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# Labour, Antisemitism and the Critique of Political Economy

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## Introduction

This chapter uses the critical theory of antisemitism (e.g. Postone 2006) to analyse the antisemitism crisis which erupted in the British Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership (2015-2020). Explanations for the seemingly sudden explosion of antisemitism within leftist milieus commonly focused on the idea of antisemitism as a 'virus' imported into the party from outside by extremists (see Gidley et al 2020 for an account). This chapter challenges this narrative, developing our previous work (2018, 2020a) to argue that the roots of the crisis under Corbyn can be found in the 'truncated' or 'foreshortened' critique of capitalism (see Kurz 2007; Heinrich 2012) that has been a feature of the British socialist and liberal left since its formation, of which 'Corbynism' represented a concentrated form. This worldview regards capitalism as the corruption of an otherwise benign form of productive society by capitalists motivated by greed and personal immorality. The 'real economy' of productive national industry is valorised and opposed to unproductive, parasitical global finance, which is taken to fraudulently conjure money out of money (Bonefeld 2014).

We do not suggest that such ideas and rhetoric *inevitably* lead to the kind of conspiracist and often antisemitic worldviews that characterised parts of the Corbyn movement. But there is nonetheless a potential for them to do so. 'Truncated critiques'

lack a properly articulated analysis of global capital and the nation-state as mutually constitutive expressions of capitalist society understood as a global form of generalised impersonal domination. Instead, such critiques understand capital and the state as externally-related antagonists, each driven by rival moralities. In this, truncated critiques create a receptive environment for the reformulation of longstanding conspiracy theories about the role of ‘international Jewish interests’ in undermining national peoples through control of finance and the media. Thus what Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) described as the ‘elements of antisemitism’ are latently present in such a perspective, awaiting political activation. Such activation, we argue, happened in the Labour party in the Corbyn years, as opposed to the importation of any kind of racist bug from outside.

This chapter focuses upon how a latent constellation of ‘elements of antisemitism’ was activated under Corbyn’s leadership. In particular, we seek to show how the Manichean anti-imperialism and ‘absolutist’ anti-Zionism which Corbyn had been personally associated with for decades is itself a manifestation of the truncated critique of capital and the state that underpinned the movement’s economic analysis at the geopolitical level. In the anti-imperialist/anti-Zionist worldview, Israel is depicted as a parasitical and illegitimate ‘entity’ undermining the global community of peoples, with many of the traditional anti-Jewish stereotypes—secretive global power, vengefulness, amorality—projected onto the Jewish state. Whilst truncated critiques of capitalism have been a feature of the socialist and liberal strands of the Labour Party from its formation, it was their political activation by a leader from the anti-imperialist/anti-Zionist strand of the movement that rendered antisemitism a pronounced and highly visible phenomenon within the party.

## **Antisemitism in Corbyn’s Labour Party**

At the core of the British Labour Party’s antisemitism crisis under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership was a series of allegations about his statements and associations made across a career-long preoccupation with the Israel-Palestine conflict. Prior to the announcement of his candidacy for the leadership in 2015, Corbyn had, despite being an MP since 1983, been a minor figure on the national political scene. Yet Corbyn had long been notorious for his equivocation over, and support of, groups engaged in political violence, in particular the IRA and Hamas (for a comprehensive summary see Johnson 2019).

Corbyn had been a leading member and Chair of the Stop The War Coalition (STWC). Stemming from the left opposition to the NATO intervention to prevent Slobodan Milosevic’s genocidal assault on Kosovo, STWC was formally established in the wake of 9/11 to protest against the US invasions of Afghanistan and later Iraq. Its leadership having been sourced from quarters of the Leninist hard left like the Socialist

Workers Party and British Communist Party, STWC's opposition to British foreign policy was grounded in a rigid, binary form of 'anti-imperialism' which bore the imprint of Cold War Stalinism (Bloodworth 2015, Randall 2021, Ch. 4). STWC's sympathies lie with any state or movement opposed to Anglo-American foreign policy and the legitimacy and existence of the state of Israel, no matter how violent, reactionary, fundamentalist, antisemitic or—as became very clear in the organisation's vacillations over the Russian invasion of Ukraine (see Thompson & Pitts 2022)—imperialist. STWC members, including Corbyn, routinely appeared at public events supporting and even lauding Hamas and Hezbollah operatives and assorted British Islamists (see Hirsh 2017, Rich 2018).

STWC's success in securing leadership of opposition to the Iraq war—a movement which had attracted broad support from across the liberal-left—sanitised their public reputation to the effect that criticism of their political alliances failed to gain traction. Thus when Corbyn ran for Labour leader in June 2015, and when he won that election three months later, he was generally presented by the media, supporters and opponents alike as a principled if idealistic lifelong campaigner for peace, standing on an 'anti-austerity' economic platform which sought to reverse the public spending cuts imposed by the post-crisis governments of 2010-2015. Criticism within Labour focused almost entirely on his supposed lack of 'electability.' In those early days, it was left to a small number of observers, and in particular Jewish activists, to point to some of the more problematic aspects of Corbyn's political worldview that belied his gentle homilies to peace and harmony.

In August 2015, with his victory in the leadership election seemingly inevitable, the *Jewish Chronicle* (JC) published seven 'key questions' about Corbyn's past statements and associations (Jewish Chronicle, 2015). One concerned Corbyn's relationship with Deir Yassin Remembered (DYR), a Palestinian solidarity organisation strongly associated with open Holocaust deniers. Most notable among the latter was DYR founder Paul Eisen, who in 2008 had published a blog entitled 'My life as a Holocaust denier,' writing that 'I question that there ever existed homicidal gas-chambers. I question the figure of six million Jewish victims of the Nazi assault and I believe that the actual figure was significantly less' (Dysch 2015a). The extent of this denial, well-known within British Palestine solidarity circles, led to the 2011 exclusion of DYR from the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), of which Corbyn is a patron. Despite this, in the years following the revelations of Holocaust denial and DYR's exclusion from the PSC, Corbyn attended its events, donated it money, and in 2014, a year before his election as Labour leader, even invited its leadership to a private meeting in Parliament in (Mendick 2017). Another question posed by the JC focused on Corbyn's support for the Palestinian cleric Raed Salah. In speeches and writings Salah had propagated the blood libel about Jews baking the blood of children into bread, labelled Jews 'the bacteria of all times', and engaged in 9/11 conspiracy theories

(Community Security Trust 2011). In 2011 this history led to Salah being refused entry to the UK. Along with other activists, including Green Party MP Caroline Lucas, Corbyn campaigned against Salah's exclusion, describing the accusations against Salah as 'hysteria' whipped up by 'the Zionist lobby' (Sugarman, 2019). In 2012 he appeared with Salah at a press conference, declaring him 'an honoured citizen' and inviting him 'for tea on the [House of Commons] terrace, because [he] deserve[s] it.'

Corbyn's response was one of aggressive indignation, immediately seeking to frame any critique of his political commitments a personal attack, 'intrusive, rude and vulgar' as David Hirsh puts it (2015, no pagination). Corbyn described the accusations of 'associating' with antisemites as 'ludicrous and wrong,' in each case claiming that the stories were a transparent attempt to 'smear' him and by extension all who support the Palestinian cause (Mason, 2015). He denied that he would ever tolerate antisemitism, contending that he had been an 'anti-racist' all his life, and that 'antisemitism and all other forms of racism' were abhorrent. Corbyn's position was that his lifelong commitment to the left, to anti-racist politics, and to the moral principles that he felt himself to embody through that commitment, meant it was inconceivable that he could fail to recognise or tolerate antisemitism, let alone act in an antisemitic manner himself. This therefore reduced the need to deal with the questions raised concerning the political values, goals and orientations of the individuals he had consorted with.

This mobilisation of his own perceived personal morality was quickly picked up by Corbyn's supporters. It was, in effect, an extension of the claim of moral supremacism that had been central to Corbyn's leadership campaign from the outset, in which Corbyn was depicted as both channelling and personifying the hitherto-thwarted moral principles of 'the people.' Corbyn had, so his supporters claimed, been on 'the right side of history' throughout his career (Bolton & Pitts 2018, p. 103). As such, claims of antisemitism against him could only be 'mood music,' as Unite leader Len McCluskey put it (Edwards, 2017), accompanying the orchestrated campaign to discredit the left, personified by Corbyn, and to defend Israel from legitimate critique. Corbyn himself was filmed describing an even-handed 2016 critique by the Guardian journalist Jonathan Freedland as 'utterly disgusting, subliminal nastiness'—implying a nefarious coded message in support of another aim (see Freedland, 2020).

These claims of antisemitism had little impact on Labour's unexpectedly strong performance in the 2017 General Election. National attention was drawn to the issue only when in March 2018, the Jewish Labour MP Luciana Berger reposted an old, and initially dismissed, *Jewish Chronicle* story about a Facebook comment Corbyn had made in support of graffiti artist Mear One. Mear One had painted a mural in London depicting a group of men, some with exaggerated hooked noses, sat counting money on a table resting on the backs of bent-double naked bodies, and surrounded by Illuminati conspiracy insignia (Dysch 2015b). Mear One had complained that the mural was being

removed by Tower Hamlets council on the grounds that it was antisemitic. Corbyn commiserated with Mear One, apparently without going to the trouble of asking himself whether the local council might have a point. Here Corbyn's failure to notice the antisemitism did not manifest itself in relation to Israel but to conspiracy theories about Jewish political and economic power more broadly. This made it impossible for the Corbyn-supporting left to attribute the furore solely to the malign influence of 'Zionists', and some acknowledged for the first time that Corbyn had erred. However, the error was widely excused as a one-off moment of inexplicable misrecognition by a man otherwise committed to anti-racist praxis, with no wider significance (Segalov 2018).

This set the tone for the subsequent years, in which the left not only comprehensively failed to get to grips with the elements of antisemitism in Corbyn's Labour Party, but often exacerbated the issue and emboldened the conspiracist atmosphere that in part underpinned it. One particular and persistent response was to posit a monetary link between individuals making claims of antisemitism and their personal political and economic interests. In June 2019, for example, the Corbynite MP Lloyd Russell-Moyle suggested that Margaret Hodge, a longstanding Labour MP of Jewish background, was only criticising Corbyn over antisemitism because she 'want[ed] to roll out more neo-liberalism and austerity on our country' (Harpin 2019).

Some responses accepted some of the evidence of antisemitism in the Labour Party but suggested it resulted from an ideological narrative constructed by capitalists and political, financial and media elites to deflect attention from their activity. Antisemitism was thus understood as a function of elite or capitalist power, with Jews the targets of a consciously designed 'scapegoat' ideology which accuses them of bearing responsibility for the world's evils (for examples see Gilbert 2018, Momentum 2019). A functionalist theory of this kind treats antisemitism as if it was merely a disposable means for a higher end, an instrument to be wielded by the powerful when it is required, and discarded when not. While it is a truism that all forms of ideology can be utilised by different social groups, this says nothing about why a particular ideology is *available* for use in the first place (Postone 1980: 104-106). The advantage of functionalist theory for its leftist adherents is that it provides an infallible alibi against any possibility of their own antisemitism. If antisemitism is merely a strategy of class division used by the powerful, then anti-capitalist leftists cannot be antisemitic in any true sense, the occasional lapse aside, so long as they retain, like Corbyn, the requisite socialist morality (see Bolton, 2020a).

A vital alibi for the avoidance of seriously reckoning with antisemitism was the notion of the so-called 'cranks' (Azim 2018), supposedly ageing Israel-obsessed fanatics who had been attracted to Labour by Corbyn's leadership but were seen as occupying the fringes of party life. Their antisemitism was associated solely with a mistaken internet-addled conspiracism that was regarded an alien imposition upon

otherwise innocuous currents of left thought. Leaving aside the question of whether Corbyn himself should be ranked as one of the ‘cranks’, though, the firewall between the swelling mass of recently entered social media conspiracy theorists on whom successive scandals centred, and the intellectual and political leadership responsible for setting the policy agenda for the party, did not always seem more than imaginary.

In February 2019, for example, grassroots web activists issued a ‘loyalty pledge’ to Labour MPs in response to rumours that the aforementioned Luciana Berger was considering her position after facing antisemitic abuse from members of her local constituency party and Corbyn and Labour supporters online (Hope 2019). Berger faced such levels of animosity that she had to be provided with police protection at the 2018 Labour party conference. Shortly after speaking out publicly about the abuse—and how the party had not informed her about violent threats made against her—local activists put forward a motion of no confidence, on the basis that ‘our MP is continually using the media to criticise the man we all want to be prime minister.’ One of the members who had proposed the motion had previously described Berger as a ‘disruptive Zionist’ (Jewish Chronicle 2019). The motion was eventually withdrawn, but not before Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell backed it by appearing on national radio calling for Berger ‘to just put this issue to bed—to say very clearly, ‘no I am not supporting another party, I’m not jumping ship’.’ The pledge was then signed and promoted by a series of Shadow Cabinet members (Pickard 2019) who, far from seeking to challenge or negate the narratives pushed by the supposed minority of ‘cranks,’ elevated and legitimised them within the highest ranks of the party.

## **The ‘rigged system’ and liberal socialism**

Closer inspection would have connected the Labour antisemitism crisis to a more comprehensive worldview pervading large chunks of the left. Corbyn’s incapacity to comprehend the content of the antisemitic mural expressed, in an exaggerated manner, the continuing legacy on the left of what critical theorists describe as ‘foreshortened,’ ‘truncated’ or ‘personified’ critiques of capitalism. This mode of critique was summarised in slogan form by the idea that contemporary capitalism constitutes a ‘rigged system’.<sup>1</sup> The idea of the economy and political system as ‘rigged’ in this way was central to Corbynism’s distinctive attempt to combine a traditional liberal-socialist denunciation of capitalism with more contemporary populist political strategies. What might be labelled

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<sup>1</sup> The word ‘rigged’—in the sense of ‘deceitful’ or ‘trick’—does not derive from a ship’s ‘rigging’ as apparently the case but rather the ‘thimble rig’ or ‘shell game.’ This was an early version of the three-cup trick in which a ball is moved from under one cup (or shell) to another, and spectators are encouraged to bet on the final location of the ball. The game has long been notorious as a swindle, often involving skills who are allowed to ‘win’ before the swindle of the public begins.

the 'latent' antisemitic potential that inheres in this kind of anti-capitalism in any context was available and receptive to being turbo-charged by the anti-imperialist obsession with Israel's supposedly being a singularly malicious threat to 'world peace'. And, much like Corbyn's default response to accusations of antisemitism, such critiques hinge on questions of personal morality.

Corbyn first adopted the rhetoric of the 'rigged system' in 2016, having seen it being successfully used, in different ways, as a populist campaign slogan by both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump (Bolton & Pitts 2018, pp. 209-10). In Corbyn's rendition, the founding contradiction of capitalist political-economy today lay in the contrast between 'the many'—a unified, productive community of 'ordinary working people'—and 'the few'—a corrupt and unproductive 'elite' who had 'rigged' an economic system that would otherwise work for the benefit of all. Corbyn thus launched Labour's 2017 election campaign with a fierce speech denouncing a system 'set up by the wealth extractors for the wealth extractors,' and raging at the 'morally bankrupt' elite who 'extract wealth from the pockets of ordinary working people' by means of a corrupt 'racket.' Only a Corbyn government would 'take on the cosy cartels that are hoarding this country's wealth for themselves' (see Corbyn 2017).

Through the lens of the notion of the 'rigged system,' the structures and functioning of capitalism appear as the manifestations of the immoral desires of those in power. The exploitation of the labour of the productive 'many' in pursuit of profit is understood as the result of the personal greed of capitalists and political leaders. Opposing capitalism thus becomes a matter of finding out who those malignant individuals are and removing them from power. Such a perspective entails constant vigilance against those suspected of bearing personal responsibility for the miseries and inequalities of capitalism. The core of this mode of analysis encapsulates what Moishe Postone (1993: 64-65) describes as 'productivism': 'a normative critique of non-productive social groupings from the standpoint of those groupings that are "truly" productive'.

In the decade leading up to Corbyn's election as Labour leader, this type of personalised critique of capitalism found fertile ground in the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. The analysis of the financial crash put forward by groups such as Occupy Wall Street suggested it had been caused by a chronic imbalance of power between the financial and banking sectors on the one hand, and the 'real' or 'productive' economy on the other. This disparity was the result of three decades of 'neoliberalism,' in which a lack of state regulation of the global financial system was seen as having enabled those sectors to make vast amounts of profit from speculation on behalf of the top '1%'—or 'the elite'—at the expense of the '99%'—or 'the people.' The 'real economy' had been undermined—or 'rigged'—by the power, greed and mathematical trickery of unproductive global financial institutions, for whom money seemed to beget money,



apparently of its own accord (see e.g. Hudson 2015). The crash was the inevitable, calamitous consequence of allowing the unproductive few to gain the upper hand over the productive many.

A contrast was often drawn between neoliberal 'casino capitalism,' driven by the speculation of international financiers, and the post-war era of welfare capitalism (for an example see Giroux 2016). During the latter, earlier period, capital controls and the Bretton Woods system meant that capital had far less freedom to roam the globe in search of profits, with industry the 'master' of finance rather than vice versa, and the gap between the '1%' and the rest much less pronounced (Reuters 2018). The shift from this form of Keynesian-welfare capitalism, in which workers received their 'fair share' of wealth, to the financialised precarity of 'neoliberalism' in the early 1970s was regarded straightforwardly as the result of the machinations of the rich and powerful, facilitated by international free trade deals and supranational institutions, distorting a benign economic order so as to place profits above social needs.

Given the numerical disparity between the productive 'many' and the unproductive 'few,' this account suggests, the only way the system can retain this 'rigged' character is either through direct violence or ideological trickery. Thus in many cases it is not only the political and economic system which is regarded as 'rigged,' but the 'mainstream media' and political and civic culture more broadly. The 'rigged system' as a whole is invariably regarded as monolithic, omnipotent, entirely oppressive, and devoid of contradiction. This can often lend such analyses a conspiratorial edge, even at their most sophisticated.

For his supporters, the power and passion of Corbyn's denunciation of capitalism as a 'rigged system,' drawing on the critiques of capitalism articulated by Occupy and the anti-austerity movement, exemplified a Year Zero moment wiping out the spin, corruption and right-wing rhetoric of the New Labour years, and returning the party to the 'true Labour values' of Clement Attlee, Aneurin Bevan and Keir Hardie. In a sense, Corbyn and his supporters were correct to see his moralistic mode of politics, and his depiction of capitalism as a battle between the 'many' who produce the nation's wealth through their labour, and an unproductive 'few' who illegitimately claim that wealth as their own, in this vein (see Bolton and Pitts 2020b). Whilst Corbynism's STWC-style foreign policy ran against the grain of the Labour Party's political traditions, in this respect it was very much in tune with a longstanding pattern of economic thought within Labour and the British left, cutting across its factional divisions and the left-right spectrum.

As the Labour MP and former Policy Coordinator Jon Cruddas (2021) has argued, theories of value and its relationship with labour have 'defin[ed] the politics of the last few centuries' throughout the British liberal and socialist left. This has resulted in the pursuit of a 'fairer' distribution of the fruits of production, rather than a more

fundamental reconfiguration of the architecture of work and economic life—i.e. what Marxists call ‘the mode of production’. Within the UK labour movement, the Fabian tradition has been the standard bearer of this understanding on Labour’s centre-left. Policy-wise, this has rested on the assumption that capitalism would generate levels of growth capable of facilitating fair redistribution of the proceeds across class strata. The technocratic generation of social democrats that led Labour through the middle part of the twentieth-century—the moment of ‘true Labour values’ to which Corbynism was taken to return—established this notion as a core part of the ‘labourist’ arsenal of policies that a large, bureaucratic state was meant to implement (see Edgerton, 2019: Ch. 11-12). This framing of the capitalist economy as a question of distribution was explicitly revived within the mainstream of the party by Ed Miliband’s centre-left leadership, whose post-2008 ‘producers’ vs ‘predators’ rhetoric unwittingly laid the groundwork for Corbyn’s subsequent radicalisation of this discourse (for a summary see Pitts 2022).

While a conception of capitalism as a ‘rigged system’ where the unproductive dominate the productive is commonly attributed to Marx—indeed, media attempts to label Corbyn a ‘Marxist’ rested on this misconception—the roots of this imaginary lie not in Marx’s work but in classical political economy and the bourgeois, or liberal, critique of the aristocratic legacy of feudalism. In particular, it stems from an understanding of class inequality as relating to the different interests that arise from the ownership of different forms of property that first appears in systematic form in the work of Adam Smith (see Clarke 1992 for a summary). For Smith, the dissolution of feudalism laid bare the three ‘factors of production’—‘stock’ (or capital), land and labour—which are the natural constituents of wealth in all societies. Each factor is the property of a different class, and delivers a different ‘reward’ to its owner—profit, rent and wages respectively—so that each class has distinct interests resulting from how it can increase its own revenue. Class membership is determined by the relationship between an individual and their property. Classes in this ‘classical’ conception are not socially-constituted, but rather are separate ‘worlds’ whose social interaction begins when they are brought together as factors in the production process.

Smith thought that through prudent management by the state, the interests of the three classes could be kept in balance to ensure the wealth of the whole society would increase, to the good of all. The state should counteract the dangers of ‘concentrated social power’ within ‘commercial society,’ with the interests of the merchant (or capitalist) class in particular regarded as potentially running against those of the ‘commonwealth.’ The pursuit of profit on behalf of individual capitalists, unrestrained by competition, morality or public administration, would reduce the overall rate of profit and impede the development of the division of labour, to the detriment of society as a whole, Smith thought.

David Ricardo took inspiration from Smith but thought the latter's partitioned account of the production and distribution of wealth was flawed. He argued that wealth was ultimately produced by labour alone, with profit being what remained after wages and rent had been subtracted from the labour product. The implication of Ricardo's theory, although not one that he himself drew out, was that wages and profit existed in an inverse relation. His analysis meant that profits could easily be construed as an illegitimate deduction from what 'properly' belonged to the worker as the 'rightful' owner of labour, which many post-Ricardian thinkers, in particular within the early labour movement, considered the sole foundation of wealth. The explosive implications of this shift in theory are clear: the capitalist class and the working class could now be perceived as being locked in a struggle over the same source of wealth, the product of workers' labour, rather than each class being 'rewarded' through a separate revenue stream.

By revealing the tension at the heart of capitalist production, Ricardo established the framework which has structured left-liberal thought ever since. The idea of a parasitical, unproductive aristocratic class was central to the first articulation of the theory of 'class struggle', between the purportedly 'active' and 'idle' elements of society by liberal historians of the French Revolution (Comninel 1987). It became a common trope of the English radical-liberal critique of 'Old Corruption' by industrialist interests, a critique that was then extended to those industrialists themselves by the nascent nineteenth-century labour movement (Stedman Jones 1983)—in so doing laying the theoretical groundwork for the productivist perspective that shaped the 'traditional Labour values' Corbynism sought to recapture. To the extent that this liberal understanding of class struggle is carried over into analyses of capitalist social relations, there is no qualitative difference between the bourgeois critique of feudal society and the socialist critique of capitalism. While the persistence of aristocratic forms of landed property was once seen by the bourgeoisie as an illegitimate and outmoded hindrance to the full development of industry, so too are capitalist private property, profit and the market now regarded as an irrational imposition preventing workers from developing their productive capacity to its full extent.

This understanding of the anachronistic nature of capitalist property relations was well articulated in #WeDemand, a Labour June 2017 campaign video, which articulated the 'demand' for a society where production would be no longer 'subject to grand profiteering, but planned, transparent, executed in efficient fashion under democratic control' (Official Jeremy Corbyn Channel 2017).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The video, directed by Ken Loach and released June 2, 2017, begins with several statements of what 'we know', including 'We know the health worker and the firefighter contribute no less than the stockbroker and merchant banker' (which seems surprisingly generous to stockbrokers and bankers). This is followed by several individuals stating 'We have had enough', leading to a series of 'We demand' statements, beginning with 'We demand health, work, home, education and care in time of need, not

This kind of liberal socialism does not provide a critique of either classical political economy or liberal theories of history, but often merely re-presents them from the perspective of the class interests seen as most closely tied to the unfolding ‘forces of production’. It has played a vital role on the left of the Labour Party, with Tony Benn, the central figure connecting Corbyn to the Labour left traditions of the twentieth-century, representing what his rival Denis Healey dismissed as a form of ‘feudal socialism’—one of the ‘types’ of socialist ideology that Marx and Engels attack and ridicule in the third chapter of the *Manifesto* as examples of ‘reactionary socialism’. According to Healey, Benn ‘read Marx for the first time in his fifties and thought he was wonderful, [but] was exactly the sort of feudal socialist, the upper-class socialist, who was satirised by Karl Marx himself in the *Communist Manifesto* as a man who could make the bourgeoisie cringe with the wit of his satire but [was] basically totally ineffective in politics because of the total failure to understand the way in which the world was changing’ (BBC 1995).

This blend of the classical critique of capitalism with the liberal critique of feudalism was continued by Benn’s disciple Corbyn, and reappears in the understanding of class that underpins the notion of the ‘rigged system.’ Rather than seeking to bring the category of class into question through a critique of its constitutive position in capitalist society (see Bonefeld 2014: Ch. 5), this kind of positivistic socialism tends to naturalise and treat as transhistorical givens historically specific capitalist social forms—in particular the peculiar forms assumed by labour and production in capitalist society. The focus immediately shifts instead to the distributive level, and the question of how the competing class ‘interests’ associated with those assumed social forms play out across society. According to this analysis, in order to sustain their power in society, the capitalist class must continually and creatively work together to build coalitions and ‘hegemonic blocs.’ The working class—those whose only property is their labour power—must in turn act creatively to defend their own interests and seize power. Class struggle, it follows, is a contingent process between two entirely separate groups, heavily dependent on a certain level of class consciousness. It is seen as arising out of attempts by the owners of labour power and the owners of capital to defend their respective interests, with both sides attempting to reduce the power and agency of the other, and in this way become the ‘ruling class’.

From this perspective, any successful hegemonic project on behalf of the capitalist class must therefore be seen as a mode of ‘rigging’ these social dynamics in such a way as to ensure the cessation of class struggle, with workers erroneously coming to see the interests of the capitalist class as their own. Likewise, socialism is here regarded as the result of a rival hegemonic project constructed by the working

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subject to grand profiteering, but planned, transparent, executed in efficient fashion under democratic control, using our intelligence and imagination. We demand the full fruits of our labour.’ Perhaps not entirely by accident, the phrase ‘not subject to grand profiteering’ is spoken by a priest in a clerical collar, subtly hinting at the roots of this rhetoric in Christian social doctrine.

class, culminating in the seizure of control over the means of production and the abolition of private property. The historical development of capitalist society—such as the transformation from Keynesian welfare capitalism to financialised neoliberalism—is explained in these terms (see for e.g. Harvey, 2005), with the failure of one previously dominant ruling-class hegemonic project and the successful construction of another, and so on.

Rather than a contradictory negative category of capitalist society, this presents the working class as existing outside of it—capitalist social relations being artificially imposed upon the working class by alien forces. This reduces the analysis of class membership to a shared common culture or the recognition of shared interests standing in opposition to an external power. In the hands of left and right alike this often ends up in a kind of regressive communalism, shaped around the nation as a bulwark against global capital flows. This was evident in Corbyn’s promises to ‘build it in Britain’ (Corbyn 2018), manifesto commitments ending the free movement of people from the EU on the supposed grounds it ‘forced down wages’ in the UK (BBC 2018), and the protectionist proposal to extrapolate on a national scale the much-heralded ‘Preston model’ espoused in so-called ‘Corbynomics’, whereby local authorities would use a procurement policy based on local ‘anchor institutions’ to concentrate and retain wealth within communities (Guinan & O’Neill 2018). This programme of economic nationalism was founded on the conviction that nationally produced wealth was being appropriated by extractive global forces (see Blakeley 2018). A 2017 report on ‘Alternative Models of Ownership’ commissioned by McDonnell recommended the adoption of a form of municipal, and then national, protectionism, underpinned by so-called ‘anchor institutions’ with UK-only procurement policies, to prevent locally- or nationally-produced wealth ‘leaking’ away from its place of origin, or being ‘stolen’ by the international financial sector (Labour Party 2017: 7). This proposed policy platform reproduced in contemporary guise elements of that put forward by Tony Benn in the mid-1970s. In Benn’s vision, the British state, workers and trade unions should unite in building a ‘siege economy,’ a national barrier against a banker-led ‘international capitalism’ seeking to hijack money that would otherwise be productively invested in ‘the British economy’ (Benn 1989: 621).

This policy agenda resonated in the party’s positioning on Brexit under Corbyn. Both Corbyn and McDonnell argued that the mutually-agreed limits imposed on ‘state aid’ to national industries by membership of the European Single Market mean that Labour should push for ‘Lexit’—leaving both the Single Market and Customs Union in order to pursue a form of state-driven ‘socialism in one country,’ as well as ending the free movement of European workers to Britain. Indeed, in the months immediately following the vote to leave the European Union, McDonnell echoed Brexiteer arguments by asserting that opposing Brexit would place Labour ‘on the side of certain corporate elites, who have always had the British people at the back of the queue.’

Labour's 2018 'Build It In Britain' campaign thus promised to repatriate the 'thousands of jobs' successive Conservative-led governments had 'sent overseas' (Labour 2018). The implication was that Labour intended to restore the glories of a lost golden age of British industry through a protectionist programme of national renewal which will throw off the restrictions imposed by the EU, international finance and global trade. Corbyn had previously made this point explicit in a 2010 speech where he claimed 'they—the world's bankers, International Monetary Fund, European Union—they are utterly united in what they want...deflation, suppressing the economy and creating unemployment' (Watts, 2019).

### **Truncated critiques and capitalist society**

Like its liberal and classical political economy forebears, the Corbynite notion of capitalism as a 'rigged system' affirms and dehistoricises capitalism's historically *specific* social forms and treats capitalist labour, class identities and the so-called 'real' economy of concrete production as if they were merely the eternally same natural interactions between humans and their environment. It thus stands opposed to one of the central aims of Marx's critique of political economy, which led to his rejection of liberal and classical forms of class analysis: the identification of the *historical specificity* of capitalist production and its class relations.

Every society throughout history has had powerful groups of one sort or another, following their own perceived interests over those with less power, and seeking to capture and consume what is produced by the labour of others. Capitalism is separated from previous modes of exploitation through the particular social forms through which these relations of power and processes of labour and consumption are necessarily expressed (Postone 1993; Heinrich 2012; Bonefeld 2014; Kurz 2016; Bolton 2020b). Acts of concrete, physical labour still exist in capitalism, just as in every society throughout history. Peculiar about capitalism, though, is that labour is organised not for the direct satisfaction of the material needs of either the labourer or the owner of the means of production, but rather for the production of that which carries value. Value, here, is not the same thing as material wealth. It is not a physical thing but a social relation that exists between things. In the context of the capitalist mode of production, no one can access the necessities of physical survival other than through the production of commodities which are successfully exchanged with other commodities, and as such validated as value-bearing and a 'socially necessary' part of the total labour of society as a whole. This means that in capitalist society, the relation between a concrete act of labour and access to the means of subsistence is not direct and immediate, but indirect and socially mediated. If a commodity fails to sell, the concrete labour that produced it has been a waste of time, no matter how useful or valuable it may be as a physical object. Thus while only human labour can produce value, not all acts of human labour

do so. In a system where the production of value, rather than wealth, is the goal of production, the specific qualities of concrete labour will always be determined by the value-side, namely, the need to *realize* the value in exchange. The impossibility to avoid social mediation of one's existence through the processes of buying and selling of labour power and other products of labour distinguishes capitalist society from all other known forms of society.

An analysis, like that based on the notion of the 'rigged system,' which endorses the concrete side of labour and the production of wealth but maligns the abstract side is unable to grasp the essential characteristic of capitalism to which their dialectic is central. The fact that the material means of subsistence are accessed only through the socially-constituted form of value leads to a competitive dynamic in which producers struggle to ensure their commodities can be sold at their socially-determined value, cheapening the costs of production through technological innovation or reducing labour costs in order to produce more for less. Failure to keep up with this race for productivity risks economic crises and ruin, and it is this wholly rational fear which compels states, capitalists and workers alike to organise themselves in such a way as to facilitate the continual expansion of value. The problem for everyone living under this system, whether capitalist or worker, is that the movement of social validation—the movement of capital itself—is not possible to consciously control. Because the status of any individual act of labour depends on the entire system of social production and exchange, no single individual, group or state can alter its trajectory, no matter how powerful they are. Indeed, from the perspective of an individual or state, the capricious movement of this standard appears as a law of nature, with its own contradictory logic and temporal dynamic. It is experienced as something which is completely out of reach of human activity but to which that activity must adapt if one is to survive. Crucially, this is not an illusion, a form of 'false consciousness' enforced on one part of society through the 'hegemonic project' of another. It is how things really are in a society mediated by abstract labour, where survival depends on the movement of commodities, money and value. Poverty, inequality and economic crises are the result of the *internal contradictions* of this form of society, rather than any external impositions.

The fundamental problem with an analysis which contrasts the 'good' capitalism of the past, dominated by the productive, with the 'bad' or immoral capitalism of today, over which unproductive finance is said to hold sway, is the failure to grasp the internal connections between the two. Anselm Jappe (2016: 70) puts this well: 'The rise of neoliberalism after 1980 was not some devious manoeuvre on the part of the greediest capitalists, nor a *coup d'état* carried out in collusion with smug politicians, as the "radical" left would have it. Neoliberalism was, on the contrary, the only possible way to make the capitalist system last a bit longer.' The traditional left-liberal critique that underpinned Corbynism's portrayal of the 'rigged system' can focus only on the evils of 'neoliberalism' or 'finance' in isolation from capitalism as a whole. As such, it is unable

to comprehend the underlying social dynamic which drove the turn from Keynesianism to neoliberalism, and seeks instead to blame the suffering caused by capitalist society on supposedly exceptionally greedy, immoral or corrupt individuals or groups. Lacking any concept of capital as a mode of social relations, this is a 'truncated' critique.

## **Anti-Judaism and anti-Zionism**

This critical inadequacy is not merely an academic problem. The way critique construes its object determines what strategies it is able to construct to act upon it. As such, a flawed or partial conceptualisation of capitalism is likely to lead to equally flawed or partial forms of 'anti-capitalism.' Critiques of capitalism come in many shades, and, as in the case of the notion of the 'rigged system', they are not always emancipatory. A critique which depicts capitalism as a struggle between a productive national people and an unproductive global elite, with the former producing all the wealth and the latter stealing it, is not unambiguously progressive. Without an adequate theoretical framework for grasping the strange, topsy-turvy dynamic of capitalist society, partial forms of anti-capitalism on the left leave themselves open to reactionary or regressive outcomes, including authoritarian nationalism, fascism, ultra-conservative theocracy, and antisemitism.

This potential is clearly indicated by Mear One's above-mentioned mural, titled 'Freedom for Humanity', in which the complex totality of capitalist modernity is reduced to the image of big-nosed bankers playing what looks like a game of monopoly, one of them counting money, on a 'table' formed by the backs of dark-skinned, lifeless, apparently enslaved human shapes, representing a totally passive and fully dominated image of 'the poor', overseen by the symbol of the Illuminati, the all-seeing eye, and flanked by a kitsch image of a black woman holding a small child and an 'activist' holding a sign with the fascist slogan 'The New World Order is the Enemy of Humanity', whereby 'enemy of humanity' as much as the 'all-seeing eye' radiate with not-so-subtle antisemitic subtext. The artist, Mear One, argued that, far from being antisemitic, his mural was an attack on 'class and privilege' and that he was not depicting Jews but rather 'the ruling class elite few.' (see Whitehouse, 2012). A critique of capitalism which is unable to grasp the central forms of that society—value, capital and commodity—but rather limits itself to the idea that an otherwise benign productive society has been 'rigged' by an immoral 'elite few' is not, on its own, inherently antisemitic but fails to have anything to answer to reactionary propositions like Mear One's imagery, fails to distinguish itself from antisemitic anticapitalism, and, like Corbyn and most of his defenders, may not even recognise it when it stares in their faces.

The idea that the development of the good society is being held back by the conscious actions of a small group of amoral people wielding a shadowy omnipotent



power has been a staple of antisemitic thought for centuries, shapeshifting with the times. David Nirenberg has shown just how deeply rooted this kind of opposition between 'good' and 'bad' forms of economic activity and modes of property is in the long history of 'anti-Judaism' within Western—or Christian—culture. From the time of St Paul onwards, the Christian supersessionist tradition constructed itself around the distinction between a supposedly 'Jewish' literalism, legalism and vengeful 'justice' and a Christianity which regarded the moral 'spirit' to be above the 'letter' of the law, and which sought salvation in grace, love and inner faith rather than blind adherence to an external law (Nirenberg 2018: Ch. 2-3).

As the capitalist world economy started to emerge across the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this pre-existing opposition was reformulated in critiques of economic activity and property ownership which were driven by strict enforcement of legal rights and contracts over the moral health of the commonwealth as a whole. In both Kant and Hegel, there is a contrast drawn between 'property'—understood as being an expression of inner moral character and 'personality'—and 'possessions'—'temporary holdings' enforced by law alone, with no moral limitation or expression, and frequently characterised as 'Jewish' (Nirenberg 2018: 433). From this perspective, a moral and rational society requires leaving behind—or 'converting'—forms of extractive, non-productive economic activity supposedly associated with Judaism, and the triumph of an economics expressing the morality and love of the community. In the young Marx's *On the Jewish Question*, prior to his development of the critique of political economy, again the 'anti-social' aspects of capitalism—'practical need, individual utility...haggling' and 'money' itself—are presented as being innately Jewish, although with the proviso that capitalism is making society as a whole 'Jewish' (Marx 1974: 236). Later British radical and liberal critics of capitalism—a tradition to which Corbyn and Benn explicitly aligned themselves—would also at times frame their differentiation of 'good' from 'bad' forms of property in terms of Jews and Judaism: the antisemitism of influential British radicals from William Cobbett to J. A. Hobson can be traced back to this longstanding conceptual structure (on Hobson, see Bolton, this volume). Moreover, this opposition posed between 'Christian' inner morality and 'Jewish' external literalism was central also to Corbynist denials of the very possibility that the great man might have spoken or acted in antisemitic ways: piling up textual and discourse analyses of the various antisemitic incidents counts as only so much typically Jewish pilpul, abstract, formalist and literalist nit-picking that can be shrugged off gentlemanly—one is tempted to say, gentile-ly—by pointing to the good heart and anti-racist spirit of the Man himself. Maddening for those who tried to engage as forensically as possible with the evidence, Corbyn's professions of faith in his own anti-racist identity regularly overrode all that lawyerly talk, contributing, in turn, though, to JC's martyrdom and Golgatha.

Through this lens it becomes possible to see the connection between the truncated critique of capitalism as a ‘rigged system,’ the phantasy of the nation-state as a bulwark against the global movement of capital, and the liberal, non-Marxian foundations of the anti-Zionism central to Corbyn’s milieu. Central to the latter is the equation of Zionism with racism that became the central sticking point in the 2018 dispute over Labour’s adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Association’s ‘working definition’ of antisemitism.<sup>3</sup> In response to proposals for the adoption of the IHRA definition, Corbyn and his supporters argued that describing the founding of a State of Israel—a conceptual, rather than historical critique of a Jewish nation state—as ‘a racist endeavour’ was necessary in the pursuit of Palestinian rights, and should not be classed as antisemitic (Sarkar 2018). To this end, during the wrangling over the definition, activists stuck up posters across London declaring that ‘Israel is a racist endeavour’ (Powell 2018). But this rejection of Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish nation-state was not grounded in a general critique of the capitalist state form as such. Rather it regarded the Jewish state as being a uniquely malign and deformed distortion of the form of a ‘true’, ethical state—in contrast to a Palestinian nation-state, which was heralded as a vehicle for universal emancipation.

While ‘true’ states are regarded as providing the architecture for the defence of a productive people from the intrusions of global capitalism, Israel is here granted the same globe-spanning power and intangible, destructive influence over world affairs and domestic policy that the rhetoric of the ‘rigged system’ attributes to the global financial elite. The violence of the Israeli state is not understood in terms of the violence that is inherent in the capitalist state form as such, but regarded as this particular state’s failure to live up to the inner moral spirit that exemplifies true national communities. Such a perspective is similar to the functionalist explanation of antisemitism which, as argued

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<sup>3</sup> The first version of what would become the IHRA definition of antisemitism was formulated in the wake of the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism in Durban. The conference was overwhelmingly focused on the supposed evils of Israel and Zionism, with delegates equating Zionism with racism and accusing Israel of genocide and Nazism. Pamphlets were distributed showing hook-nosed Jews depicted as Nazis, dripping blood and spearing Palestinian children with pots of money nearby. A thousands-strong march featured placards equating Zionism and Nazism, with one reading ‘Hitler Should Have Finished the Job.’ Jewish delegates feared for their physical safety (see Hirsh 2017: 135-146). Fearing that attacks on Jews based on this kind of rhetoric and aggression would not be classed as antisemitic by security and legal institutions, the new definition sought to outline the areas where ostensibly anti-Israel statements could, in context, be classed as antisemitic. The result was a short, and by no means conceptually watertight, definition of antisemitism as ‘a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews,’ including attacks on individuals, property, community institutions, religious facilities and the state of Israel ‘conceived as a Jewish collectivity.’ This core definition was accompanied by a set of 11 illustrative examples, the most contested being that it could, in context, be antisemitic to claim that ‘the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor’—in short that aspirations of a Jewish nation-state are by definition, and unlike other national claims, racist. The definition also made clear that ‘criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic’ (IHRA 2016).

earlier, reduces antisemitism to a contingent ideological cover for supposedly deeper economic interests, but here the argument is inverted: here, *anti*-antisemitism is supposedly functional for economic interests. In the context of rebuttals of antisemitic polemics against the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish nation state, the history of Israel and Zionism is severed from that of the foundational anti-Judaism which pervades Western culture, culminating in the Holocaust, and is itself reduced to another disguised expression of capitalist and imperialist ‘interests.’ Anyone seeking to make a connection between antisemitism and the critique of the *concept* of a Jewish state, as highlighted by the IHRA definition, is regarded as fraudulently ‘instrumentalising’ anti-antisemitism in order to defend capitalist and imperialist ‘interests.’ This anti-antisemitism is not one, it is suggested, and therefore the alleged antisemitism cannot be that, either.

This often led to Jewish leftists being portrayed as disaffected right-wingers, ‘neoliberals,’ and imperialists (Sugarman 2019a). They were accused of confecting claims of antisemitism in order to both undermine Corbyn’s domestic agenda and to deflect criticism of the Israeli state. At times, this focus on the supposedly true ‘interests’ of those who refuse to deny Israel’s right to exist as such can go so far as to lead to a distortion if not outright denial of the Holocaust. As the existence of the state of Israel is often linked to the need to ensure the Holocaust can never happen again, the ‘absolutist’, i.e. unconditional and categorical opposition to the existence of Israel and to (any tradition of) Zionism can become the starting point for a revisionist history which seeks to downplay the reality of the Holocaust itself (see Yakira, 2010: Ch. 1). This can be expressed either through ‘casting doubt’ on the extent or purpose of Auschwitz, or the ahistorical and relativising equation of Auschwitz or the Warsaw Ghetto with the current conditions in Gaza. Both of these forms of Holocaust distortion were frequently found within Corbyn-supporting milieus; indeed, Corbyn himself hosted an event in Parliament explicitly comparing Auschwitz to Gaza on Holocaust Memorial Day in 2010 (Marsh 2018).

## **Conclusion: Activating the elements of antisemitism**

The crisis over antisemitism in Labour was not merely the result of one particular individual’s failings, or those of a “few bad apples,” but was rather the culmination of a long process of political, ideological and theoretical degeneration that has disfigured parts of the left for decades. It is our contention that a critique which depicts capitalism as a struggle between a productive people and an unproductive elite, with the former group producing all the wealth and the latter stealing it, contains reactionary potential, including the potential for a distinct mode of antisemitism on the left which can, in certain circumstances, expand the room for the right to make political gains.

We do not want to understate the importance of challenging forms of concrete domination and the unequal distribution of power across society. But the critique of political economy as we have presented it here suggests that no individual or group can be made wholly responsible for the poverty, inequality and alienation of capitalist societies. Left antisemitism springs, at least in part, from this failure to grasp the abstract, intangible side of capitalist social relations, the historically-specific form of impersonal power that, as Marx noted, ‘works behind the backs’ of all who live in capitalist society, including capitalists (Marx 1976: 135). The impossibility of locating in individuals or groups the totalising and omnipotent power underpinning a society completely shaped by capital is undoubtedly a recipe for a dangerous and ever-mounting frustration. The case will never be closed on these culprits, because the locus of this power cannot and will not be identified in individual or collective human actors. This produces unsustainable notions of what it is possible to do to remedy capitalism’s ills, and the perilous environment for the cultivation and manifestation of antisemitism.

As Postone (2016) put it: ‘one of the roles of theory, and this sounds very modest but it is very important, is to show which paths are clearly mistaken. You can put a lot of energy and effort into mistaken paths’. Corbynism was one such mistaken path. Its vision of a unified national community of hardworking people manipulated by an unproductive global elite only served to expand the rhetorical space within which Brexitism and Johnsonism could operate with much greater electoral effectiveness. The result was Corbynism’s irrevocable defeat in the 2019 General Election. The centrality of personalised critique to the Corbyn worldview, and the gradual activation of its latent antisemitic potential throughout his leadership, ended up with Corbyn-supporting social media milieus seeking to explain his election loss by accusing the British Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Chief Rabbi, and a whole host of Jewish communal organisations of conspiring to bring him down in a concerted effort to destroy the left and protect the state of Israel from criticism (see for example Finn 2019, Stern-Weiner 2020, Harpin 2020).

Understanding how the elements of antisemitism are inscribed within the foundational social forms of capitalist society as a whole renders inadequate attempts to explain antisemitism as a contingent function of class ideology. Treating antisemitism solely as an instrument consciously wielded by powerful groups allows leftists to reassure themselves that antisemitism is something alien imposed upon them by their political opponents. The oft-stated idea on the Labour left that identifying as ‘anti-racist’ is enough to inoculate leftists from the power of this narrative is therefore a comforting fallacy. But it is precisely because antisemitism is often presented as an emancipatory response to oppression that it is so seductive (Postone 2006; Hirsh 2017).

In its response, the left absolves itself of the need to grapple with the uncomfortable possibility that antisemitic worldviews—including the belief that Jewish

national self-determination is uniquely malign—might not be simply the result of manipulation by those in power. In this sense, it is important not only to recognise the limits of relating Corbynism’s antisemitism problem to the prevalence of a ‘rigged system’ narrative constructed around economic issues alone, but also to recognise the imbrication of this narrative with a form of antisemitism more indebted to anti-Israel sentiment, anti-Zionism and anti-Judaism. These two core elements of left antisemitism activate one another where there exist those theoretical conditions foundational to Corbynism: a critique of global capital in the name of the national community, a critique of unproductive classes in the name of the productive, and a critique of Western ‘imperialism,’ personified in the form of the state of Israel, in the name of a reactionary ‘anti-imperialism’.

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