

Gender Politics after Corbynism

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Abstract

This article examines Corbynism's gender politics, and its relationship with feminism. We note that in the early years of the Corbyn period there were starkly opposed positions on the gender dynamics and feminist-friendliness of the Corbyn project. This, in turn, reflected wider factional divisions, often mapping onto different articulations of the relationship between feminism, race/whiteness, and trans rights. We then describe how initial prospects for the cultivation of a more gender-sensitive left politics were ultimately undermined by two key developments: first, a discursive terrain in which feminism increasingly became pitted against the Corbynite left; and second, a defensiveness within the Corbyn project that made it resistant to immanent critique. We conclude by arguing that the failure of pro-Corbyn feminists to gain much traction must be contextualised within the dynamics of personalisation, instrumentalisation and polarisation that increasingly shape our political culture.

Keywords: Corbynism, left politics, gender politics, feminism, polarisation, political malaise

THE RELATIONSHIP between feminism, the Labour Party and the wider left has long been a source of contention and controversy. The emergence of women's liberation in the UK in the 1970s was, to some extent, generated by many women's disaffection with the gendered cultures of the various left parties and movements that had sprung up during the fervour and radicalism of the 1960s. And over the course of its history, the Labour Party has evinced significant variability in its gendered cultures, and receptivity to feminist claims and demands.¹ To some extent, the Corbyn era was marked by a renewed visibility of these longstanding debates. Against this backdrop, this article is an attempt to trace some of the different arguments, perceptions and narratives that emerged in relation to Corbynism, gender and feminism. It also offers some reflections on the fortunes of the various attempts to cultivate more feminist-friendly modes of Labour/left politics during the Corbyn years.

In the first half of the article, we suggest that in the early years of the Corbyn period, there were

significant attempts by feminists within the orbit of Corbynism to cultivate a distinctively feminist iterations of left politics, while at the same time there were frequent accusations that Corbynism was an inhospitable environment for the pursuit of feminism. These divisions, in turn, reflected wider factional divisions, as well differing articulations of the relationship between feminism, race/whiteness and trans rights. In the second part of the article we describe how early prospects for the cultivation of a more gender-sensitive left politics were ultimately undermined by two key developments: first, a broader discursive/ideological terrain in which feminism increasingly became pitted against the socialist/Corbynite left; and second, a defensiveness within Corbynism that made it resistant to constructive forms of immanent critique. More broadly, the ultimate failure of a pro-Corbyn feminism to gain much traction and visibility is, we suggest, symptomatic of a more general malaise across our political culture.

2015–17: the drawing of the battle lines

Corbynism emerged amidst a cultural and political terrain in which feminism and gender issues had taken on a new salience. A number of feminist scholars have argued that, in the

¹V. Randall, 'Gender politics', in M. Beech, K. Hickson and R. Plant, eds., *The Struggle for Labour's Soul: Understanding Labour's Political Thought Since 1945*, London, Routledge, 2018.

UK and to some extent globally, feminist movements and discourses had taken on a renewed prominence from the early 2010s onwards, reflected in a strong and vibrant feminist grassroots movement, and a greater visibility of feminist discourse in mainstream media and popular culture.² So it should come as no surprise that debates about gender would feature prominently in early responses to Corbyn. And, in tune with the wider tone and tenor of the Corbyn years, responses to Corbynism's gender politics soon became deeply entrenched.

From very early on, many feminists on the 'moderate'—that is, anti-Corbyn—wing of the Labour Party (as well as some outside Labour) cast doubt on Corbyn's feminist credentials, at times going so far as to intimate that Labour under Corbyn was becoming increasingly hostile to women. Evidence in support of these claims included sexist abuse levelled at Labour women critical of Corbyn (as well as Corbyn's perceived failure to crack down on such abuse), and the appointment of men to the 'big four' Shadow Cabinet positions after Corbyn's 2015 leadership victory. This led some to portray Corbynism as a hotbed of blokey patriarchy in which 'brocialism' (a portmanteau of 'bros' and 'socialists' intended to draw attention to the male dominated character of left spaces) reigned supreme.³ Feminists on the pro-Corbyn wing of Labour countered these accusations by highlighting the gender parity in Corbyn's Shadow Cabinet appointments, the progressive gendered effects of Corbyn's anti-austerity position, and by highlighting the existence of sexism across the different wings of the party (claims given further credence by

a series of sexist gaffes made by Owen Smith during his failed 2016 leadership challenge).⁴

These claims and counter-claims soon consolidated themselves, such that perceptions of Corbyn(ism)'s feminist credentials tended to correlate with factional allegiances, with each side referencing very different traditions of feminist thought and activism, and often taking very different stances on a range of high-profile 'wedge' issues. More concretely, within the pro-Corbyn movement, feminism was often articulated in a broadly intersectional frame, stressing the mutual constitution of forms of power related to gender, race, class and sexuality.⁵ Others—particularly older Corbynites—expressed a left feminism that was more overtly socialist feminist, stressing in particular the gendered impacts of austerity. By contrast, feminist anti-Corbynites tended to advance a politics marked by a hybrid of radical feminist analysis and centrist or centre-left ideology. While their critique of left patriarchy often invoked a traditionally radical feminist language of patriarchy and structural misogyny, their substantive ideological politics typically aligned with either the 'soft left' or Blairite wings of the Labour Party.

These broad splits were thrown into sharp relief by three particularly prominent 'wedge' issues. The first was sex work: the dominant view among the pro-Corbyn wing favoured decriminalisation, on the back of a broadly socialist feminist commitment to improving working conditions for sex workers. Conversely, anti-Corbynites typically favoured sex work abolition, on the basis of a radical feminist analysis of the sex industry as an agent of structural violence against women.

The second issue related to race relations and the question of whiteness. Put simply, Corbyn's longstanding personal commitment to anti-racist struggle was such that Corbynism often received a more favourable reception

²E. Evans, *The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2015; S. Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2018.

³See, for example, C. Newman, 'Welcome to Jeremy Corbyn's blokey Britain where brocialism rules', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 September 2015; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/welcome-to-jeremy-corbyns-blokey-britain-where-brocialism-rules/>; S. Moore, 'As Jeremy Corbyn was anointed leader, not one female voice was heard', *The Guardian*, 12 September 2015; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/sep/12/jeremy-corbyn-not-one-female-voice> (both accessed 16 November 2020).

⁴See D. Foster, 'Jeremy Corbyn and women: a matter of policy not appointment', *OpenDemocracy*, 14 September 2015; <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/jeremy-corbyn-and-women-matter-of-policy-not-appointment/> (accessed 2 December 2020).

⁵For more detail, see J. Dean and B. Manguashca, 'Gender, power and left politics: from feminisation to feministisation', *Politics and Gender*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2018, pp. 376–406.

from black feminists than white feminists, in turn reflecting the prominence afforded to anti-racism by the Corbyn movement as a whole. Anti-Corbyn feminists, by contrast, frequently articulated an anti-patriarchal politics without explicit reference to race and class dynamics. This made anti-Corbyn feminists vulnerable to the charge of ‘white feminism’, that is to say, a feminism that *de facto* serves to centre whiteness and advance a politics grounded in promoting (predominantly white and middle class) women within existing power structures and institutions.⁶

The third and perhaps most divisive and prominent ‘wedge’ issue was the question of trans rights, which has, in recent years, assumed a remarkable prominence in wider cultural and political life. Simplifying somewhat, Corbynism as a movement *tended* to be supportive of trans rights, defending the rights of individual trans people to determine their own gender and, in the case of trans women, to feature on women-only shortlists. Conversely, anti-Corbyn feminists have often been sceptical of, or even hostile to, trans politics. Typically, this was framed on the basis of the (in our view, misguided) perception that improving the legal status of trans people would pose a threat to (cis) women’s safety. But in its more extreme manifestations, it expresses the belief that trans women are, in a certain sense, not ‘real’ women, and that any support for trans rights should be taken as *prima facie* evidence for a lack of commitment to feminism.⁷ A further curiosity of this argument is that trans men are almost always overlooked, and arguments or opinions specifically about the status of trans men are rarely made explicit. To be clear, the splits between pro and anti-trans rights, and pro and anti-Corbyn, do not fully align. Many anti-

Corbynites have supported trans rights, while some sections of Corbynism have expressed resistance to trans rights, perhaps most infamously the *Morning Star* newspaper which, while being unyielding in its support for Corbyn, has faced accusations of adopting a transphobic editorial line.⁸

However, the depth of division on these three issues, as well as the highly fractious ideological terrain on which the Labour Party found itself during the Corbyn years, were such that perceptions and narratives about the gendered aspects of Corbynism very quickly split along factional lines, and became ever more entrenched over time. One interesting development which struggled to be seen amidst these highly emotive battles were the various attempts by pro-Corbyn feminists to defend and cultivate a vision of left politics more feminist in its style and orientation than earlier iterations of Labour left politics. This took a variety of forms, but included: a revitalisation of women’s sections in local Momentum groups and within the wider Labour Party; the inclusion of more gender-transformative policies in the 2017 and 2019 manifestos than had been the case under previous Labour leaderships; and regular and wide-ranging workshops and panel discussions on gender, feminism and left politics at Momentum-organised events (particularly the World Transformed festivals that run alongside party conference).⁹

Alongside these more public or visible manifestations, the attempt to cultivate more ‘feminist’ iterations of left politics also took more protean, everyday forms. As indicated, the Corbyn movement drew sustenance from the politicisation of a broad swathe of young people in the aftermath of the 2008 crash—a cohort Keir Milburn has dubbed ‘generation left’.¹⁰ Feminism was a crucial—but sometimes overlooked—element of generation left, such that many young Corbynites evinced a high degree of fluency in feminist concepts,

⁶See, for example, H. Carby, ‘White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood’, in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in Seventies Britain*, London, Hutchinson, 1982; A. Phipps, *Me Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020.

⁷For an overview of these debates, see P. McQueen, ‘Feminist and trans perspectives on identity and the UK Gender Recognition Act’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2016, pp. 671–687.

⁸See Unison, ‘Letter to the *Morning Star*’ 25 February 2020; <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/article/2020/02/trans-letter/> (accessed 16 November 2020).

⁹See Dean and Maiguashca. ‘Gender, power and left politics’.

¹⁰K. Milburn, *Generation Left*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019.

languages and practices, often drawn from their experience of studying feminism—or participating in feminist activism—while at university. This came to light while conducting a research project on the changing shape of the UK left, during which the research team for our project interviewed a total of 135 left activists about various aspects of their politics and experiences, including their perceptions of gender and feminist issues. In so doing, it was striking that many predominantly young Corbynites and Momentum activists were deeply invested in cultivating feminist and feminised renderings of left politics. However, much of this work went on behind the scenes through, for instance, challenging the gendered cultures of branch meetings, developing policies ensuring gender parity on representative bodies, and small group discussions about gender relations in left spaces. As such, it generated far less interest and coverage than it perhaps deserved, while also—as the next section makes clear—falling foul of an inhospitable affective and ideological landscape.¹¹

2017–2019: the forward march of Corbynite feminism halted

One of the many misfortunes of the Corbyn era was that it did—especially in its early years—present a genuine opportunity for the British left to renew itself in a more feminist and inclusive direction. It took place at a moment when there was widespread public interest in—and discussion about—feminism and gender; it drew support from a broad swathe of people who were committed to feminism and fluent in feminist theories and practices, and much (but by no means all) of the Corbyn movement was aware that the left's traditional styles and assumptions needed to be reworked if the Corbyn project was to succeed. And yet, this chance was missed. In part, this was owing to hostile forces outside the Corbyn movement, but it was also a reflection of a series of internal failures that plagued the Corbyn project from early on. We will discuss each of these factors in turn.

One significant obstacle to the cultivation and consolidation of a revitalised feminist left was the way in which an overtly anti-socialist iteration of feminism ultimately gained the upper hand in mainstream British cultural and political life. Put simply, the dominant feminist voices in British public life—found on the pages of *The Guardian* and *The New Statesman*, or heard on Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*—articulated a feminist politics very much at odds with the socialist or intersectional feminisms that predominated within the Corbyn movement. This was then compounded by the fact the politicians most often interpellated as offering *the* feminist voice within Labour tended to be those associated with the moderate wing of the party.

Furthermore, the dominance of mainstream British feminism by voices that pitted themselves against the socialist/Corbynite left reflected the consolidation of a particular kind of gendered representation of the Corbynite left, whereby the latter was frequently cast as an unsavoury rabble in which there was little or no space for feminist ideas to gain traction.¹² Within this discursive framing, the typical Corbyn supporter was cast as irrational, misogynistic, fannish, cultish and all too willing to sacrifice feminism at the altar of his support for Corbyn. Indeed, a not dissimilar situation arose in the US around the time of the 2016 presidential election, where male Bernie Sanders fans—dubbed 'Bernie bros'—were cast as part of an anti-feminist left, and contrasted with what was typically depicted as a more feminist and feminised centre/centre-left politics among Hillary Clinton supporters.

As we shall go on to discuss shortly, many of these concerns about the gendered cultures of Corbynism were not without foundation. Still, the solidification of a discourse in which feminism was anchored to the political centre, with the Corbynite left cast as an anti-feminist quagmire, had a number of rather curious, even perverse, consequences. For one, it meant that a small number of women on the moderate wing of the party (in particular Jess Phillips) became cast as the standard-bearers for Labour feminism, exemplified by the publication in 2018

¹¹For a more detailed exposition of this argument, see Dean and Maiguashca. 'Gender, power and left politics'.

¹²See for example, S. Ditum, 'How the left betrayed feminism', *Unherd*, June 2020; <https://unherd.com/2020/06/how-the-left-betrayed-feminism/> (accessed 16 November 2020).

of her memoir, entitled *Everywoman*, in which Phillips cast herself as an honest, authentic feminist voice for 'ordinary women'.¹³ Meanwhile, socialist and pro-Corbyn feminists (and especially socialist feminists of colour such as Diane Abbott or Dawn Butler) were often side-lined or framed as not truly feminist in some way.¹⁴ Perhaps the most (in)famous manifestation of this fissure was the long-running 'feud' between Phillips and Abbott, in which the former boasted of having told the latter to 'fuck off' (despite such an incident never having taken place), and despite Abbott having been found to be the recipient of no less than half of abuse directed at all women MPs.¹⁵ Second, the association of 'brocialist' misogyny with the Corbynite left often served to downplay or excuse sexism and misogyny on the anti-Corbyn wing of the Labour Party. What is more, the attention afforded to sexism and misogyny on the Corbynite left was at times implicitly contrasted with the supposedly more feminist and feminised New Labour years, despite the highly uneven legacy of the Blair and Brown governments' record on gender issues.¹⁶ Finally, the drawing of a discursive boundary between a feminist centre and an anti-feminist left often led to the curious spectacle of men with no prior commitment to gender equality suddenly trumpeting their feminist credentials by denouncing Corbyn.

For Corbyn supporters, it might be comforting to assume that these problems were all down to external factors. But there can be no such comfort, for the obstacles to the cultivation of a more feminist rendering of left politics did not come only from external critics hostile to the Corbyn project. They were also produced

by the quirks and specificities of the internal dynamics of Corbynism. As indicated above, there have traditionally been significant tensions between feminism and various forms of left politics: the latter have often played host to traditional and/or problematic gendered scripts, have often been resistant to feminist claims and, in some cases, have sought to cover-up or downplay instances of abuse.¹⁷ So, it should come as little surprise that many feminists were keen to challenge some of the more problematic gendered habits and behaviours on the Corbynite left. But Corbynite and socialist feminist attempts at remedying Corbynism's more concerning gendered dynamics soon found themselves squeezed out.

From fairly early on, Corbynism was beset by a culture of defensiveness and feelings of besiegement. In some respects this was an understandable response to a wider political landscape that was implacably hostile to Corbyn and the wider left. But this oversensitivity meant that there was little room for internal conversation about how to revitalise the Corbyn project from within. Thus, criticisms of Corbyn's gender politics from pro-Corbyn feminists were often rebuffed on the grounds that such claims provided grist to the mill of those who were seeking to attack Corbyn. Caught between mainstream feminists hostile to Corbynism, and Corbyn supporters wary of any attempt at admitting weakness, pro-Corbyn feminists ultimately struggled to make headway in a deeply unforgiving discursive terrain.

In our view, this defensiveness within Corbynism—and the highly entrenched nature of opposing political positions it reflected—is not specific to debates about Corbyn and gender. Rather, it is symptomatic of a broader malaise in our political culture, in which there is very little room for any kind of immanent critique. Immanent critique—that is, critique premised upon the expansion and development of the discursive terms of the perspective or approach under examination—has been central

¹³J. Phillips, *Everywoman: One Woman's Truth About Speaking the Truth*, London, Cornerstone, 2018.

¹⁴A. Wilkinson, 'Stop erasing socialist women', *Prospect*, 17 July 2017; <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/abuse-happens-across-the-political-spectrum-so-why-are-socialist-women-being-ignored> (accessed 16 November 2020).

¹⁵See, V. Princewill, 'As we rally to support Jess Phillips, let's not forget her "lies" about Diane Abbott', *Gal-Dem*, 10 May 2019; <https://gal-dem.com/as-we-rally-to-support-jess-phillips-lets-not-forget-her-alleged-lies-about-diane-abbott/> (accessed 1 March 2021).

¹⁶See, for example, A. McRobbie, 'Feminism and the socialist tradition...undone?' *Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2004, pp. 503–522.

¹⁷See, for example, L. Coleman and S. Bassi, 'Deconstructing militant manhood', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2011, pp. 204–24; J. Downes, "'It's not the abuse that kills you, it's the silence": the silencing of sexual violence activism in social justice movements in the UK left', *Justice, Power and Resistance*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2017, pp. 35–58.

to the history of feminist thought. Liberal feminists from Wollstonecraft to Nussbaum have sought to unpick the gendered oversights and blind spots of traditional liberal thought. Black feminists from Anna Julia Cooper to Kimberlé Crenshaw and beyond have interrogated the patriarchy of black liberation politics, and the whiteness of feminism, without jettisoning either. And, finally, socialist feminists from Alexandra Kollontai to Nancy Fraser have sought to rectify the gender blindness of the Marxist tradition without abandoning it. But there is little space for immanent critique in a political landscape that entrenches opposing positions and abhors nuance. In the fraught terrain that marks our current political moment, it is typically assumed that to be critical of something must necessitate its wholesale abandonment. There is little appetite for, or comprehension of, forms of politics aimed at the internal transformation of specific political parties or movements. This problem is then compounded by frequent double standards in the invocation of feminism, such that one's political opponents are invariably held to higher standards than one's comrades. This has the effect that ideological differences (between, say, different strands of Labour Party politics) are personalised and sublimated into debates which, while ostensibly about feminism or gender, are in fact motivated by factional disputes. As such, both supporters and critics of Corbynism have often converged in their frequent adoption of a style of debate premised upon polarisation, personalisation, and instrumentalisation of key issues. Such an affective and discursive landscape is profoundly inhospitable to arguments which seek more nuanced positions, or which seek to work through difficult questions.

Conclusion: after Corbynism

In opposition to those who seek discursively to anchor feminism to a liberal politics opposed to the socialist left, we have argued that the Corbyn years saw a range of genuine and sincere—but largely overlooked—attempts by feminists on the left to cultivate more dynamic and gender-sensitive styles and forms of left politics. Pro-Corbyn feminists also sought to defend a more race sensitive and trans inclusive vision of feminism than

the predominantly white, liberal and anti-trans rendering of feminism that frequently dominates mainstream political debate. Ultimately, however, Corbynite feminists struggled to make progress in an ideological and affective landscape that was unable and unwilling to accommodate them.

This rather depressing state of affairs has shown little sign of abating since the 2019 general election which brought the curtain down on the Corbyn era in Labour politics. Although some high-profile feminists in the mainstream media initially rallied around Jess Phillips' abortive leadership bid, in the end, there was rather little discussion about the gender implications of the 2020 leadership contest. This was perhaps because the dichotomy of '(feminist) centre *vs.* (anti-feminist) left' was no longer tenable. Keir Starmer—widely seen as the most centrist of the candidates—was up against three women, all of whom identified as feminist and at least two of whom were to his left politically. Indeed, some commentators who had bemoaned, ostensibly out of a concern for women's descriptive representation, Corbyn's 2015 victory over Yvette Cooper and Liz Kendall, nonetheless threw their weight behind Starmer.¹⁸ This should leave us in no doubt that any discussion of feminism and gender will always be overdetermined by the ideological coordinates of the wider context in which it happens. Indeed, we would suggest that one key lesson of the Corbyn years is that feminism suffers when it becomes subject to cynical opportunism, and when positions become so entrenched that the immanent critique historically central to feminist politics becomes unable to gain traction. Within a political landscape that continues to be highly fractious, some will no doubt interpret our argument as an apologia for Corbynism's problematic gender politics. So let us be clear: the failure of feminism to gain traction during the Corbyn years is not a failure of any one specific political faction, but reflects a deep malaise at the heart of our entire political culture. New forms and styles of political

¹⁸For example, C. Bennett, 'Why should Keir Starmer step aside? His rivals have few feminist credentials', *The Guardian*, 26 January 2020; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/26/why-should-keir-starmer-aside---his-rivals-have-few-feminist-credentials> (accessed 16 November 2020).

engagement and debate among the ‘generation left’ may offer some hope for renewal, but the task of cultivating a more vibrant democratic culture in British politics is a daunting one.

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