



Resources of history and hope: Studying left-wing political parties through loss

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abstract

The paper offers loss as a framework for identifying resources of hope in insider studies of left-wing political parties. It interrogates and builds on insights from our paper on the resistance leadership of Corbynism in the UK (Sinha et al., 2021), in conversation with Walter Benjamin and Raymond Williams, proposing political parties as perhaps unique resources of hope in times of loss. Three threads of hope are offered. The first is a consideration of the ambivalence of factions and the potential for intra and cross-factional learning and leadership. The second is the notion of leaders and leadership within political parties as an ongoing and live area of contention and possibility. The third is an examination of political parties as resources of care and hope. The paper concludes by making the case that insider research of political parties can engage with the contingency of history through recovering and composing potent narratives that can act as guides for future research and practice.

Introduction: Everything goes heavy...

Our insider study of resistance leadership from the left wing of the UK Labour Party was published online on 25 November 2019, two and a half weeks before the party was soundly defeated by a surging Conservative Party in the general election. Reams of seats previously regarded as bastions of the labour movement fell. As the exit poll was announced at the close of voting, a nation

of Labour activists and supporters gasped. As one (losing) parliamentary candidate, who saw the poll announced on television in a busy pub, surrounded by her volunteers and campaign team told us in an interview recently: ‘The world fell through me. Everything went heavy’.

The paper we co-authored is based on interviews with a range of Labour left insiders – MPs, senior strategists, organisers, councillors, member representatives, trade unionists and ordinary activists. In it we try to make sense of how a group previously marginal, indeed almost extinct people – Labour Party socialists – transitioned to power through a series of practices we theorise as ‘dramaturgical resistance leadership’. We thought we had made a useful contribution in better understanding moments of dramatic change through resistance but confess that for some weeks after the election defeat thought it was possible our paper would be notable for a single reason, being relevant for less than three weeks. A media consensus was taking root that Labour’s defeat was not the result of a new divide in British society over Brexit; rather, it was due to the party being too left wing, its leader, Jeremy Corbyn viewed by voters as too radical, its hundreds of thousands of new members being too idealistic, demanding too much change, which resulted in an overly ambitious manifesto lacking credibility amongst conservative voters. Was it possible that our study, which tried to understand how a resisting mass movement formed and transitioned to power, was in reality a study of folly and hubris?

Having somewhat processed the loss, we argue not. We write this paper in our isolated academic spaces as the Covid-19 virus circulates outside, its destruction amplified by the very structures of neoliberal social and economic relations which, only a few months ago, were assumed as political common sense – untouchable and the only show in town. In the present moment, when so much seems in flux, when social democratic solutions to contemporary problems are suddenly relevant again, developing knowledge of how the left can re-mobilise, re-assemble and re-engage through political parties seems like essential work.

Yet before we do so we need to come to terms with loss – preferably sooner rather than later, and to do so in a political and sociological way that helps us

see the potential for hope. Addressing fellow left-wing activists growing accustomed to routine defeats, the Marxist theorist Raymond Williams stated that our challenge lay in ‘making hope practical, rather than despair convincing’ (Williams, 2016: 209). Dwelling in something akin to melancholy for too long (where ‘too long’ in chrono-time now compresses to hours and days rather than years), we accept Williams’ call – in general – but also as the guiding principle of the remainder of the paper. Our task here is a modest one, to interrogate our study and some of its implications in the present, but to do so in the knowledge that others are doing likewise and that together we may build resources of hope that can inform the practice and research of movements and struggles in these perilous but pregnant times.

Perhaps paradoxically, Williams was writing from a position of loss, that of the anti-nuclear movement and it is loss that also offers us a potent frame through which to take stock of the implications of our 2019 *Human Relations* paper for the organisational study of political parties. In what follows we explain and justify the conceptual basis for a focus on loss. From here, we expand on three threads we think relevant for future study of political parties. Threads dangle from the dominant body of fabric; they also come loose and float between unexpected surfaces. They can be stubborn, resisting attempts at disposal, but they can also unravel large knots and stitches if one pulls too much. In the spirit of unravelling and loosening dominant narrative, we posit our first thread as the study of political parties at the intersection with social movements; our second thread is the relationship between leaders and leadership in political parties; our third and final thread is that of the organisational ethics of political parties, which we position as resources of loss, care and hope.

Before proceeding, however, we need to make clear our respective positions with regards to our chosen object of study, the UK Labour Party. Owain has been a member of the party for over 20 years, used to work for it professionally and during the 2019 election volunteered to manage the campaign in an important target seat. Brigid and Paresha live in New Zealand and consider themselves critical friends of social democratic and left wing parties and movements in general, who became fascinated by the dynamics of the Corbyn insurgency; although they wanted it to succeed they were less close to the

action and more able to gain some critical perspective through distance. Owain, on the other hand, was in the thick of the action, both in terms of the election and the party's socialist faction. We will return to the issues generated by this research dynamic, but first we need to make sense of loss.

Salvaging hope through loss

We have spent quite some time since the defeat of December 2019 processing and reflecting on loss. Left-wing activists and supporters become accustomed to it, of course, although some blows fall harder than others. We therefore feel a sense of responsibility to our research participants, to academic colleagues and to ourselves to offer a framework for interpreting political loss and know that, in a time of unprecedented global economic, social and personal loss, that this is one lesson that the study of political parties could indeed offer the organisational world.

Mining the resources of hope available through historical materialism has helped us situate loss and to further clarify the task for those of us engaged in insider research within progressive parties. We are mindful of Eagleton's (2015) differentiation between hope and optimism, where optimism is a naïve and blind disregard to the miserable realities of tragedy and loss but hope is a commitment to persevering despite foreknowledge that radical change is unlikely but possible. At the heart of Eagleton's formula is faith in contingency and the unsettled nature of history: 'As long as there is contingency there is hope...There is hope as long as history lacks closure. If the past was different from the present, so may the future be' (Eagleton, 2015: Loc 3084). Because things need not have developed as they did in the past, we know that the terrain of present and future struggles can buck past outcomes of loss and oppression and we therefore need to revisit the past to discover traces of possibility for how things could have been otherwise.

Like Eagleton, we have been mining the work of Walter Benjamin, who penned his great theses on history (Benjamin, 2015) under the gravest circumstances of personal loss while on the run from the Nazis. Benjamin had every reason to concede to despair and yet managed to craft a methodology for

interrogating (and rescuing) history. Consider his Thesis IX, a fabulation of a Paul Klee painting of the Angelus Novus that he had acquired:

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, 2015: Loc 4092-4098)

In this narrative Benjamin offers an account of history where the agent can be identified as the 'storm' of 'progress' rather than the angel itself. Progress in this articulation is the historicist accounts of the victors, who leave a trail of accumulating catastrophes in their wake. Stripped of agency ('staring eyes', 'mouth open'), the angel, a metaphorized figure for the historical materialist, seeks to 'awaken the dead', the losers and leftovers of progress, but to no avail, as he is blown further into the future, while the 'pile of debris before him grows skyward'. The fable speaks to the tragic (im)possibilities of the historical materialist task of reconceptualising and redirecting narrative, yet one that Benjamin finds essential, as to do otherwise would be to overlook the tradition of 'progress' within which we are stuck.

Resources of hope for Benjamin therefore lie in the past as much, if not more than, in the present. At the core of his method is an understanding of history and narrative as unsettled and unsettling, open to fresh understanding and rich in potential to charge the present time with revolutionary possibility (with revolution captured for Benjamin in the metaphorical figure of the Messiah) hewn from past events and people. For Benjamin:

A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he [sic] encounters it as a monad. In this structure, he recognises the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history – blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. (Benjamin, 2015: Loc 4166)

Envisaging the present task as one of ‘blasting’ moments and people of the past out of their allocated role in the dominant narrative of history feels like a crucial task for left researchers with practical aspirations to cultivate resources of hope - because we should of course be attentive to deconstructing and revising dominant accounts of history but also because we have so many more losses to salvage than do the usually triumphant. Academic work (acknowledging Benjamin’s distaste for more traditional academic discipline(s)) by this account is far from a neutral activity of identifying causes of victory or rationalising and systematising the dimensions of victors but rather a charged political and ethical task of recovery and retelling: ‘To remember, to com-memorate, is actively to reprise, revive, retake, recuperate’ (Haraway, 2015: 25). Resisting the winds of ‘progress’ and searching through the wreckage of loss, we now interrogate our study in the hope that they may illuminate future study of political parties.

Thread one: Divergent organisational logics meet

Our first thread concerns factions and diverse organisational logics. Factions fractionalise, disperse and dilute energies and resources: internecine warfare debilitates. In the aftermath of loss, prominent Labour politicians warned that factionalism within the party had to end and accused Corbyn and his associates of prioritising factional advantage over electoral gain (e.g. BBC News, 2020). One legitimate resource of hope would therefore be to study attempts to transcend factionalism, to analyse the ways in which groups within political parties consciously seek commonality, to cultivate ‘agonistic respect’ (Connolly, 2002) and approach such leadership as residing beyond individuals and instead within stewardship of an inclusive and participative democratic practice (Raelin, 2016).

Yet factions in a political party also concentrate and intensify affects, knowledge and learning; they can act as gateways through which new entrants to a political organisation find community and education; they can interact and generate energy, possibility and joy (Munro and Thanem, 2018) from diversity, a process of ‘pluralization’ (Connolly, 1995). It is therefore worth circling back to factions and the ‘factions as factors of loss’ explanation to

critically examine it and even to grasp traces of possibilities in the interleaving and inter-agonisms of factions.

In our study, we theorised the practice of organisational redrawing as ‘the questioning and testing of taken-for-granted assumptions about organisational boundaries and power, and the consequent construction of a collective leadership that stretches beyond existing actors and spaces’ (Sinha et al., 2021: 355). Corbyn’s campaigns reached beyond the current party membership to draw in hundreds of thousands of new members, and of those we interviewed, most said they did not think of themselves previously as people who would ever join a political party and had held indifferent or hostile attitudes towards Labour in the past. Redrawing is therefore an imaginative and dramatic means of changing and challenging the power structures of an organisation rarely achieved in practice – and it occurs through factions but in a way that radically reshapes those very gateway factions in the process.

Within these factions, we can grasp resources of hope in the distinct communities of learning and development that are notable. Hence a proliferation of literature published by faction insiders seeking to educate new entrants on the various traditions at play (e.g. Hannah, 2018) and the genesis of online readings groups and lists during the Covid-19 crisis. Factions become hubs of what Gramsci (2005) calls organic intellectuals and intellectualism, knowledge gleaned through ‘active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, “permanent persuader”’ (*ibid*: 10). Intellectualism for Gramsci is an egalitarian and potentially universal characteristic (admittedly a claim undermined by pronoun use): ‘All men [sic] are intellectuals, one could... say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals’ (*ibid*: 9). Any activist, from ordinary member to party leader, can offer a kind of intellectual leadership, therefore. Yet we need to learn more, and more systematically, about knowledge creation and adaptation within party factions, how common struggle within communities generates intellectuals and situated knowledge that is passed between members and that circulates to create new norms of ‘common sense’ (another Gramscian term) that guide future interactions between factions.

We also need to learn more about cross-factional learning and the possibilities at the intersection of factions, a theme of our paper that could be developed further. When interacting, the Corbynite factions and their logics could be generative, coming close to the ideal of assembly posited by Hardt and Negri (2017) when they elucidate a decentralised grassroots providing strategy and the formal leadership tactics; or the democratic yet populist energy of Laclau's (2007) 'chain of equivalence', a counter-hegemony of diverse subjects, identifications and discourses articulating an alternative in antagonistic relation to the status quo, which cannot internalise and co-opt its demands. At its strongest, there was an ethos of learning that accompanied this intra-factional engagement. In Wark's (2015: 328) terms, it was 'tektological', 'communicat[ing] between labour processes poetically and qualitatively... a training of the metaphoric wiliness of language toward particular applications which correspond to and with advances in labour technique'. Factions can cross-pollinate and this process is an aesthetic and embodied one, as well as cognitive.

Yet at the time of writing, socialist activists are grappling with the possibility that the new party leadership, under Keir Starmer, is not only against factionalism but equates ending factionalism with marginalising the left. The left, of course, is not without fault. Under Corbyn's leadership hierarchies (re)asserted themselves through the opaque decisions of leadership and their pacts with union sponsors, while centralised control and a retreat to 'parliamentarism' (Miliband, 1972) became prominent strategic approaches of the party. We refer to this possibility in our study under the practice of a 'trifold focus'. Within this practice we point to the delicate balancing act in leadership of subduing dissent from the former status quo, resisting acts of disruption and sabotage from the same group but also building for the future through generative engagement. Indeed, more generally, empirical research regarding cross-factional, multi-structural connection within parties remains threadbare, even as it seems central in a world where the multitude subsist while older established institutions and bonds of sociality wither (Hardt and Negri, 2000).

Thread two: Blasted leaders, blooming leadership?

Our second thread of history considers more explicitly the status of, and tensions between leaders and leadership in political parties; or alternatively articulated, the problematic of where the noun of leader ends and the verb of leadership begins, in both explaining loss and for envisaging a more hopeful present and future. This does not mean adopting an uncritical account of Corbyn or his movement but comes from a standpoint of critical leadership studies, from which we adopt an attitude of scepticism to any explanation that apports undue credit or blame to individual leaders.

Our research participants conceptualised Corbyn in ‘anti-charismatic’ ways, a present non-presence who helped a movement to channel its energies and disparate demands. He was also spoken of as a symbol of steadfastness and integrity, rather than as a charismatic inspiring the masses with rhetorical flourish. Almost every person we interviewed emphasised that it was not Corbyn ‘as such’ who inspired their commitment to the party; rather, it was more the ideas and ideals articulated through and beyond him as a symbol. In our study we refer to such work not as an investigation of leader qualities, as such an approach would be too ahistorical and depoliticised to be of much practical use. Instead, we prefer the term ‘leadering’, a refashioning of the noun ‘leader’ to a verb indicating the symbolic and affective work accomplished through the figure of a leader, which, in a contemporary left setting seems less about a cult of personality and more concerned with the ideas and values expressed through the symbol of a leader. The leader becomes one channel amongst several for a multitude of forces, desires, movements and values.

Relatedly and finally, we also need to critically interrogate the past to glean lessons concerning gender, leadership and loss. Gender was not a topic covered in our study and there are three reasons for this. First, there were uncommonly large numbers of women present in the senior echelons of Corbyn’s team and indeed in leadership roles throughout the party. Second, events and meetings held by pro-Corbyn groups were strongly informed by feminism and norms of gender-equal participation. Third, the figure of Corbyn himself defied the masculine, instead embodying many characteristics

more commonly associated with ‘feminine’ stereotypes (inclusivity, modesty, care, etc.). Yet the party, like society, has a history of institutional sexism and hot public disputes surrounding its initiatives to implement gender equality initiatives (for an overview of these, see Smolović Jones et al., 2020a; 2020b). Labour remained a party dominated by male MPs until it introduced the first gender quota system of any UK organisation in the 1990s, under the leadership of Tony Blair. The resignation of Corbyn and the election of another male as his replacement, has reignited the question of why and how notionally left-wing, socially liberal parties continue to have a problem with electing women as their leaders.

To cultivate resources of hope from loss, there is need for inquiries that engage women in leftist parties about their experiences of candidacy, the particular pressures they feel and the attitude of party members and the public to their authority. Such research may gain further urgency in the wake of another leadership election loss.

Thread three: Resources of care and hope

When business organisations experience a catastrophe they often go under. Political parties can also go ‘bust’ or wither into insignificance, a fate that has befallen Labour in Scotland and the Liberal Democrats UK-wide, but such stories are exceptions. Political parties also experience loss in hyper-visible, public and even ceremonial ways (Roberts, 2017) – e.g. losing candidates forced to hear election results on a platform alongside their opponents while the country watches on from television screens. Yet most parties bear loss, live it, walk with it and ultimately move through it. We therefore need to better understand political parties as organisms that absorb and work through loss in incredibly resilient ways. Political parties may seem unfashionable within a liquid culture (Bauman, 2013) that values loose affiliation and dynamic, multitudinous assembly (Hardt and Negri, 2017), but they persist and, when strong, provide a channel for the energies, affects and everyday ethical practices of activists (Dean, 2018). In this final thread we focus on the mundane and embodied ethical practices of parties as resources of hope that can be salvaged from loss and develop these with some concluding

methodological reflections on the challenges of researching these from the inside, through experiences of loss.

In our original paper, we described some of the bonds of sociality, generosity and solidarity that coursed through Corbyn's campaigns. Even post-election an ethos of care is discernible across spheres of the Labour Party, at a level invisible to media commentators but networked amongst the grassroots (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Chains of digital responsibility formed through a proliferation of WhatsApp groups and social media contacts (Barad, 2007), which transited in a liquid fashion from the instrumental to the caring, from telephones to more intimate in-person care. The ability to rapidly communicate with one another meant that activists could learn more about one another's lives and struggles, which translated into the enactment of care sitting at the intersection of the political and personal. Owain's ethnographic journal of the election reveals a growing net of responsibilities and care (Barad, 2007; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), of supporting one another through mundane family dramas, as well as more pressing issues of advising and supporting comrades in precarious conditions.

Following defeat, and outside social media and the commentariat, there was very little evidence of triumphalism from factions that opposed or were sceptical of Corbynism. Instead there were words and embraces of consolidation: 'Don't be down too long. Keep the energy and ideas going because we need them', an older and more right-leaning activist told Owain the week after the loss, demonstrating an attitude of care and respect towards seemingly opposing party factions. Activists sought one another's company and factions seemed less relevant than sharing the experience of loss. We do not wish to romanticise (Collinson et al., 2018) care, however. Care can torment and perpetuate loss (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Owain's journal recounts spoiled special occasions and intimate family time, sleep deprivation due to late night WhatsApp conversations.

Methodologically, insider research of political parties presents opportunities but also problems we need to take seriously. How can one understand the losses of political parties without experiencing them from within, in all their bone-shaking, debilitating and world wearying horror? Dispassionate and

distanced analyses of parties versus immersive accounts seems like an unnecessary binary choice. Parties can and should be researched from within with full regard the experience of potent affect (Clarke et al., 2014); there is a power to experiencing first-hand the charge of ethical responsibility and care as it flows through bodies and across organisations (Pullen and Rhodes, 2014).

Just as parties become perhaps unique repositories of tragedy and loss, so insider research offers one means of documenting and honouring loss as much, if not more than, making sense of victory. We have yet to explore and develop this mode of insider research into the Labour Party to the extent that it deserves, as nerves and feelings remain too raw, yet when we and others do we think that it will offer a depth and visceral sense of interconnected presence within parties that is impossible to glean from the safer distance of the office or television studio. Owain felt firsthand the highs of securing radical policies, and the joy and love that comes from sharing and building a movement with comrades (Munro and Thanem, 2018). Yet he also gained a proximate view of the tiredness and anger that came in amplifying waves over time, taking their toll on the body and mind, as enthusiastic young volunteers were maligned by the media and other party members, seemingly endless voters barked racist views on their doorsteps and the fragile unity of intra-party solidarity broke down in endless cycles of recrimination.

Such proximate experiences can be captured through recourse to our pictures, memories and conversations with others as much as from more formal interviews, loosely structured or not. This research must be simultaneously political and aesthetic, drawing lines of connection between the beautiful experiences, mementos, technologies and spaces of political party activity and the charged political and ethical moments of party work. Such multimodal forms of insider research promise to unveil the everyday and mundane contours of political parties which yet provide the resources of hope from which movements are born. There is clearly an academic activist (Contu, 2019) dimension at play in the work of insider political party research, therefore. We are never neutral observers but pursue research in order to, in the tradition of critical theory, make change in the world. Our lesson from Benjamin, and indeed a rich history of critical engagement with narrative from feminism (e.g. Pullen, 2018), is that such research should not focus on

objectivity but on recounting and composing the alternative, subdued, hidden and hopeful. Insight can come simultaneously of course from proximity *and* distance, and the balance we have tried to strike has been allowing the former space to breathe while using the latter as a device to help us see emergent patterns, to conceptualise out from a basis of raw experience, as well as to check some of the taken-for-granted assumptions of right and wrong made by the researcher closest to the action.

Of course this kind of insider research does present some practical ethical issues. While those closest to the researcher in the field should be informed that everyday experiences will be written up in an ethnographic journal, duly anonymised, it is impossible and undesirable for an insider researcher with activist ambitions to inform each and every person who enters the orbit of the fieldwork that experiences may one day appear in the pages of an academic publication. To do so would sabotage the campaign, eat up precious time and resources, and, just as importantly, potentially mislead volunteers into thinking that their every utterance and movement is being recorded. Rather, reporting on events involving the peripheral appearances of volunteers requires ethical judgment. Anonymity in writing up is of course a prerequisite, with identifying features disguised as far as possible, a task made easier in the UK Labour Party of the years 2015-2020, as the pool of membership exceeded 500,000 people nationwide. Judgment also involves reflecting on the nature of the action observed: people need to be able to speak freely - and clumsily - within democratic spaces without fear, as it is this form of expression that generates intrinsic pleasure and collective learning. A large dose of good faith is required from the insider to respect the protected spaces of free expression and when such instances are conveyed in research to take extra steps to maintain anonymity – through merging events, disguising geography and identity, if necessary.

This does not mean that unpleasant events or acts should be redacted. Indeed, the research of Owain and colleagues on Labour's ongoing gender problems (Smolović Jones et al., 2020a; 2020b) did report on instances of sexism and misogyny in the wider party, but the value of writing up such events for research lies in seeing and making sense of their presence rather than identifying the perpetrators. Of course being an insider researcher also means

accepting the normal responsibilities of being a good organisational citizen, utilising internal systems for reporting hateful or harmful conduct when necessary, and where such systems fail, blowing the whistle. While such measures will be disruptive of the research process, they are ethically vital.

Conclusion: Hope through loss

This paper has sought to recognise and work through the experience of loss to illuminate some resources of hope for future insider study of political parties. These organisations are to a great extent unique in their ability to process loss, adapt and continue. We have argued in this paper that such a capacity stems from their potential to glean energy from factional difference, to reconceptualise the meaning of leadership and to forge sustainable and ethical ties. We have also started the work of critically interrogating the ways in which parties can seemingly perpetuate losses, particularly when our notions of loss are extended beyond the instrumental realms of losing elections. Our primary focus, however, has been on seeking resources of hope in dark times, of dwelling in these moments to offer insider learning. Now more than ever it seems vital to recover and honour resources of hope that circulated in the multitude (not the few), in the old times, the distant and receding memories of a 'Brexit' election already backgrounded by the grim realities of a pandemic.

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