifesto – it is the strange death of the deficit which holds the key to explaining Labour's remarkable performance in 2017.

AUSTERITY POPULISM

The collapse of the international banking sector in 2008, as credit markets seized up following the revelation of huge levels of toxic sub-prime debt throughout the system, overturned three decades of economic wisdom. Governments who had vowed to give the financial markets a free hand were now called upon to bail out the banks to the tune of billions. Electorates around the world demanded answers. How had this happened? Who was responsible? For those competing for political power in the wake of the crash, the overriding priority was to construct a narrative that was able to explain the crisis to the public, justify a particular policy response, and pin the blame for economic disaster elsewhere. And no political narrative succeeded on all three counts to such an extent as that constructed by David Cameron, George Osborne and Nick Clegg, the leading figures in the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government which came to power in 2010.

Austerity is often taken to have caused the contemporary rise of populism.¹³ In retrospect, however, it is abundantly clear that austerity itself was a populist project – both in Chantal Mouffe's sense of the creation of a political frontier between 'us' and 'them,' and Jan-Werner Müller's notion of the hypermoralisation of political discourse. How else to explain the singularly odd way that Britain responded to the financial crisis? The Cameron government was far from the only one to react to the crash and their ballooning deficits by insisting on the need

for a programme of austerity. But in no other country did the public don hairshirts with such gusto. As Owen Hatherley has noted, Britain was convulsed by a fit of ‘austerity nostalgia’ in the wake of the crisis – unleashing dark political energies Tom Whyman captured well in the coinage ‘cupcake fascism’.¹⁴ This mood was epitomised by the ubiquitous ‘Keep Calm and Carry on’ poster, which seemed to pine for ‘an actual or imaginary English patrician attitude of stoicism and muddling through’, the reprise of an age marked by make-do-and-mend thrift and ‘hardiness in the face of adversity.’¹⁵ It was as if the public actively welcomed the collapse of the economy, regarding it as an event which finally gave some meaning to a life waylaid by the cheap thrills of credit-fuelled consumerism and reality TV, a form of existence that suddenly felt as toxic as the junk bonds clogging up the balance sheets of banks around the world.

The austerity narrative was founded on an opposition between a national community of ‘hardworking people’ and a feckless underclass who had brought Britain to its knees – namely the ‘scroungers’, the benefit cheats, those too lazy to work and choosing to live off the largesse of the state.¹⁶ In this telling, the financial crisis itself was essentially caused by the Labour government’s reckless decision to rack up monstrous debts in order to fund the lavish lifestyles of their shiftless clientele. In contrast to this rotten coalition of bloated state, corrupt liberal-left political elite, and workshy scroungers, the Tories would instead take the side of the ‘hardworkers’, those willing to take responsibility for their own lives and roll up their sleeves to ‘sort out Labour’s mess’.¹⁷ ‘We’re all in it together’ was the cry, deliberately evoking the Churchillian spirit of war-time. The ‘deficit’ – and those responsible for it – was turned into a national enemy whose defeat, as in the Blitz, depended upon a heroic act of collective endurance, a momentous sacrifice of abstention in order to save the country, and indeed future generations, from financial ruin.

This was classic ‘productivist’ discourse. The economically active (the ‘hardworking families’, the inhabitants of ‘alarm clock Britain’) were presented as morally superior to the non-productive (the unemployed at the bottom, the state itself at the top), who are portrayed as a parasitic drain on the resources of the former. Britain’s economic woes were the result of the non-productive being allowed to gain political and economic dominance over the productive, an imbalance that was both economically disastrous and morally reprehensible. ‘Where is the fairness, we ask, for the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of their next door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits?’ George Osborne asked in his 2012 conference speech. ‘When we say we’re all in this together, we speak for that worker.’¹⁸ The only solution to such a dire situation was to either force the non-productive minority to become productive themselves, through a ramped-up programme of ‘workfare’, or cut them off from any state subsidy whatsoever via savage benefit cuts and sanctions, consequences be damned. The implication was that public spending on services for the productive might once again be possible as soon as this parasitic excrescence was no longer allowed to deplete the vitality from society. Austerity was thus both economically necessary and morally right, an act of national rebirth in which the dregs of the old society would be cast off and the new rebuilt around the righteous desires of the productive.

It is doubtful whether Cameron and Osborne actually believed their claims of a causal relation between Labour welfare spending, the crash and the deficit. Indeed, in an interview in 2017, after he had left Parliament, Osborne admitted he did not.¹⁹ The demonization of ‘scroungers’ and pinning the blame for the crash on the previous Labour government was a political manoeuvre designed to legitimate a broader strategy to cut public expenditure and fundamentally change

the relation of state to society. It set the template for what was probably the most brazen lie in British political history a few years later – the promise that leaving the EU would mean £350m a week extra for the NHS, a pledge that was immediately recanted the morning after the vote to Leave.²⁰

The difference between the two was that the austerity narrative retained its connection to matters of prosperity in the last instance, even if that prosperity was by no means distributed evenly across society – whereas the Leave campaign's claim was used to force through a policy which virtually every economist agreed would reduce Britain's economic well-being. Thus in 2013, once his austerity policies looked like they were seriously threatening to thrust the economy back into recession, Osborne changed tack. He 'paused' austerity by pushing plans for further cuts back into the next Parliament, stimulating a period of economic growth in the run-up to the 2015 election.²¹ The 'belt-tightening' rhetoric did not change, but the policy did – which is not to say that the 'pause' provided any real relief for those still reeling from the effects of the cuts already implemented, or reduced the impact of those still to come. The point is merely that when it came to the crunch, economic realism trumped the ideological narrative. While Cameron and Osborne were happy to utilise populist tropes as a tool when necessary, their government retained a core of general economic rationalism. The way in which they went about managing the economy is up for dispute – but their attachment to principle of economic interest itself is not.

The extent of Cameron and Osborne's bad faith matters less than the extraordinary power generated by the concept of austerity. It seemed to tap into a force that was far greater than the trivialities of day-to-day politics. It drilled down into deep-lying reserves of national sentiment and cultural memory, conjuring up image after idealised image of a past

that had never actually existed, but whose retrieval was nevertheless held to unlock the door to an authentic life. The energy and intensity of this torrent of false nostalgia inevitably overwhelmed valiant technocratic arguments about the historically low cost of state borrowing, relative bond yields or interest rates. Charged with such cultural significance, the political and media debate around ‘the deficit’ could never have been one based on reasonable consideration of the various approaches to a post-crisis economy.

For all the criticism hurled at Ed Miliband and Ed Balls by Corbyn supporters for their supposed ‘austerity-lite’ programme, there was in truth no shortage of attempts to put forward alternative proposals to the Conservative–Liberal Democrat spending cuts, certainly in the first years of the coalition.²² But worthy attempts to convince people that government finances were not the equivalent of a maxed out credit card, and Britain was not like Greece because it had control of its own currency singularly failed to cut through. In the popular imagination, the need to ‘get the deficit down’ was shot through with a moral urgency in the name of the ‘hardworking families’ who were striving to get the country out of ‘Labour’s mess’.²³ The idea that Corbyn would have fared any better at challenging this moral fable than Miliband during the coalition years radically underestimates the libidinal power generated by ‘austerity nostalgia.’

Such emotional reactions are not those of a debate that is grounded in rationality, where ideas are dispassionately evaluated on the basis of their respective merits, as much as such a thing is possible. A political system in which the very existence of opposing arguments is regarded as being morally suspect is one that is already well on the way to populism. And so it would turn out – for the emotional tenor of the debate over austerity, in which opposing viewpoints were not merely disagreed with but banished from the realm of

acceptable discourse, was in hindsight a clear prefiguration of the Brexit campaign itself. Therefore to argue that Miliband failed to successfully challenge the austerity narrative because soft left cowardice prevented him from breaking with an ‘austerity-lite’ platform is to get things the wrong way round. It was rather the blanket delegitimisation of the anti-austerity argument in the face of amoralistic fantasy of national self-sacrifice that made it necessary to place deficit reduction at the centre of his platform in the 2015 election.

It is by no means insignificant to what followed that the anti-austerity movements which *did* make some impact in the early years of the coalition – such as Occupy, UK Uncut and the People’s Assembly Against Austerity- drew on precisely the same productivist tropes as that which they unsuccessfully opposed. Whereas for Cameron the parasitic elements against which the ‘hardworking’ productive people had to be united were in the main internal enemies – the unemployed, those on benefits, the disabled, and the state itself, in its public service guise at least – for the anti-austerity movement, the threat was to be found on the global level, namely the international banking and financial system, and the global political project of neoliberalism which had allowed that system to dominate the rest of the economy.

To reduce this analysis – which achieved hegemonic status amongst the liberal-left in the wake of the crisis – to its bare bones, the financial crash was caused not by state over-spending but by a lack of state regulation of the financial and banking sectors. This had enabled those sectors to make vast amounts of profit from speculation on behalf of the ‘1%’ at the expense of the other ‘99%’.²⁴ The ‘real economy’ which makes actual physical things had been undermined by the power, greed and mathematical trickery of financial institutions, for whom money seemed to beget money, apparently of its own accord.²⁵ While in the Cameron narrative, the crisis

had been caused by the moral failings of those too lazy to work, and a Labour government too lax to make them, here the crisis was understood as the result of the moral failings of the international financial elite, whose refusal to curb their own greed had brought the entire system down as a consequence. This had been compounded by a further moral failing, that of what John McDonnell routinely describes as the 'political choice' to impose austerity.²⁶

From this perspective, austerity was not only a vicious, self-centred political decision made by and for the '1%', it was objectively irrational. The problem facing the economy was ultimately one of distribution. The greed of those in power had tilted the balance of the economy too far towards the unproductive global 'elite' and away from those who actually do all the work. The crash, it contended, was the consequence. The contrast was often made to the post-war era of welfare capitalism, in which capital had far less freedom to roam the globe in search of profits, and the gap between the '1%' and the rest was much less pronounced. The shift from this form of capitalism – based on mass production and a Keynesian welfare state – to the financialised precarity of 'neoliberalism' in the early 1970s was regarded straightforwardly as the result of class warfare. The system of production, this suggested, had been taken over by a financial elite and distorted in such a way to place profits above social needs.

This analysis is by no means without merit. Neoliberalism as a strand of political-economic theory certainly does exist, with roots stretching back to early 1930s Germany.²⁷ The economy – in 'developed' countries at least – did become more financialised and less industrialised from the late 1970s onwards. The provision of public services was transformed to adhere to the tenets of 'market rationality.' And the trade union movement suffered a series of severe defeats, which ripped up the old corporatist model of Keynesian social democracy.

But, as Werner Bonefeld asserts, ‘normative’ critiques of neoliberalism reject neoliberal *capitalism* only abstractly. They pose no questions about ‘the character of capitalist wealth itself’ – of which neoliberalism is only one expression. Instead they lash out at what is seen as a ‘doctrine of narrow-minded economic interests,’ in particular those of finance capital. By suggesting that neoliberalism has somehow ‘corrupt[ed] capitalism’, they elide the extent to which neoliberalism is merely ‘a theoretical expression of capitalism’, and therefore miss the object of critique – capitalism itself – not only in theory but in practice too.²⁸ This perspective offers another way through the recent online debate, out of which no side stood smelling of roses, between the Labour right and left about the meaning and salience of the term ‘neoliberalism’, which has rumbled on at precisely the time its relevance is diminishing.²⁹

By ignoring the core of what neoliberalism expresses, in the anti-austerity discourse the implementation of some neoliberal-inspired policies is routinely dehistoricised. It is ripped out of the context of the severe crisis of profitability that hit the ‘good’ welfare-Keynesianism in the late 1960s and demanded a change in the organisation of capitalist production. Such a dehistoricised perspective has no means to grasp the necessity of profit in a capitalist system – a necessity that applies just as much to workers, who rely upon the profitability of their employer as the guarantor of future work, as it does to industrialists or financiers. Profit is instead regarded as a political choice, imposed from above. Nor is the mutually constitutive relationship between ‘productive’ or ‘real’ industry and ‘unproductive’ finance recognised. Thus the pursuit of the restoration of growth, fictitious or not, through the ‘neoliberal’ explosion of financial instruments, globalised trade and personal debt was not seen as emerging from the contradictions of the previous form of social organisation but rather transformed into an evil conspiratorial plan cooked up in Chicago, unleashed on an unsuspecting public, and held in

place purely by ideology or military force. This has the effect of not only writing out of history both the economic failure of and popular resistance to the hierarchical strictures of Keynesian Fordism, but also flattens the substantial (and ongoing) developments within neoliberal government policy itself into a one-dimensional caricature which hides more than it reveals. Moreover, it can result in a perspective which regards the forms of rule-based cosmopolitan liberalism which have accompanied a globalised economy as being merely an ideological cover for exploitation.

The logical conclusion to be drawn from the popular understanding of neoliberalism as form of conspiracy imposed via the ‘Washington Consensus’ and backed up by US military power is that the nation-state should use its powers to throw off the shackles imposed by the predatory practices of unproductive global finance and American imperialism, reject the rule-based cosmopolitan order of internationalism liberalism, embark on a programme of intensive economic intervention on a national level, and restore the ‘real’, ‘productive’ national industrial economy back to its rightful position.

As we shall see in Chapter 4, this was the programme proposed by Corbynism’s ideological predecessor, Tony Benn, in the mid-1970s, and it remains central to the Corbyn worldview today. The risk of uncritically holding to this position is that any challenge to the transnational liberal order in the name of the nation-state appears to be an attack on ‘neoliberalism’ itself, and thus something to be welcomed. It is this conflation of cosmopolitanism with neoliberalism that explains to a great extent Corbyn’s ambivalent response to both Brexit and even the election of Donald Trump – something we will explore in more detail in later chapters.

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For all the differences of their conclusions, then, the central arguments of both the austerity narrative and its anti-austerity

opponent ultimately rested on the same premises. The financial crash was caused by a wholly avoidable structural imbalance between the productive and unproductive sectors of society, an imbalance that was at best ignored and at worst encouraged by the practices of a corrupt political elite. The solution to the crisis was the restoration of proper order through a political programme which would take back power from the unproductive elements of society, and their political handmaidens. For Cameron, this took the form of ruthless benefit cuts, intensified workfare schemes and the slashing of public sector jobs. For the anti-austerity movement it meant the use of the state to stimulate the economy, put up barriers to the free movement of global capital and the end of predatory financial trickery. The implication of both arguments was that once those parasitic elements who had been draining the productive vitality from society were removed or tamed, everything would be fine. Both the austerity and anti-austerity narratives agreed that the primary cause of the 2008 crash was the errors, greed, laziness and corruption of identifiable groups and individuals. The difference was only in who was to blame.

THE STRANGE DEATH OF THE DEFICIT

How, then, did Corbyn's Labour manage to overcome the austerity impasse in 2017? For his supporters, there is no great mystery to unravel. An explicitly anti-austerity Labour party had delivered an explicitly anti-austerity message and won the argument.³⁰ Things turned out just as they had always said they would. From this perspective it was Corbyn's election as leader which marked the line in the sand. As we shall see, the idea that Corbyn represents a clean break with everything that has come before in Labour history has been

absolutely crucial to his success from the moment of his entry into the leadership contest in 2015. But, in truth, the mysterious disappearance of ‘the deficit’ cannot be explained by the heroic persuasiveness of Corbyn and his army of supporters.

Firstly, as we have seen, contrary to the ‘austerity-lite’ mythology, there had been no shortage of attempts to challenge the austerity narrative during the early years of the coalition government. The problem was that few were listening. Secondly, despite all the rhetoric of a clean break with the craven compromises of the past, when it came to the question of the deficit Labour’s 2017 manifesto did not in fact fundamentally alter the approach developed by Miliband and Balls two years earlier. Labour’s 2017 manifesto was self-consciously presented as ‘fully costed,’ meaning it required no additional borrowing for day-to-day spending.³¹ Furthermore, the manifesto promised that a Labour government would ‘eliminate the current deficit’ and ensure the national debt fell by the end of every term, in line with the self-imposed ‘fiscal credibility rule’ McDonnell had announced the previous year.³² This was precisely the position that the left- Corbyn and McDonnell included- had decried as ‘austerity-lite’ in Miliband’s 2015 offering.³³ And the reason why Corbyn and McDonnell had adopted this position was exactly the same as Miliband’s: because they expected the austerity narrative to continue to dominate the economic debate. It was a preemptive measure taken to try to fend off the barrage of attacks they presumed were coming their way. If they had truly believed they had successfully overturned the consensus around debt and the deficit, why bother tying their own hands with a self-imposed ‘rule’?

What was really remarkable about the 2017 election was the failure of that barrage of attacks to arrive – and the abject failure of those which did take aim at the figures in the manifesto to have any impact on the electorate. The ‘fully costed’

nature of Labour's manifesto was of the most speculative kind, based on radically optimistic projections of economic growth and tax revenues which would follow from the stimulus provided by government investment. These projections enabled Corbyn to make an array of voluminous spending pledges, with something on offer for virtually every section of society. Leaving aside the question of how likely Labour's economic predictions were to come true, it is inconceivable that this far-from-watertight 'fiscal rule' neutralised the issue of the deficit of its own accord, given that Miliband's much more rigorous attempt two years earlier had failed miserably to do so. Had 'the deficit' retained the same power as in 2015, it would have been the easiest task in the world to convince wavering voters that Corbyn's commitment to his 'fiscal rule' was a lie, that he had not the slightest interest in cutting the deficit, and that his big-spending programme of investment would drag the country back to financial ruin.

Such arguments were indeed made by Labour's opponents. Corbyn's manifesto would 'bankrupt Britain' bellowed the *Telegraph*.³⁴ 'Jeremy Corbyn's election giveaway is a magic money tree blowing a £300bn black hole in Britain's finances,' railed the metaphor-mixing *Sun*.³⁵ And yet, in stark contrast to the coalition era, it was now the Tories with the communication problem. Where once arguments about the merits of Keynesian counter-cyclical stimulus had fallen on stony ground, now it was precisely the opposite. It did not matter how much the right-wing press screamed of the purportedly dire consequences of Corbyn and McDonnell's spending plans. Something had changed. The austerity narrative had lost its bite. The Tory attacks on Labour's lavish spending sounded increasingly hollow, even half-hearted. Now it was those who continued to insist on the need for restraint who found themselves ignored, unable to land a punch on a man who should, in theory, have provided the easiest of targets.

The question of what lies behind the strange death of the deficit cannot, then, be answered by recourse to Corbyn's hard left heroism. Nor, in truth, was it simply a case of austerity fatigue, or the fact that the latest round of cuts at last began to affect wealthier demographics, particularly school funding (although these were both important factors). The truth of its demise is far stranger than such simplistic explanations suggest. And the key to understanding it is Brexit, not Corbyn. That is to say, in order to grasp the true, rather than mythic, role of Corbynism in this story we need to view it through the prism of Brexit.

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The vote for Brexit was a moment of seismic, even revolutionary, importance in British politics; the point at which the increasingly tenuous connection between economic calculation and ideological narratives finally broke loose. The very ground of British politics seemed to collapse in the wake of the result. And for the past six years at least that ground had been austerity. Ever since the 2008 financial crisis, the Conservatives had presented themselves as the bulwark against economic ruin. In 2015, this argument had been rewarded with a majority. And yet just a year later, as an endless series of economists, business leaders and politicians lined up to predict the similarly dire consequences of leaving the world's biggest trading bloc, the result was the exact opposite. Warnings of self-inflicted economic catastrophe no longer registered. People refused to believe them – or worse, no longer cared. There was evidently something bigger at stake than mere economic well-being. A united British people were 'taking back control' from the 'elite', the 'experts', 'Brussels bureaucrats', 'the immigrants.' 'We want our country back' was the cry, and to hell with the economic consequences.

The Leave campaign itself sunk ever deeper into the swamp of pure reaction. Billboards threatened the imminent arrival

of '76 million' Turks.<sup>36</sup> UKIP leader Nigel Farage apocalyptically claimed migration was pushing Britain to 'breaking point'.<sup>37</sup> A week before the vote, the rising tension culminated in the assassination of pro-EU, pro-migrant Labour MP Jo Cox by a neo-Nazi activist. He shot and stabbed her to death while shouting 'Britain First.' The shock success of the toxic Leave campaign in such circumstances split the country down the middle. Numerous attempts to categorise the split followed – old vs young, small towns vs big cities, 'authoritarian' vs 'liberal,' 'closed' vs 'open', 'the people' vs 'the elite.' Theresa May decided to adopt the latter frame, using the populist signifier of 'the people' to interpret the 52–48% vote for Brexit in the most hardline manner possible, making the reduction of immigration and withdrawal from the European Court of Justice her lead priorities. The extremity of May's position, her refusal to regard as legitimate the 48% who had voted to remain, in favour of a pure winner-takes-all majoritarianism, exacerbated the tribalism that the referendum campaign had unleashed. The electorate was polarised like never before, along lines which refused to fit into the old boxes of social status, occupation or income. Nor was it a division which could be overcome through rational debate or argument. The division was now one of identity, of morality – of *who we are* and *who you are not*.

Brexit recalibrated the political scales to such an extent that attempting to make a direct comparison between events before and after the referendum is a pointless exercise. Arguments which simply attribute Corbyn's success and Miliband's failure to their relative commitment to anti-austerity, without taking into account the intervention of Brexit, and the dramatic polarisation of the electorate that followed, are in this sense ahistorical. In 2015, Miliband was fighting on a terrain dominated by austerity and the perception of 'economic credibility'. By the time Corbyn entered the electoral

fray in 2017, austerity was already dead. And it was Brexit, not Corbyn, that killed it.

But it is equally ahistorical to portray Brexit as an inexplicable and wholly irrational act of spontaneity, running against the grain of everything that had preceded it. Britain's populist turn, the triumph of identity over economic interest, did not come out of nowhere. The roots of British antipathy to Europe and anti-migrant racism go way back, of course. But in the short term, the path to Brexit was laid by austerity itself. The connection between Brexit and austerity is one that has been routinely made on the left, including by Corbyn himself the morning after the referendum, when he popped up on TV screens nationwide to suggest that the result showed 'many communities are fed up with cuts'.<sup>38</sup> In this reading Brexit is straightforwardly interpreted as a cry for help by those 'left behind,' lashing out at whatever target is at hand and using the EU as a proxy for austerity.<sup>39</sup> But this argument has no means to explain why Cameron could win the 2015 election on an explicitly pro-austerity platform and yet lose to a supposed anti-austerity backlash a year later. Nor can it explain why so many of the most pro-austerity Tory voters, particularly those in the affluent South East counties who had benefitted the most from rising house prices, were also the most pro-Leave.<sup>40</sup> There was no inevitable contradiction between the austerity narrative and Brexit – the two were perfectly compatible for many, perhaps most, voters.

And this compatibility, we suggest, was evident even in those areas in which a vote to Leave could perhaps be more legitimately read as a reaction to economic decline. Even if here, in the post-industrial towns of the North and the Midlands, the vote to Leave was a form of popular revolt against austerity, it was a revolt *based entirely on the logic of austerity itself*, not a rejection of it. It is only by recognising this that it becomes possible to see how 2017 was a 'post-deficit'

election not because the ‘austerity’ narrative had failed, or had been defeated, but because it had succeeded only too well. Significantly, Brexit emerged out of the confluence of the two forms of productivist moral tales which had dominated British politics since the crash – that used to justify austerity and that used to resist it.

### THE AMBIVALENCE OF ‘45

The brilliance of the Leave campaign in the EU referendum lay in its ability to harness the combined power of both of these analyses, holding them to their promises, pushing them to logical yet mostly unforeseen conclusions, seamlessly incorporating them into the Brexit narrative. So successful has this strategy been that it has left the pro-European wings of both the austerity and anti-austerity movements floundering on the sidelines of the post-referendum debate, impotently looking on as the charge to hard Brexit – defined as leaving the European Single Market, and the Customs Union – takes its seemingly inexorable course. And the reason for this chronic inability to stage even the flimsiest of interventions is that any attempt to do so from the basis of their previous positions faces the prospect of the full weight of their own arguments being thrown back at them in their new Brexit form.

The Leave campaign took the two forms of productivism exhibited by the austerity and anti-austerity movements – one aimed primarily at internal ‘scroungers’, the other at external predatory forces – and merged them into one. Whereas Cameron had blamed the crash and justified austerity on the basis of a supposed underclass of benefit cheats living off the largesse of a Labour-run public sector, for the Leave campaign (and the UKIP platform that preceded it) the parasitic force which had dragged Britain into economic crisis and years of austerity

was immigration, and, in particular (although by no means exclusively), immigration from the EU. In UKIP leader Nigel Farage's telling, everything from declining wages through to traffic-jammed motorways was ultimately down to immigration.<sup>41</sup> The housing crisis, unemployment, a lack of funding for the NHS, a shortage of school places, overcrowded trains – there was not a single issue facing Britain that could not be blamed on migrants. The implication of this argument – and, in truth, there was very little left implicit in it – was that just as for Cameron the eradication of the unproductive was the only way to restore the country to its former glories, so too would the cessation of immigration and the removal, forced or otherwise, of those who were no longer welcome enable the dark days of austere sacrifice to come to an end.

Like Cameron, UKIP and Leave certainly pinned a good share of the blame for this on the Blair-Brown government. But the real culprit was not internal but external – Britain's membership of the European Union. The free movement of people – a formal legal right to work and study that accompanies membership of the European Single Market, and which, as long as that membership is retained, is beyond the reach of any individual government – had, in the eyes of Farage and Leave, allowed 'uncontrolled migration' into the UK, drained the resources from British public services, and, contrary to the evidence, put downward pressure on the wages of British workers.<sup>42</sup>

The Leave campaign then skilfully combined the no-holds-barred nativism of this argument with the core of the anti-austerity narrative, in order to create a causal connection between the funding of public services and leaving the EU. The now-infamous claim that the British public was wasting '£350m a week' on EU membership, money that could be spent on funding 'our NHS instead', was aimed squarely at those who had felt the sharp end of austerity but for whom the

full-fat nativism of Farage, Boris Johnson et al might prove a little too hard to stomach on its own. It was an argument that chimed with those put forward by the initially miniscule but increasingly influential 'Lexit' (left-wing Brexit) movement, an alliance of the traditionally eurosceptic Labour left and anti-EU trade unions and far left groups, some of whom had previously run a joint electoral platform under the inelegant moniker No2EU: Yes to Democracy.

The Lexit wing of the Leave campaign had its origins in the Bennite faction of the Labour left, the tradition within which Corbyn spent his formative political years. From a Lexit perspective, the EU and its unelected bureaucratic leaders had joined forces with other transnational organisations (everything from the IMF and World Bank through to NATO and the UN) to deprive the British nation-state of its power to protect its people against the ravages of predatory global finance. Here the Lexiteers found common ground with Farage, suggesting that the rules of the Single Market in particular were illegitimate restrictions on the sovereignty of the British nation-state, imposed by an alien power. These purported impositions included free movement, a limit on the amount of 'state aid' a national government can provide an ailing national industry, regulation of government procurement policy and, more generally, the broader legal and institutional structure of the European project as a whole.

Where they disagreed with the right of the Brexit movement was on the effect of those restrictions. For the right-wing Brexiteers, the EU was imposing socialism on Britain by the back door. For the Lexiteers, the EU was blocking the transition to socialism. In either case, as with austerity, the language and imagery of the Second World War was routinely used in order to present the struggle to leave the EU and restore British 'independence' as an extension of the fight against the Nazis. It is of no small significance that in 2003

Tony Benn himself portrayed attempts to leave the EU in anti-colonial terms, describing it as a ‘national liberation struggle,’ regarding it as a crucial part of the ongoing battle against ‘international capitalism.’<sup>43</sup>

The Leave campaign’s choice of ‘our NHS’ as the public service whose survival supposedly rested on withdrawal from the EU was by no means accidental. The NHS is the one state institution to inspire the same intensity of public affection as the idealised memories of wartime pluck which provided ‘austerity populism’ with its ideological power. This appeal had long been recognised by the anti-austerity movement. Ken Loach’s film *The Spirit of ’45*, which told the story of how the NHS and the rest of the welfare state was built out of the ruins of the Second World War, was merely the most high-profile attempt to divert the austerity narrative’s nostalgia for the 1940s into channels more conducive for leftist politics.<sup>44</sup> Campaigns against the EU’s proposed TTIP treaty with the United States similarly centred on forecasts of the leech-like attachment of parasitical American capital to the NHS that would follow.<sup>45</sup>

Such an approach not only failed to challenge the nationalist premises of the austerity argument, but in many ways strengthened it. Seen through a Faragean lens, the NHS became yet another example of British wartime exceptionalism, a national treasure constructed in the face of threats from alien forces. This framing of ‘our NHS’ left it wide open for reappropriation by the right. Indeed, the idea that a wave of ‘health tourism’ – in which foreigners fraudulently claimed health care in the UK – was responsible for the travails of the health service became common currency amongst right-wing papers in the run up to the EU referendum.<sup>46</sup> By making the survival of the NHS its central focus, the Leave campaign thus managed to invoke the ‘spirit of ‘45’ in both its left and right guises. It brought the productivist and exclusionary logics shared by the austerity and anti-austerity movements to a head.



The referendum was thus transformed into the means by which the various promises made by the two narratives were given concrete form. In both cases, the resumption of public spending was predicated on the expulsion of the alien outsider, whether in the form of the immigrant, the scrounger, the European Court of Justice, or the shadowy world of ‘globalist’ finance. ‘The deficit’ and ‘the 1%’ were powerful images, but they were intangible – the odd banker stripped of his knighthood aside – and it was precisely this intangibility that gave their personified representations a dangerous political dynamism that we will go on to consider in later chapters. Moreover, neither the deficit nor the 1% could be removed in a single moment of decision. The moment of reckoning never seemed to arrive. It was always just around the next corner. In contrast, for the Brexit tendency, the demonic power of the EU took corporeal form everywhere they looked – from the colour of the British passport to the relative bendiness of a banana, the weights on a market stall, to accents on the street – and came to step in as a placeholder, depending on where one stood politically, for both the deficit and the 1%. Raising the question of British membership in a referendum offered the prospect of a concrete decision to which the latter two abstractions could now be reduced. The Leave campaign thus brought the moment of truth back from the ever-receding horizon and planted it firmly in the here and now. Here, at last, was the chance to redeem the promises that had been made, the chance to remove every one of the externally-imposed restrictions that had been holding the national community of ‘hardworking people’ back and had necessitated austerity in the first place. A straight question, once and for all. In or out. Servitude or freedom. All it took was a tick in a box.

The Leave campaign’s critique of the EU took on both aspects of the productivist analysis, top-down and bottom-up, adopted from left and right, and pushed them to, and beyond, their limits.

Together, this amounted to a formidable political arsenal, bringing together the strongest elements of both the austerity and anti-austerity narratives: an emotional appeal to cultural tradition, the moral righteousness of the productive, the sanctity of national sovereignty, anti-migrant nativism, conspiracist railing against ‘global elites’. This was then employed in such a way as to explain the financial crash, failing public services and Britain’s post-industrial malaise all at once. Against this, arguments based on topics as deathlessly utilitarian as the loss of a few percentage points of GDP or the smooth functioning of trans-European supply chains were doomed to fail. For the first time in decades, the notion of ‘economic credibility’ had lost its purchase as fantasies of ‘control’ took over, on both left and right. The utter failure of the endless warnings that Brexit amounted to an act of unprecedented act of national self-sabotage, combined with the fantastical promises from both right and left of the wondrous world to come once Britain had shaken off the dead hand of the EU, pushed British politics into new territory. Brexit ushered in a new era in which fantasies of national sovereignty or the ‘will’ of a dreamt-up ‘people’ overcame appeals to economic interest, whatever the cost, as the fragile connection between ideology and economic interest finally snapped in two.

#### ‘SOME THINGS MATTER MORE THAN MONEY’

One of the first and most famous public flauntings of this devil-may-care irrationalism over questions of economic interest came in an interview Farage gave to the BBC in 2014. There he stated that, where immigration was concerned, ‘there are some things that matter more than money’.<sup>47</sup> Even in spite of the fact that more immigrants make the country richer, Farage would sooner be poorer. ‘I do think the social side of this matters more than the pure market economics.’<sup>48</sup> In retrospect,

it is clear that this statement marked a wider moment in which the politics of ‘economic credibility’ lost control of the ideological narratives that had been used to justify them. As noted above, Cameron and Osborne had been happy to sell public spending cuts as a project of national redemption in which ‘we’ were ‘all in it together’ against the collective foes of debt and unproductive ‘scroungers.’ But when it came to the crunch, they subordinated the fantasy of ‘austerity nostalgia’ to a form of economic reason, however disputable, that by implication recognised the relationship between the needs of capitalist reproduction and the reproduction of humans as labour power. Farage’s statement, by contrast, openly questioned the centrality of economic calculation altogether, and with it the fraught dependency of humans upon such calculation.

Here the moral urgency of exclusion contained in the productivist fairytale was separated from the question of productivity itself. As such, while inspired by the racist desire to cleanse Britain of perceived outsiders, it opened up a plane of political possibility on which left and right coalesced in certain forms of thinking and acting. In some way, Farage’s comment gave a glance of what a politics that prioritised things other than commodities, wealth and value could look like. In much the same way, the left tradition from which Corbynism springs also regards the relationship between the ‘social side’ and ‘pure market economics’ to be essentially contingent, a matter of will power rather than necessity. In this, Corbynism mirrors the obsession with ‘taking back control’ which underpinned the vote for Brexit, with the two movements even agreeing on the political agent needed to wrench back that elusive control – the nation-state. Both claim to be able to free society from the necessity of living through the economic forms of capitalism through the building of national barriers. Apparently different but strangely resonant, each shows the janus-faced indeterminacy of populism in an era of democratic crisis.

The reality is that the society they seek to build by strength of moral force alone cannot be found apart from in and through the economic forms dismissed as secondary concerns. Without wage-labour, money, the buying and selling of commodities, and economic growth, individuals in capitalist society cannot live – even while these same conditions grind us down. Rather than facing up to the unforgiving reality that in capitalist society the fulfilment of social needs and the need to make profit exist in an inseparable contradiction – the one impossible without the other, while constantly negating it – these critiques entertain a compensatory fantasy that the relation between the two is simply a matter of ‘taking back control’. There is no escape from this conundrum, and this is what gives both Brexit and Corbynism their edge: impossibility, insatiability, irrepressibility. Once unbottled, such fantasies can no longer be stopped shut. In a topsy-turvy world where subjects act under conditions they cannot choose, where the attempt to satisfy needs create objective realities beyond their control, groundswells against the status quo can have unintended consequences. Left populisms in this sense are fully of a piece with those of the right. Emotional or irrational urges are unlocked as electoral assets with unpredictable outcomes that risk the liberal democratic certainties within which social democracy, for better or for worse, moves – particularly when impossible promises do not, and cannot, come true.

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Austerity populism died on June 23rd 2016, killed by an uncontrollable explosion of its own exclusionary logic. This logic was no longer merely an instrumental tool, cynically used by the government for its own ends. The polarising division between ‘friends’ and ‘enemies,’ those inside the tribe and those outside, now constituted the very foundation of British

politics. As such, the political terrain had shifted irrevocably, and although few realised it at the time – least of all Corbyn’s critics – all bets made in the previous era were off.

Political success now depended on the speed at which the new situation was recognised. Strange as it may seem now, given the torturous lethargy of her post-election reign, Theresa May was the quickest off the mark. The distinct brand of ‘Erdington Conservatism’ developed by her close advisor Nick Timothy seemed perfectly primed for the post-austerity, post-Brexit era.⁴⁹ Inspired by the 19th century Birmingham industrialist Joseph Chamberlain, Timothy’s vision was founded upon an interventionist economic programme of infrastructure investment, the rejection of ‘globalist’ free trade in favour of protectionist tariffs to secure British industry, fierce Euroscepticism, a radical reduction in immigration, selective state education, and a laser-like focus on the apparently communal concerns of the so-called ‘white working class’ – traditional values, self-responsibility, patriotism, and law and order. There was an obvious overlap with both the message of the Leave campaign, as well as the creed of ‘faith, flag and family’ which had long been touted by the ‘Blue Labour’ wing of the opposition party – indeed, Lord Glasman took tea with Timothy in the early months of May’s premiership.⁵⁰ As May walked into Downing Street for the first time as Prime Minister it seemed that her programme of economic and cultural protectionism was destined for hegemonic status. On the steps of Number 10, she promised, in language clearly adopted from the anti-austerity wing of the Leave campaign, that her government would be ‘driven not by the interests of the privileged few, but by yours’ – the millions of ‘ordinary people’ who were ‘just about managing’.⁵¹

For most commentators (including ourselves at the time), the emergence of ‘Mayism’ seemed to signal the final demise of Corbynism.⁵² The combination of anti-austerity economics,

anti-globalist nationalism and anti-immigrant nativism in a post-Brexit, post-austerity world seemed invincible. In desperation, the Parliamentary Labour Party attempted to force Corbyn's resignation by putting up a series of Shadow Cabinet ministers to quit *en masse*. At the time, such despair seemed wholly appropriate. And yet, a more sober analysis would have revealed the strong correspondence between the new post-Brexit terrain and the protectionist economic and foreign policies long advocated by the Bennite 'hard left', of which Corbyn was both founding member and modern day heir. Far from Brexit destroying Corbyn's electoral chances, it is clear, in retrospect at least, that it was the indispensable precondition for his success. Brexit was not the sign of the political zeitgeist rushing away from Corbynism, as so many thought. It was precisely the opposite. By pushing the populist logic of both austerity populism and its anti-austerity cousin to their conclusion, and eradicating economic competence as a criterion for electoral success, Brexit cleared the ground for Corbynism's consolidation, simultaneously sublimating and abolishing the issue of the deficit through the fulfilment of its exclusionary promise.

The effect of Brexit was to send British politics into a space somewhere between fantasy and abyss in which Project Corbyn was perfectly primed to operate. The stuff of success in such a scenario is emotion, sentiment, identity, abstract concepts like national sovereignty and the will of a dreamt-up 'people,' with either a nativist or socialist inflection – or both. This was the kind of heady mix on which the 2017 election was fought. On both left and right a deranged optimism prevailed, in which faith in the future was all that was needed to bring it into being. This wishful thinking, seemingly at odds with the cold reality of forthcoming political isolation and economic decline, was exemplified both in the credulous Brexiteers convinced that Empire 2.0 was on the horizon, as well as the Corbynists who held in their man expectations apparently

so high as to never be met. Farage's heresy resounded, and with it the dangerous insatiability of the abstract principles and unmeetable goals to which it opposed economic calculation. Ironically, for all her attempts to capture the revanchism of the Brexit campaign, it was Theresa May's failure to reach the required level of utopian exuberance which led to her underwhelming electoral performance. In such conditions, centring an election campaign upon the grey promise of 'stability,' and promoting policies as knotty and downcast as a change in the contributions to adult social care, was not enough for voters used to stronger stuff left and right to reward May with a majority.

Brexit thus opened up political space for Corbyn to construct an electoral platform of bold state intervention of the kind that had been wholly denied to Ed Miliband – as long as that platform came dressed in the protectionist colours of a post-liberal, isolationist nation-state, in which the free movement of people no longer held. Understanding how and why Corbyn was able to deal with the thorny issue of free movement while keeping his supporters onside, in a manner that was completely denied to his predecessor, is crucial to grasping the nature of Corbynism as a whole. And here we must turn to the figure of Corbyn himself. Without the advantage of Corbyn's reputation as a uniquely authentic man of principle, an impression shared across the political spectrum, Labour would not have been able to take advantage of the gap opened up by the collapse of the austerity narrative through the skilful neutralisation of the question of immigration. The next chapters will therefore trace the development of this Corbyn mythology, outlining the many ways in which it has been crucial to the rise of a Corbynism constructed around the man from a set of seemingly independent ideas, whilst simultaneously being dependent on him and him alone for its existence, survival, and unpredicted success.