

Exorcising the ghost of the Alternative Economic Strategy

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The AES has haunted the Labour left since the 1980s. But as new research by Baris Tufekci shows, even in the 1980s it was outdated. The Labour left must think in a new way about strategies for winning power and changing our country.

Between 2017 and 2019, the question of left economics moved centre-stage in Britain for the first time in two generations. The Labour left, from Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell to the ranks of the new, often young, always enthusiastic members, was handed the extraordinarily difficult task of assembling something that could both return Labour to power and deliver on the immense expectations Corbyn's leadership had produced.

The bureaucratic grind inevitably bequeathed a certain conservatism to the Corbyn project as it emerged. The scope for active policy thinking or experimentation was reduced by the slog of managing a mass party. Both Corbyn and McDonnell were significantly more creative political thinkers than they are typically credited with being; McDonnell, in particular, actively encouraged a broader ferment of ideas and initiatives on left economics, establishing conferences and roadshows to promote and expand the range of Labour's policy thinking, helping to produce a new generation of left economic thinkers, and institutions to promote critical economics. But this was too often divorced from the core political issue of strategy. While UBI may or may not be a good idea on its own terms, the possible connection between an offer of UBI and winning crucial new constituencies was not made or even ever discussed. So, too, with the line of decentralised socialist thinking that emerged around the 2017 *Alternative Models of Ownership* document: plans like the Meidner-style 'Inclusive Ownership

Funds' were left as adjuncts to the core of the offer. Policy was not matched to strategy.

Instead, the core of the Corbynite offer on economics was drawn heavily from the familiar range of the left: nationalisation, income tax changes, and state-led development to promote growth. This was the programme that had been put together the last time the British left had come this close to power, and preserved almost in aspic since the end of the 1980s.

Baris Tufekci's new book, *The Socialist Ideas of the Alternative Economic Strategy*, provides a detailed, policy-focused history of the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES), as the left's main economic programme of the time was known.¹ In conversation with Tufekci's account, in this essay I will show how the history of the AES can guide the left in learning from its more recent experience under Corbyn. I suggest that the AES, which, as Tufekci shows, was in key ways outdated even in the 1980s, has haunted the Labour left ever since, casting a spell which needs to be broken if the movement is to come up with more realistic strategies for redistributing power, money, time and esteem more equally in our society.

Heroism

For the activist left, the close of the post-war consensus – a time disappearing rapidly into the murk of the past – is wrapped in heroic myth. From the struggles at the end of the 1960s, through to the 1984-85 miners' strike, the belief is that the left in and outside of Labour posed a fundamental challenge to capitalism in Britain, with the hallowed AES a component part. Tufekci takes a bracingly revisionist view: that the AES, far from being a radical break with Labour's historic economic programme, was far more of a continuation – and that this continuity helps explain its eventual failure in the early 1980s. Yet simply because it was the economic programme of the Labour left the last time the left was close to power, it has exerted a decisive (if generally unexamined) influence over the broad spectrum of the left outside of Labour's leadership under Blair, Brown and Miliband.

So Tufekci's book has perhaps arrived too late. A few years ago, it might have helped show Corbynites that not only were some of the core strategic dilemmas during the period of Corbyn's leadership historically familiar; it might even have helped us avoid some of the errors that were made.

Tufekci is sharp, as other recent historians have been (David Edgerton most obviously), on the unexamined British economic nationalism of the original AES, and the strategic weaknesses this contributed to. These weaknesses played out across the movement: in the failure of Corbynism to make serious inroads in Scotland,

notably in failing to produce the upsurge in younger members, and of course in the tangle around Brexit.

Tufekci also does a great service in showing the relationship between economic policy and strategy. The debates over policy on the left at the time were deeply informed by a sense of the wider strategy for social change: policy, we see from the discussions and arguments that Tufekci reproduces, was never separated from the question of a strategy for socialism – not merely the venerable debate of ‘reform versus revolution’, but an active inquiry into how a Labour government could act, in a changing national and global context, in coalition with its supporters in wider society (notably the trade unions) to bring about transformational social change.

These debates did not happen in the same way or in the same depth for Corbynism: the closest I recall – two moments where a clear strategy was laid out for activists – were two (brilliant) interventions by John McDonnell at sessions at *The World Transformed*, the Momentum-inspired but independent left fringe event that is now a fixture at Labour Party Conferences. Now available as recordings online, McDonnell lays out his view of how a Labour government could be formed and the likely challenges it would face on the way – a comparatively rare glimpse into the explicit strategy of the Labour leadership. But for the most part, these sorts of strategic discussions did not happen in the movement, and happened still less in relation to economic policy.

There were objective circumstances that weighed against this happening. For the movement as a whole, the period of 2015 to 2017, with its atmosphere of permanent internal crisis, tended to limit longer-range projections on the direction of the Corbyn leadership. For the period after the 2017 election, the national crisis of Brexit had a similar impact, limiting horizons.

But even allowing for these constraints, the failure of the left in general to make clear and explicit its plan to achieve and use power was serious. Post-2017, it boiled down to a ‘one last heave’ mentality in which Theresa May’s flailing government would fall out of power and Labour would swoop in as a kind of historic inevitability. In the place of movement-wide strategic discussion – priorities for government, for example, or thorough consideration of which fractions of capital Labour needed to develop a relationship with – economic policy debate tended towards an argument about the merits, or otherwise, of policy as such: that this or that reform would be necessary by virtue of its own merits, rather than in relation to a broader strategy – a strategy which remained under-theorised and, worse, under-discussed.

On rare occasions, possible strategies were made more explicit: Joe Guinan and Christine Berry’s *People Get Ready!* is exemplary in this respect, but it stands somewhat alone as a strategic statement by two important actors in the movement

itself – and, moreover, its version of socialist strategy (written in the full flush of the 2017 election) is significantly concerned with what a left Labour government might do *when in government*, rather than what might need to happen to help us get there. In reality, these two periods – what the left does out of government, and what it does in government – cannot be easily separated.²

The AES debates were by contrast very substantially debates around alternative left strategies. For the left end of the AES's support, encompassing primarily the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and those closest to it, these debates hinged around the question of how the election of a left Labour government could itself also be part of a *process* of radicalisation in British society, driven by wider social forces. Something like this process of radicalisation would, sometimes, be implied by leading figures in Corbynism, and Berry and Guinan made explicit that they anticipated the movement rallying (indeed, needing to rally) to the defence of a left government, which they viewed as fated (even doomed) to be on the wrong side of a capitalist offensive.

But in general Corbynism did not have a strategic debate to the same extent or in the same depth, and, ultimately, it paid the price for failing to develop this capacity. It inherited much of the AES world-view, and parts of the programme; it did not, unfortunately, also inherit the same institutional capacity to debate strategies for winning power, and – worst of all – it did not inherit the post-war mass union movement that immediately gave such debates relevance and purpose. This was hardly the fault of the movement or anyone in it: we are all on the wrong side of decades of defeat, and the trade union movement today is a whisper of its former self. Despite their six million members – smaller today than then, and more heavily concentrated in the public sector – unions are simply not a part of either political discussion or even everyday working-class life in a way they were two generations ago.

The institutional support that key unions provided, notably Unite, was of course fundamental, to the point where Corbynism makes little sense without also considering the 'turn to Labour' undertaken by Unite under Len McCluskey's leadership. But this turn was, in part, a reaction to the comparative *weakness* of trade unions as social organisations and could not substitute for the (for example) solid workplace and community organisations of decades past. There is a difference between attempting to use the *bureaucratic* capacities of a trade union to shape political outcomes at a national level, and using the *movement* capacities of a trade union to shape political outcomes on a local level. Members paying subs for union full-timers to act on their behalf involves a radically different set of relationships and actions to members themselves taking part in union organisation and activity.

Strategic indeterminacy

Debates around left strategy in the 1970s-1980s period, as Tufekci shows, extended well beyond the Labour left itself, notably into the 30,000-strong CPGB – electorally almost a non-starter, but industrially able to claim the allegiance of a huge number of shop stewards, branch secretaries and – by 1974 – the national leadership of major unions. Outside of the CPGB, there were also the smaller but, by the early 1970s, comparatively fast-growing groups of the far left, of which the Trotskyist Militant Tendency was, by the mid-point of the following decade, the largest and most prominent. All these tended to reject the AES as both a ‘reformist’ compromise with capitalism and, specifically, as troublingly nationalist in its orientation, a point to which we will return.

This rejection by the majority of the Trotskyist and anarchist left differentiated them from those on the radical left who supported the AES because they thought that its implementation would provoke the kind of confrontations with capital that would open up the road to further radicalisation and, ultimately, the end of capitalism. This was roughly the argument of the CPGB majority.

These supporters of the AES were, in turn, in tension with a broader tendency, typically on the Labour left, who tended to stress the AES as a necessary step in the rescue of capitalism from itself. But, on Tufekci's account, this tension was managed reasonably effectively, in part by its protagonists offering a new version of left strategy which sought to move beyond the hoary argument of ‘reform versus revolution’.

The form of this argument pre-dated its usual 1917 reference point, as Rosa Luxemburg's classic 1900 pamphlet, *Reform or Revolution*, succinctly illustrated. Stripped of its rhetoric, Luxemburg's argument was a discussion of the relationship of the left and the workers' movement to the capitalist state: whether to work inside it, or work against it. But with the stabilisation of capitalist democracies in Western Europe and North America after the Second World War, and with the demonstrable rise in living standards – alongside the stabilisation of the institutions of the workers' movement itself, the trade unions and their political parties – the central strategic question gradually shifted its emphasis. It increasingly began to turn around the labour and socialist movement's relationship to a capitalist state that was no longer solely the repressive ‘nightwatchman’ of capitalism's birth, but which now offered a range of more obviously progressive services, from pensions to healthcare to education.

Reformism had, to this extent, delivered, at least for some (significant) sections of the working class in the developed economies. But it had not delivered on a global scale, and the fundamental problems of capitalism had not been resolved (despite some brave post-war claims, of which Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* is

the best known).³ Global inequality (worsening over this period), the threat of war, poverty and discrimination in the ‘First World’, the failures of the new welfare states, and even a diffuse criticism of ‘alienation’ under post-war capitalism, all offered enough material for a radical left to claim the continued necessity of revolution over reform, particularly after the global revolts of 1968.

Stuart Holland, longstanding economic advisor and latterly MEP, and a critical figure in the development of Labour’s economic policy in the 1970s, attempted to move beyond this binary, urging ‘revolutionary reforms’ on the party. ‘Non-reformist reforms’ was Andre Gorz’s variant of the same idea, first proposed in 1964, and was later adopted by some of Corbynism’s own intellectual wing.⁴ The idea, in its essentials, was that by proposing major reforms that intruded on capitalist power to the benefit of workers, the path would be opened up to *more* radical intrusions on the same capitalist power. Workers would claim a bit more capacity to act from the reform, and so make further intrusions on capital’s power, opening the route to further reforms, and so on. So instead of some grand revolutionary act that transforms everything, radical left strategy would become a series of *directed and cumulative* steps that, over time, opened bigger and bigger possibilities.

This introduced a certain strategic indeterminacy about ultimate goals: was the programme intended to *improve* capitalism, or to *end* capitalism? It was not immediately clear, but this indeterminacy had the advantage of holding the coalition around the AES together, and allowed for a certain flexibility of language amongst its proponents.

At least some of those promoting the AES saw it as sitting squarely within the traditions of post-war Labourism, rather than aiming to transform capitalism into socialism. Prominent economist (and communist) Sam Aaronovitch wrote that one of the AES’s main ‘sources of strength’ was that it was a “‘common programme’ being constructed by many different groups and interests’: in other words, that it did *not* stretch beyond Labour’s existing programme and therefore made no great radical demands of its existing coalition of support.

Those on the Labour left, by contrast, ‘frequently presented the strategy’s implementation as a means to “begin to unlock the potential” for a socialist transformation’ without necessarily itself being a socialist programme.⁵ Tony Benn believed that the democracy needed to implement the AES would, by itself, lead a Labour government to increasingly radical positions as it attempted to overcome the barriers to the implementation of the AES. Tufekci argues that this democratic ‘open-endedness’ ‘helped raise the hopes in the AES of those ... who expressed sympathies with revolutionary variants of socialism’, in which winning a left Labour government would also be the path to winning a more fundamental transformation of British society.⁶

Some Trotskyite supporters of the AES also came close to depicting it as a programme of 'transitional demands': in other words, a programme which, if an attempt was made to implement it, would open up a process of intense struggle which would ultimately overthrow capitalism. CPGB members like economist Bob Rowthorn, on the other hand, stopped short of quite saying that the AES wouldn't, in fact, work, but they held out the prospect of its success being highly contingent and subject to the sort of challenges that would seriously imperil its implementation – and, therefore, provoke a radicalisation of the original demands.

The AES was also sometimes justified in the most radical, even revolutionary terms that could be found. Figures in the CPGB sometimes suggested that the AES was so radical that, were a government to attempt to implement it, a coup by the British army was a distinct possibility.

Keynesianism is always with us

This is where Tufekci argues that the AES fell wildly short of the claims made by its more radical adherents. He argues, convincingly, that the reality of the AES programme was simply an extension of existing 'Keynesian' control – which is to say, the less radical wing of AES support was entirely correct. The boundaries of what even its most radical proponents were calling for stopped some way short of demanding full democratic planning, or the removal of the market: 'The AES had a distinct lack of confidence in non-market solutions to Britain's economic crisis, therefore embodying, in a sense, a significant moderation of Labour-left thinking since the 1950s.'⁷

This habit of framing not-so-radical demands as radical is something that later bedevilled Corbynism: the programme in practice scarcely looked beyond what, across much of the rest of Europe, would be considered fairly run-of-the-mill social democracy. Even the growth of state spending envisaged by the 2019 manifesto would have raised UK public expenditure only to the levels typical of Northern Europe; while the expansion of public ownership was little more than a (partial) return to the pre-1980s situation of state ownership for utilities and natural monopolies – which in Europe and across much of the world was generally accepted as the norm. This didn't stop assorted newspapers screaming their heads off about the crazed radicalism that Corbynism, in fact, never represented; but, equally, it didn't stop activists adopting a language and expectation of complete 'transformation' that the programme itself never lived up to.

Had either Corbyn manifesto been implemented it would, of course, have been a major break with the previous forty years of broadly neoliberal governance, and it

would have been a break in the direction of favouring ‘working people and their families’ (as the 1970s language had it). It can also be plausibly argued that the international repercussions of such a government being formed in the UK would have been huge. But it was not and *could not* have been a breach with capitalism as such. If the AES debates didn’t resolve the dilemma about strategic goals, it was unlikely that Corbynism would manage to do so; and the result was, too often, an over-inflation of radical talk around the programme relative to its actual content. This almost certainly cost Labour more electorally than it delivered. A more detailed discussion around strategy and goals at least could have helped manage this problem. That, in turn, would require movement institutions and structures able to sustain such a detailed debate.

Economic nationalism

Because the AES was fundamentally Keynesian, the limits to AES ambitions were, in practice, set by national borders. The AES was strikingly economically nationalist, in a fairly unexamined fashion. Its leading thinkers tended to fix the boundaries of their political options at the borders of the existing nation-state. Stuart Holland, for example, argued that the primary problem of post-war Keynesianism was that it was an economic theory fundamentally designed for a world of national economies, in which the balance of desired consumption and investment would match the output of the national economy, once a government was prepared to intervene to ensure it did so. The rest of the world was an afterthought – excluded from consideration in Keynes’s *General Theory*, and left outside of the adaptations of that model to the economics mainstream.

As a simplifying assumption used in building a model, removing the outside world could make sense. And the relative stability of the Bretton Woods system of exchange rates, combined with tight controls on the movement of money between countries, created a situation where the international economy could be presented as a minor factor in anyone’s considerations. But as the Bretton Woods regime steadily decayed (collapsing entirely by the early-mid 1970s), and as corporations extended their operations across the globe, capital became more mobile, and international trade mushroomed, it was no longer a viable belief. The old conditions for the successful application of Keynesianism – ‘price competition, national markets, and investment horizons shorter than the scope of governments’ budgets’⁸ – were no longer extant.

Holland’s solution to what he called the rise of ‘mesoeconomic’ power (that exercised by the multinationals, sitting between micro- and macroeconomics) was to insist that the *indirect* tools of Keynesian economic management, whether monetary

(like interest rates) or fiscal (tax and spending), had to be replaced by *direct* intervention. This would encompass planning agreements with multinationals and an extension of public ownership: in both cases allowing the national state to reassert some control over the economy in the presumed national interest. This would include tighter controls on money moving in and out of the country, and import controls intended to help support domestic industry. The latter were deemed to be particularly important for what was believed to be a weaker economy like Britain's, since a programme for increased government demand and rising real wages was likely to simply produce more demand for imports that domestic producers were not able to supply adequately.

There was another problem, too, for Labour in the 1970s and early 1980s: the party's traditional base of working-class support appeared to be melting away. The loss of working-class votes in the 1970 election was used by those on the left of the party as an argument for more radical policy, which came to be embodied in the AES.

This should sound familiar: the loss of working-class votes has been a perennial theme for Labour since the 1950s, and invariably inspires much soul-searching and chest-beating, generally with limited impact on any actual working-class voters. (It's tempting to suggest, given the endless debates, that perhaps the party should stop collectively bothering so much about which voters it feels it *ought* to have, and start thinking a bit more clearly about which voters it *needs* to have.) But, in a situation very different from the Corbyn era, the AES was an argument for radicalism conducted in a context where the trade union movement was large, implanted across the private sector, institutionalised inside working-class communities across the country – and increasingly militant. (Strike days lost reached all-time highs, outside of the 1926 General Strike, over the period 1974-1985.) Corbynism emerged in an industrial context that was utterly transformed: union membership was smaller, unions weaker, and trade unionists overwhelmingly concentrated in the public sector. The institutional expression of working-class agency in the 1970s, and through to the 1980s or even early 1990s, has withered.

Tufekci argues that the AES had a weakness – or even a contradiction – at its core: the core of the programme remained attached to both a 'national Keynesianism', seeking a major expansion of government spending on one side, and the continued strength of trade union bargaining at a national level on the other. A government committed to reflation would be supported by a union movement promised wage rises. Extensive planning and state ownership would then be built around the central bargain between unions, government and employers. But the abject failure of the 1974-9 Labour government, which managed to combine a turn away from the promised Keynesian reflation with a

desperate attachment to the tripartite, corporatist bargaining system, sounded the death-knell for the post-war institutions that were sustaining it. The ‘Social Contract’, negotiated between the Labour government and major trade unions, more or less held for a period of time despite spending cuts and falling real wages, but collapsed in the 1978-79 Winter of Discontent, which saw mainly low-paid public sector workers taking part in a series of large but uncoordinated sectional disputes against pay restraint. Thatcher’s government, elected soon after, very directly bore the imprint of those few months: ‘Thatcherism as a state project, though conceived long before, was born in the context of crisis during the Winter of Discontent.’⁹

But the AES, as translated into Labour policy by the time of the 1983 general election, failed to keep pace with these changes. State policy had shifted under Thatcher to outright confrontation with unions, and the tripartite system – which had depended on the ability of top-level union bargaining to secure steadily rising wages – had been blown apart by rising shopfloor organisation and militancy (on one side) and direct state attacks (on the other). Post-war corporatism was no longer an option, but the AES persisted as if it could have been; and economic nationalism, in its Keynesian guise, was also highly problematic (as Francois Mitterrand’s government demonstrated). But the AES was presented as if it could have functioned. And it continued to shape the political imaginations of two further generations of the Labour left.

Cancelled futures

Here Tufekci usefully directs our attention towards the left’s enduring fantasies about the ‘cancelled futures’ of the past: its clinging to the dream of another 1980s, the one where the miners won, Thatcher lost, and Tony Blair stayed a lawyer. The ghostly presence of these fantasies has haunted the left in Britain for two generations, almost since the 1984-85 miners’ strike. We lost, collectively, very badly, and have internalised that loss. So, when given an unexpected opportunity in Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership to *overcome* the loss, we sought ways to instead *reverse* it.

A strikingly large part of the content of the Corbynite economic programme was built around this reversal. In terms of the balance of funding in the 2019 manifesto, the nationalisation programme implied that assets valuing over £200 billion would be brought onto the public balance sheet – equivalent to half of the entire capital expenditure programme.¹⁰ By 2019 nationalisation represented the biggest single plank of Labour’s economic policy: it was projected to receive major expenditures and, in the period after the 2017 general election, a significant proportion of staff and research resource time was committed to developing the programme. But this

extraordinary effort was concentrated overwhelmingly on the *re*-nationalisation of utilities privatised at various points since the 1980s.

It was, for example, only late in the day that the novel policy of free broadband was introduced – at the start of the 2019 election campaign. Had it been proposed earlier, it could have acted as the bedrock of a forward-looking, popular and genuinely transformative economic programme, as Barking MP Sam Tarry has argued – acting as a synecdoche for Labour's ambitions, much as tuition fees removal came to symbolise the kind of government Labour aimed to be in 2017. Instead, the balance of party effort in policy-making, and the balance of proposed expenditure in the manifestos, was directed, very significantly, towards the reversal of a course set some three decades earlier.

More than this: the justifications offered for the programme were often framed in terms of correcting the errors made in the past. This was what defined the set of industries that would be targeted for bringing into public ownership, and, in large part, supplied the justification for so doing. Labour's 2018 policy paper, *Clear Water: Labour's vision for a modern and transparent publicly-owned water system*, leads with the striking claim that:

Water bills increased 40% in the 25 years after privatisation. Over the last ten years, the English water companies have paid out more than £18 billion in dividends to shareholders. This is money that could have been invested instead, or used to reduce bills by around £100 a year per household, the equivalent of a 25% reduction.

Note that this isn't an argument about what is happening *now*: it is an argument about *what could have been*. It's an argument about what could have happened, but didn't – 'let's have a look at what you could have won', as that pillar of 1980s Saturday evening TV, Jim Bowen, used to say.

There is a solid, in-principle case for the public ownership of water, but that case wasn't made here, or argued strongly for elsewhere. Nor, despite the framing of the problem as one of historic injustices, was there any claim made for reparations for the public, or some similar element of redress – Labour was at pains to stress that it would pay a fair (if not market) price for assets. Nor was renationalisation framed as a part of a socially just adaptation programme, perhaps as part of a Green New Deal – a necessary shift in ownership and management to cope with an increasingly unstable environment. (The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee has recently warned of widespread water shortages.)¹¹

The swathes of social life that Corbynism failed to talk about were similarly revealing. The mass collection and processing of data, now shaping all our lives and an

unavoidable political fact, was almost entirely glossed over. The 2017 manifesto references data only in relation to facilitating cross-border flows in a Brexit deal; in 2019, the sole specific reference to data comes in relation to NHS data, which Labour would keep under public control: the correct position, an important issue, but also very much within the left's comfort zone. Big Tech itself is treated in traditional terms both as a source of revenue for free broadband, and the object of a future competition investigation. The pathbreaking 'Digital Democracy Manifesto' of Corbyn's 2016 leadership campaign, and McDonnell's promises of support for 'platform co-operatives', are nowhere to be seen.

Psychology and strategy

What this points towards, and what Tufekci's attention to the texts of the AES's factions certainly leans into, is a different methodology in trying to understand the economic thinking of the left in Britain. It should be seen not only as a rationalist project to understand and so reform society today – but also as a somewhat less rational attempt to win a battle that had been lost long ago.

This involves a step back from the two modes of analysis preferred by the left, each of which has its own drawbacks.

Policy analysis – the process of attempting to appraise and understand policies by reference to their presumed outcomes and purported instruments – is one method to understand the arguments; and, to the extent that it presents policy-making as a rational process, in which given ends are achieved through given means, it has always had an appeal to a section of the left that sees itself as more effective administrators of what currently exists. A specifically 'left' policy analysis had fallen into disuse in the long years of the wilderness, but Jeremy Corbyn's Labour strongly adhered to the desire to offer justifications of policy by reference to a means-end rationality of government purpose. Reams of documents were produced to show that the programme as a whole contained a clear internal logic, from the fully-costed manifestos to the lengthy 'Thirty for Thirty' decarbonisation programmes.

A second preferred mode of thinking on the left bases itself on a form of *historical* analysis, in which the circumstances of political strategy and policy-making are seen as best understood by reference to the knowledge, experience and institutions that history has given us. Typically, historical analysis on the left takes the slightly crude form of looking for historical episodes and leaders, and drawing immediate parallels: Starmer being Kinnock, for example, or (more improbably) Jeremy Corbyn as Clement Attlee. Generally speaking, the historical narrative adopted is that of

decline and fall: Labour was once a socialist party with honest leaders, but a series of terrible decisions or corrupt influences pulled it into the sorry morass we see today. A more sophisticated version of this would see that the legacy of the historical left is a set of *resources* – from the Labour Party itself, to the trade unions, to the wider social movements and the intellectual inheritance of the workers' movement – rather than *narratives* that are available for use by today's left.

Under ideal circumstances the two modes of analysis would pull together and inform a strategy – that of applying the historically-given resources at hand (the party, its membership, its bureaucracy, for example) to achieve given political ends in the rational application of policy. Supporters of Corbynism certainly thought they were doing this, and the near-miss of 2017 reinforced the general sense that both history and rationality were now on the side of the movement. The End of History was being ended, the Last Men vanquished and blinking. We, the British left were, finally, on the cusp of victory.

This view reached its apex at Labour Party Conference 2017 which, for those attending, resembled nothing so much as a delirious collective victory lap around Brighton: young activists, grinning from ear to ear, skipping between World Transformed sessions in the Synergy Centre; longstanding apparatchiks, veterans of factional knife-fights and intra-party skulduggery of every sort found wandering, dazed and trance-like past the candyfloss bags on the seafront; grizzled trade unionists weeping tears of joy into their lager at the Grand Hotel bar; Jeremy himself in the middle of it all, both the prophet and the architect of our new post-neoliberal world, like Hegel's Napoleon riding into Jena on horseback, but minus the horse, and in Brighton.

Of course, we didn't actually win and, as the next eighteen months dragged on, it became increasingly and grimly obvious that we weren't likely to. Nonetheless the suspension of disbelief required to elect Jeremy in the first place, and then to campaign for him, and then to put him within touching distance of Downing Street, already had vast, Humber Bridge-like proportions, and it would carry a great deal of traffic yet. What tied this suspension to reality was the Corbynite movement itself. The movement had a great reservoir of self-sustaining energy, drawing on the hopes (at its peak) of hundreds of thousands, and it could deliver some extraordinary breakthroughs. But, because it was so reliant on its own resources and enthusiasm, it could (and did) rapidly deplete when Corbynism lost its (small-'m') momentum. It was possible, via bureaucratic devices, to create a simulacra of the movement, as Labour Live demonstrated; it was not possible, via bureaucratic devices, to recreate a spontaneous upsurge, as Labour Live demonstrated.

The AES – or ‘AES

In mathematics, an apostrophe is used to signal that one thing is a derivative of something else. Corbynomics was a derivative of the AES: an ‘AES. But why was Corbynism so fundamentally shaped by an economic strategy that was 40 years old?

To understand this, we need to bring a different method to the analysis; and the method developed and popularised by Mark Fisher, but referenced first in Jacques Derrida’s 1993 *Spectres of Marx*, fits the circumstances perfectly: *hauntologie* (the French pun on *ontologie* being too good to miss).¹²

To truly understand the baseline of the Corbynite left’s economic thinking, as presented in two manifestos and surrounding documents, we need to also approach it *hauntologically*: in other words, we must understand that the left was deeply trapped and traumatised by its own past, and so unable to escape it, instead being doomed to endlessly return to what it had lost. Its economic programme should not be understood as the product of the *presence* of a viable workers’ movement, as in the 1980s, but the *absence* of such a movement: in 2017, at the very peak of the Corbyn movement, strike days lost in Britain reached their lowest level since official records had begun 126 years before. Many elements of the AES were present in the Corbyn programme, notably its commitments to public ownership and public investment, but the social content that would potentially make these a fundamental challenge to capitalism had been evacuated. The problem was not the *presence* of history, in the form of the institutions and resources and experiences available to the Corbyn movement, but its *absence*.

We should think of the Corbyn programme, then, as a *hauntological economic strategy*. Not a *new* strategy, but a derivative of the old AES. The ‘AES maintained itself as a ghostly presence that the present-day left has never been able to fully exorcise. The original AES, as Tufekci argues, was both a strategy to reform capitalism *and* an attempt to maintain a relationship with the agent (the organised working class) that would be capable of performing that transformation. The ‘AES was a ghostly belief that this could still happen, without the agency. The material basis for the AES – the relationship between the Labour Party and the wider working class – had decayed, visibly and obviously, in two dimensions: first, in the form of the disappearance of Labour’s working-class votes in its heartlands from Blair’s first election onwards; second, in the longer-term decay of the institutions of the organised working class. British trade union density remains, on paper, relatively high at around 20 per cent of the workforce. But this headline figure disguises enormous variation: public sector union density is at 63 per cent, but private sector density has

collapsed to 15 per cent.¹³ By age, the figures are even worse: trade unionism is increasingly something for those approaching retirement, with density amongst the young falling away dramatically.

It shouldn't be too surprising that a party (and a left) so solidly located in the public sector should choose to talk up the public sector and seek to expand spending on it: there was a material relationship between that part of the working class and the proposals actually on offer in Labour's two Corbyn-era manifestos. There was a material rationality to the programme, in this sense. But this is not necessarily the same as having a programme that fits the wider working class, nor a strategy for its empowerment, and still less a programme for working-class self-emancipation. The latter, granted, was always some distance from anything the Labour Party was likely to achieve; but at least the AES acknowledged this, and attempted to make allowances for it.

The original AES could, for instance, confidently propose the nationalisation of major parts of industry under workers' control, tying the transfer of ownership directly to the empowerment of workers through their representative organisations – and do so in the expectation that this transfer would contain a direct challenge to capital precisely because it was so tied to that representation. The 'AES, on the other hand, was left proposing the same form of nationalisation, but stripped of its political content: this was to be a bureaucratic exercise, with the transfer of ownership occurring alongside the construction of a complex system of democratic control via systems of nested regional water authorities. The 2019 manifesto did, at least, contain proposals for some significant reforms to the British state, including abolition of the House of Lords: but here, again, the problem is of agency: who will oversee the reform of the British state, in order that the state can reform the British economy? A mass, mobilised trade union movement could do it. But where was this movement?

The distribution of popular support for key elements of the hauntological economic strategy speaks volumes about its reference points: by some distance, it is older voters who are most enthusiastic about public ownership of gas, electricity, water and the post – precisely the same set of voters who were so dramatically opposed to Labour under Corbyn. By contrast, younger voters shade towards an indifference or even hostility to renationalisation, yet voted for Labour (when they voted) in astonishing numbers in 2017 and 2019. Younger voters strongly prefer spending cuts to tax rises, if given this binary choice, and a diffuse 'entrepreneurial' ideology is central to how most younger Britons think about the economy.¹⁴ Claims by the left to speak for 'Generation Left' could risk turning hollow.

Exorcism

The biggest political danger today, as should be obvious, is that the socialist left, further traumatised by its loss in 2019 and its consequences, becomes still more entangled in its past: condemned to eternally return to 2015-19, itself a period spent returning to the early 1980s, haunting its own haunting. For the world emerging in the wake of Covid-19's initial outbreak, this would be a catastrophic error, condemning the British left to irrelevance. To privilege maudlin nostalgia over meaningful action in a period of accelerating ecological decay would be an unforgivable dereliction of duty. A left behaving like this would fail, and would deserve to fail.

There are, however, some signs that a more radical break with its past can and will be made. The core of the problem for the Corbyn left was the absence of a historical agent outside of the state itself. Yet the very conditions of Covid-19 have politicised both the question of labour, and the control of labour – around the issues of health and safety, the status of 'key workers', and, as we are seeing, the surveillance and management of workplaces. At the same time, the disruption to labour markets has provoked an unprecedented churn: the 'Great Resignation' in the US, with 24 million people changing jobs in the second quarter of 2021, was matched by nearly a million job switches over the same period in the UK. Both are all-time highs. Meanwhile, the first signs of a recovery in trade union organisation are becoming apparent: the election of Sharon Graham as General Secretary of Unite, alongside the organising efforts of newer, smaller unions like the IWGB, are possible indicators that a return to workplace combativeness is on the cards. In the context of a pandemic that has dramatically politicised the work process itself, from the status of particular jobs to the demands for flexible working times and locations, these shifts are of crucial importance.

All previous iterations of the left have, in power, depended on economic growth. In conditions of ecological crisis and decay, manifesting, over an extended period, as weak economic growth, it is of central importance to build a labour movement that fights for a different way forward – through the redistribution of power in the workplace, as well as of income, and the expansion of non-monetary benefits like reduced working time. This implies a turn away from the social-democratic politics of the previous decades in favour of a more obviously redistributive focus for worker organisation – and an expansion of the terms of that redistribution to include intangibles like time. It requires, too, the growth in importance of political actors outside of the Westminster system: in the 'Devolved Administrations' of Wales and Scotland, but also, increasingly, in the new poles of attraction that English devolution has created around the Metro Mayors.

Alongside this emerging do-it-yourself ethos in the wider movement there is a need for a corrective to the years of left focus on expanding the capabilities of the capitalist state. The pandemic has seen an extraordinary growth of government powers, in the UK and elsewhere, typically in the guise of public health necessity, but often also taking the form of repressive measures to reduce the scope for protest and freedom of speech. A protest movement is developing against this grabbing of greater state power, and in the UK, it is the comparative weakness and incompetence of the core state, as it faces multiple problems from Brexit to the pandemic, that gives hope that these movements may succeed. A new socialism, less committed to a belief in the British state as a necessary force for good, more willing to develop a politics outside of the charmed circles of Westminster, is beginning to emerge. In the coming years it will start to pull together its own programme. Tufekci's excellent book is a reminder of the vital relationship between policy and strategy. We should not forget its lessons.

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Endnotes

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- 2 Christine Berry and Joe Guinan, *People Get Ready! Preparing for a Corbyn government*, London, O/R Books 2019.
- 3 Anthony Crosland, *The Future of Socialism*, London, Jonathan Cape 1964.
- 4 For an overview of Gorz's views, see: P. Engler and M. Engler, 'Andre Gorz's non-reformist reforms show how we can transform the world today', *Jacobin*, July 2021: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/07/andre-gorz-non-reformist-reforms-revolution-political-theory>; for more recent advocacy of 'non-reformist reforms' see Guinan and Berry, op cit.
- 5 Tufekci, op cit, p44.
- 6 Ibid, p45.
- 7 Quoted in ibid, p66.
- 8 Ibid, p72.
- 9 Quoted in ibid, p177.
- 10 Institute of Fiscal Studies, 'Labour's nationalisation policy', 3 December 2019: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/election/2019/article/labour-s-nationalisation-policy>.
- 11 House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, *Water and Demand Management*, Cmnd 5801, 10 July 2020: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmpubacc/378/37803.htm>.
- 12 Mark Fisher, 'What is hauntology?', *Film Studies*, Vol 66 No 1, 2012.

- 13 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 'Trade Union Statistics, 1995-2019', 27 May 2020, Table 2.4b: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/887740/Trade-union-membership-2019-statistical-bulletin.pdf.
- 14 James Meadway, 'Generation left might not be that left after all', Novara Media, 22 July 2021: <https://novaramedia.com/2021/07/22/generation-left-might-not-be-that-left-after-all/>.