

Antonio Gramsci and Britain's Corbyn moment

By Camila Bassi

Introduction

From the mid-1990s, the British Labour Party explicitly oriented to free market capitalism and adopted a new version of Clause IV of the Party constitution, which decisively turned away from the original promise to 'secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry' (cited in Gani, 2015). New Labour, as it was branded, pushed politically conservative discourse and policy on social justice (in contrast to redressing poverty and inequality), on workfare (as opposed to welfare), and on crime and immigration, and it implemented public-private partnerships and private finance initiatives to dismantle the public sector and welfare state. New Labour's landslide electoral successes in 1997 and 2001 indicated its firm hegemony of the Party and the labour movement base: a swing in the Party's basic contradiction, as a bourgeois-workers' party, to its right-wing pole.

A majority on the British Left regarded such changes as irreversible. No one predicted that in the Labour Party leadership race of 2015 the socialist candidate of Jeremy Corbyn would win, and with a huge mandate. Corbyn's election manifesto included demands for growth not austerity, public ownership of the railways and the energy sector, a large-scale public and private house-building programme and rent controls, reinvestment in the welfare state, the abolition of zero hours contracts, and the right of trade unions to organise collectively to redress workplace injustice. While arguably not going far enough, notably, in failing to promise that Labour Party MPs will not implement existing Conservative Government funding cuts to the public sector, Corbyn nonetheless stands in stark opposition to unbridled capitalism.

How was it possible that Corbyn became leader of the Labour Party? In this article, I use the insights of the late Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to offer an answer.

The Labour Party and contradictory consciousness

For Gramsci, all of us, in our living activity, engage in a popular or 'spontaneous philosophy' (Gramsci, 1971: 323), which contains 'a conception of the world' (Gramsci, 1971: 344). Moreover:

'One's conception of the world is a response to certain specific problems posed by reality, which are quite specific and 'original' in their immediate relevance.' (Gramsci, 1971: 324)

Gramsci (1971: 265) stresses our living contribution 'to modifying the social environment'. However, he observes, because people are generally not aware of engaging with various outlooks on the world - one's worldview simultaneously belonging 'to a multiplicity of mass human groups', popular philos-

ophy tends to be 'not critical and coherent but disjointed and episodic' (Gramsci, 1971: 324). Gramsci identifies popular philosophy as a condition of *contradictory consciousness* consisting of two competing philosophies, common sense and good sense. In their environment, people will seek to modify 'certain of its characteristics' whilst 'preserving others' (Gramsci, 1971: 265). Common sense signifies the aspect of contradictory consciousness that induces situations of submissiveness: it is a means of making sense of the world that goes against 'thinking dialectically', instead encouraging dogmatism and eagerness 'for peremptory certainties' (Gramsci, 1971: 435). The 'most fundamental characteristic' of common sense is its 'fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential' nature (Gramsci 1971: 419). On the other hand, good sense entails the ability:

... to reflect and to realise fully that whatever happens is basically rational and must be confronted as such ... This is the healthy nucleus that exists in 'common sense', the part of it which can be called 'good sense' and which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent. (Gramsci, 1971: 328)

The 'elementary and primitive phase' of good sense is:

found in the sense of being 'different' and 'apart', in an instinctive feeling of independence, and which progresses to the level of real possession of a single and coherent conception of the world. (Gramsci, 1971: 333)

Good sense refers to the various ways that our consciousness hopes, fantasises and dreams for the future.

Both the New Labour years and the Corbyn moment can be understood through Gramsci's notion of contradictory consciousness. The election of New Labour brought an end to the Conservative Party rule of 1979-1997. The 1997 election slogan, 'New Labour, New Life for Britain', signified much more than the manifesto at the grassroots electorate level: it captured an anti-Conservative sentiment, and a hope and belief in change. What proceeded was New Labour's continuation and extension of the neoliberalism that the Conservative Party started during the Thatcher years:

Baroness Thatcher defeated Labour at three general elections and forced the party to drag itself into the modern world by supporting market forces; privatisation; reform of employment laws to reduce the power of the trade unions; lower taxation for individuals and business; an independent nuclear deterrent; a 'special relationship' with America; public services geared more to consumers than

producers and the sale of council houses to their tenants. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, the two principal architects of New Labour, were dubbed 'sons of Thatcher' for embracing her free-market reforms. (McSmith, Chu and Garner, 2013)

Labour Party supporters grappled with a basic contradiction: hope for actual change versus 'there is no alternative to Labour' and 'this is better than the Tories'. To be a member of a trade union and to support New Labour, while being against Tony Blair's retention of 'the most restrictive' anti-trade union legislation 'in the western world' (Blair's own words, cited by Thompsons Solicitors, 2006), was precisely contradictory consciousness.

The Labour Party and hegemony

Hegemony is most commonly comprehended as how political power in society is maintained through social consent by means of political and ideological leadership. In some instances, such consent is interpreted as, in actuality, ideological social control (reminiscent of Althusser), as 'the way in which a minority can impose its leadership and its values on a majority' (Joll, 1977: 68).

However, Gramsci's notion of popular philosophy reveals a more subtle understanding of hegemony, as an arena of struggle tending towards inaction. Nevertheless, hegemony is always contestable. Popular philosophy is the terrain where more hegemonic ideas and forces prevail (i.e. those, at a given point, with greater political power) alongside counter-hegemonic ideas and forces, which are latently capable of challenging the given relations of power. Thus, people might 'accept' dominant ideas by not questioning them fully, or by not realising that they can actually change a given situation; whereas hegemony-as-consent implies a state of consciously deciding to agree with given circumstances, and hegemony-as-control implies a structure of dominance in which contrary thought and action are not possible.

Britain's Corbyn moment happened not at the end of an era of social consent or control by the New Labour hegemony of the Party, but at the protracted end of a bitter, reluctant, contradictory, and ultimately ever-dwindling 'putting up with' New Labour. The Corbyn moment burst through as a good-sense moment of hopes, fantasies and dreams - of belief in change becoming tantalisingly close to actuality. It opened up a process of overcoming common-sense barriers to intersubjective engagement, developing existing embryonic good sense, and constructing a conscious, critical, coherent and dialectical conception of the world through 'intellectual and moral reform' (Gramsci, 1971: 133). At its best, the Corbyn moment showed the abilities of people to struggle 'for a new culture' and 'a new intuition of life' (if not yet fully realised but embryonic) to the point that it might become part of 'a new way of feeling and seeing reality', since:

[a] new social group that enters history with a hegemonic atti-

tude, with a self-confidence that it initially did not have, cannot but stir up from deep within itself personalities who would not previously have found sufficient strength to express themselves fully in a particular direction. (Gramsci, [1913-1922] 1985: 98)

The challenge now is to keep such a space open and in motion.

The journey ahead

The Left, as organised in the Labour Party has a crucial role to play in challenging the democratic deficit of the Party bureaucracy that has been built up by New Labour. Local Labour Party meetings need 'to stimulate a mentality of construction' (Gramsci, 1985: 39), enabling 'the habit of generalization, of synthesis' (Gramsci, 1985: 24), in other words, they must be 'ideally active' spaces (Gramsci, 1985: 39). In January this year, I attended a Sheffield Central Constituency Labour Party meeting during which, despite the Corbyn moment, three local councillors delivered a line: 'We have no choice but to implement the Tory cuts.' When a few Party members, including myself, contested this from the floor, a member of the top table denounced us for disrespectfully partaking in a 'public laceration', and the Party bureaucrats applauded. When a moderate level of internal questioning of Labour Party policy is defined as laceration, when debate and critical thought is not tolerated, then there is a long, arduous and precarious journey ahead. *Avanti* with hopes, dreams and fantasies.

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