Labour's first post-socialist leader?

Michael Rustin

Oliver Eagleton, *The Starmer Project: a Journey to the Right*, Verso 2022

When I heard that Verso had published a book about Keir Starmer, I was initially surprised, just as I had been when I heard a fellow *Soundings* editor refer to 'Starmerism' at a recent conference. Would there be anything interesting enough to fill an entire book about Labour's current leader, I wondered, and was there any variety of ideology, justifying the term 'ism', which could be attributed to him? But in fact, Oliver Eagleton's book is well-researched, interesting and valuable. It does not, however, enhance one's opinion of its subject.

The book covers several phases of Starmer's career thus far. The first of these is his years as a human rights lawyer, between 1987 and 2008, which included being active in the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers, and at that time doing significant pro-bono work for good causes, which included assisting the Greenpeace campaigners in the 'McLibel trial'. He worked with Amnesty International in support of the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into UK Law, which was largely effected in the New Labour government's Human Rights Act of 1998. He became an authority on the links between domestic law and the European institutions. In these years he gained the reputation of a progressive liberal-minded lawyer, of considerable energy and ability. In this early period Starmer took part in the work of the Socialist Society, and had some connection, Eagleton reports, with a small Trotskyist grouping. However it seems that his primary interest remained in aspects of law, of an initially socialist but soon more centrist kind, and that larger fields of socialist debate had little interest for him.

DOI: 10.3898/SOUN:81.REVIEWS.2022

The second phase of Starmer's career followed his appointment by New Labour in 2008 as Director of Public Prosecutions and Head of the Crown Prosecution Service, on the basis of his credentials as a progressive lawyer. At the point when he was standing for office as Labour's leader, after Corbyn's resignation in 2020, the fact that Starmer had already had responsibility for a large public organisation with a workforce of 8000 seemed an asset, given the Labour Front Bench's lack of experience in government. But this was before one had given attention to what this public organisation was, and what its role had been under Starmer's leadership of it.

It appears that Starmer worked smoothly with the Coalition government when it took office in 2010 (despite the fact that its budget cuts had aborted his plans to 'modernise' this service). Eagleton's argument is that in this period Starmer became the willing instrument of an increasingly authoritarian state. He reports the expansion under Starmer of the CPS's International Division, and its engagement in both the War on Terror and War on Drugs, in close cooperation with Obama's attorney general, Eric Holder. Starmer supported the extradition of the autistic IT expert and hacker Gary McKinnon, until Home Secretary Theresa May withdrew the order, it is said infuriating Starmer. Eagleton asks questions about the CPS's role in shielding the police in several other notorious cases, such as that of Jean Charles de Menezes, Ian Tomlinson and Jimmy Mubenga, and suggests that Starmer may have 'a particular blind spot about women's issues', as evidenced in the failure of the CPS to prosecute cases of rape. Starmer is described as having personally led the DPP's repressive response to the Tottenham riots, and as having strengthened judicial sanctions against illicit benefit claims, as an instrument of the Conservatives' demonisation of welfare claimants. Eagleton quotes a comment on Starmer by Andrew Murray: 'It is wrong to say that it is unclear what (he) stands for. He stands for the state, its servants, its perquisites and their protection from the toils of democracy' (p59). Leaving aside this assessment for the moment, Eagleton's meticulous discussion of the cases and actions which give rise to it call to mind Paul Foot's fine writings of many years ago on governmental abuses of justice.

The book's next section is about Starmer's role as a politician, after his election to parliament in 2015 but before his election as Labour's leader in 2020. This provides an account of the Parliamentary and Labour Party machinations of that period, with the challenge to Corbyn's leadership and Starmer's support for the doomed candidacy of Owen Smith. But the most interesting part of this discussion

is about Brexit, and the role which Eagleton attributes to Starmer in the negotiations and debates which then took place. It's a complicated narrative, but its essential argument is that an opportunity to pursue a 'left populist' endorsement of Brexit was missed, because of three factors. The first of these was the lack of vigour and conviction of Corbyn's advocacy of it. The second was the countervailing strength of the 'Remainer' commitment of Starmer and the advocates of a second referendum campaign, which included Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell - foreshadowing Starmer's later association with the Blairites. The third was John McDonnell's withdrawal of his support for a left-populist position (for which he is attacked by Eagleton), and his instead working for a compromise with Theresa May's 'soft-Brexit' position, which would have enabled Labour to support it in Parliament.

Eagleton seems to believe that a left-populist ('Lexit') endorsement of Brexit after the referendum result could have been politically successful. But in explaining the disaster which took place following the failure of the Brexit negotiations, the defeat of Theresa May and the 2020 general election result, he ascribes specific blame to Starmer. He suggests that Starmer and his allies, through their undermining of McDonnell's attempt to negotiate the compromise which May's government by then wanted, directly led to her defeat and resignation. One aspect of this may have been the depth of Starmer's commitment to the Remain position. Eagleton suggests that another was his sheer opportunism. A compromise outcome would have left Corbyn, and his ally McDonnell, still in charge of the Labour Party. Its failure meant that Corbyn was finished, and the road was open to Starmer to become Labour's leader. This narrative seems very plausible. The suggestion is that not only does Boris Johnson place his own political survival over every other consideration, but so does Keir Starmer.

One respect in which I think Eagleton is wrong is in the idea that a left-populist endorsement of Brexit after the referendum ever had the slightest prospect of political success. Jeremy Corbyn's programme in the election of 2017 represented a substantial and successful reassertion of democratic socialist principles, but it did not depend on, nor was it consistent with, a leap into economic isolation by the UK, as has taken place with Brexit. It was always the case, after the outcome of the referendum, that the most viable option for British society (or at least for most of its elements) was the closest continuing relationship with the European Union that could be negotiated. It is striking that Starmer's Labour Party is not even now willing

to admit this fact of life.

The story of Starmer's leadership of the Labour Party was still unfolding when Eagleton's book had to go to press. It is a lamentable story of promises betrayed by Starmer (to retain Corbyn's programme but under more orderly and consensual management), and of the entire absence to date of any vision or programme which says what a Labour government would do. Starmer's most forceful commitment has been to seek out and destroy antisemitism in the Labour Party. This campaign has been his justification for removing the Parliamentary whip from Corbyn, although Eagleton's report of how this took place suggests a degree of confusion and indecision in its operation. But in any case, the entire episode has been an act of displacement. Corbyn has always been strongly identified with opposition to the oppression and injustices inflicted on the Palestinians, and it has been convenient to many to interpret that commitment as hostile to Jews, which it is not. Meanwhile, few of those who attack Corbyn seem to have had anything critical to say about Israel and Palestine.

Why was Jeremy Corbyn so wholly unacceptable as Labour's leader to the British establishment (which includes most of the Parliamentary Labour Party), even though the Corbyn election campaign of 2017 was Labour's most successful for years? I don't believe that this was because his domestic programme was too 'left-wing', or because of later socialist advances. The key issue was Corbyn's long-held position on international relations - his anti-imperialism, his rejection of nuclear weapons, his dislike of NATO and the American alliance. The anxiety was surely that such a figure, as prime minister, would be representing the UK on the international stage. Corbyn's positions on Israel and Palestine (with attitudes to Islam and the Middle East perhaps implied in these) seem to have been a convenient proxy and condensation of these antipathies.

What then do we make of Starmer and 'Starmerism'? His leadership does seem to represent a new phase in the Labour Party's history. All of his predecessors have been able to claim some significant connection with elements of Labour's and even of socialist traditions, however ambiguous some of these links have been. Fabianism was a key strand of twentieth-century Labourism, after all. Even an explicit project to abandon certain principles and commitments, for example by Gaitskell and Blair, involved an active dialogue and argument with them. New Labour's was a detailed and well-worked out project to rethink many of the fundamental assumptions of

what it regarded as 'old Labour' and as outdated socialist ideas. Gordon Brown has clearly remained an egalitarian and ethical socialist, revisionist and pragmatist as he was in much of his governmental practice. David and Ed Miliband were brought up in a socialist household, and David as well as his brother contributed to literatures on equality and social justice.

But what traces are there, in what Keir Starmer has said and written since he became a politician, of interest in socialist understandings of society? Perhaps the training and orientations of a human rights lawyer are in any case rather confined, but it does seem that Starmer is in effect a 'post-socialist', reliant primarily for his politics on what can be learned from the techniques of political marketing. He certainly wishes Labour (and himself) to have its turn in governmental office. But what substantive beliefs does he have about what such office should be for, or what place it might have in any longer process of change? I asked in a recent contribution to a Raymond Williams centenary conference if the 'Long Revolution' about which Williams wrote had failed?[1] A question more to the point, observing Labour's leadership today, is whether it hasn't been entirely forgotten.

Notes

1.Thomas Piketty's *Capitalism and Ideology* (2020) and *A Brief History of Equality* (2022), both Bellknapp, Harvard University Press, set out a version of an incomplete 'long revolution' as inspiring as Raymond Williams's, though based on a different kind of historical research.

Three responses to the Trojan Horse Affair podcast

Manuwi C. Tokai, Jannat Hossain, Debs Grayson

Brian Reed and Hamza Syed, *The Trojan Horse Affair* (podcast), Serial Productions & The New York Times 2022

Manuwi C. Tokai

I thought the podcast was a really great contribution to research journalism - I had never heard of the affair before and learnt a lot from listening to it. It was quite over produced and I can understand some of the critiques - did we really need a white American to tell the story so it would be listened to? But the fact it got such a large international audience shows why those choices were made.

In the Netherlands we've been experiencing the fallout of a scandal which has some similarities to the Trojan Horse Affair. A childcare scandal beginning with a genuine scam by some members of a minority community to defraud government benefits led to the application rules being tightened. Communities with certain last names were accused of fraud and had child-care payments stopped - often in really cruel ways, such as just before Christmas or other holidays, to deliberately cause hardship. This was based on no evidence and nothing to do with the original fraud - and recently the government acknowledged that this was institutional racism. There was a similar mechanism as in the Trojan Horse Affair, where racialised communities were put under scrutiny, and the only lens through which to look at their activities was with suspicion.

I wasn't hugely surprised by the podcast because I already understood something

about how racism works in the UK. But I did think it was incredible that the Trojan Horse Affair was based on a document that everyone accepted was a fiction. There was no common sense used - they still rolled out measures to protect people from a 'Muslim conspiracy', even though they recognised the conspiracy was made up. Just as with the child-care scandal, for marginalised and racialised groups a hunch seems to be enough - there's no right to receive civil treatment or for allegations to be probably researched, you are already in the wrong and deserve to be punished. It maintains marginalisation and sets communities up for failure.

I found it bizarre and sad that the podcast concluded that the letter that kickstarted the scandal came from within the Muslim community of Birmingham. There's something larger to explore there about how racism gets embedded within racialised groups - the impact of people fighting for crumbs and for a few minutes at the table, which is such a big part of how Europe is being governed right now. It would be good to see more analysis of this, without losing the institutional racism part of it. Governments are the ones with the power to punish. In this case, someone lit a spark and the government threw petrol on it.

Jannat Hossain

Nearly nine years after the hoax letter that started the Trojan Horse Affair appeared, this podcast felt more relevant than ever. If you listen closely, it's one of those programmes that will stay with you for years to come. I keep coming back to three things from the podcast and the response to it.

Firstly, the programme was really well-evidenced - the journalists had done more actual investigating than anybody else who has looked into the case, and they found new documents that no one else had turned up. Yet they still received unreasonable criticism afterwards for supposedly not having enough evidence or for missing things out from the story - for example, that there was real homophobia amongst some of the teachers - but this is something the journalists did recognise and talk about. Perhaps it's just another signifier that evidence doesn't mean that much any more, in a broader context where the government has ignored scientific evidence on coronavirus, is refusing to take meaningful action on climate change, etc.

Secondly, the show and responses to it highlighted how it is getting harder and harder to talk about Islamophobia in this country, and that as Muslims we

cannot even ask people to bear witness to the racism we experience at individual and systemic levels. I have seen and had people vent about the podcast opening old wounds and that it shouldn't have been produced. These types of comments are laughable at best and infuriating at worst. The Trojan Horse Affair significantly changed the British landscape in ways which further discriminate against marginalised communities. The incompetent handling of the case by the government and the inaccurate reporting by the media deserve to be investigated further, and another, more accurate, version of the story presented.

Finally, I think it is important to note that the podcast and responses to it barely mention the role that the academisation of UK schools played in the affair. The whole panic about 'Muslims taking over our schools' began because a very capable Muslim man, who turned around a catastrophically failing school in his role as the Chair of its governing body, was asked to take on two more schools and establish an academy trust. There are major problems with governing schools in this way, but instead of confronting this abysmal approach to education, an entire community were ostracised and accused of all sorts of horrors, leaving no space for any mention of the ills of the marketisation of education.

The whole Trojan Horse scandal is another example of how neoliberalism and capitalism more broadly need racism to uphold the endless shift of capital from the public purse to private pockets. If we can only take one thing from the podcast, it should be that knowledge, and the impetus to take action - however big or small - to change the way we choose to live with one another and the way we educate our children.

Debs Grayson

In October 2013, a month before the Trojan Horse letter appeared, I was just beginning my PhD research with an interfaith charity that runs workshops with schoolchildren. It was one of the organisations that got called up by Muslim-majority Birmingham schools when the Trojan Horse scandal was picking up speed, to show their 'non-extremist' approach to religion and that they were teaching British values. Listening to this podcast brought me back to the tension this produced in the organisation - the staff were really aware of the compromises that came from doing interfaith work when the whole context was shaped by Prevent and counterterrorism.

Coming from an interfaith perspective, some of the most telling material for me was in episode five when the podcasters interviewed the director of Humanists UK. The humanists became involved when whistle blowers from one of the schools contacted them with concerns about safeguarding and inappropriate religious teaching. Humanists UK amplified these concerns, which then got conflated with the Trojan Horse letter and a potential terrorist plot in the media and official reports.

Humanists UK have put a statement on their website which strongly criticises the podcast, and it does seem there is a bit of misrepresentation going on - the organisation seems to have done a lot more due diligence to check out the claims being made about the school than the podcast makes out. But overall I would say that their statement actually shows why the way they were portrayed in the podcast was valid - for example, they include some extended transcripts from the interview, including one of the bits that didn't appear in the episode, where the director was saying that forcing UK schools to teach British values was a positive impact of the affair. And more generally, the Humanists UK statement still shows a real failure to take any responsibility. They don't express any regret for how they ruined the education of a generation of working-class Muslim kids in Birmingham, even though their whole justification for intervening was because they were trying to protect 'children's rights'.

I felt that the podcast managed to reveal something that is often quite tricky to pin down about how Islamophobia shows up in a particular kind of white secularism - the director just can't grasp the enormous impact of the affair. And it shows that this kind of complex issue needs a long-form format like an eight-hour podcast if it is to be really grappled with.

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