

The Legacy of Millbank: How Britain's student revolt changed radical politics

Wednesday 20 January 2021, by [WHEELER Seth](#) (Date first published: 10 November 2020).

Today marks the ten-year anniversary of one of the most important demonstrations in British political history. The occupation of Millbank Tower during a major fifty-thousand person demonstration organised by the NUS to contest the tripling of tuition fees and cuts to student grants kickstarted the largest student rebellion for fifty years. Matt Myers, the author of [Student Revolt](#), described it as 'a moment of heightened transition, a catalyst in the decomposition of old politics and organisations and the founding of new experiences and new methods of organising.'

[Student Revolt: Voices of the Austerity Generation](#) - the oral history of the 2010 movement - is available for £5 this week only.

Here, Seth Wheeler looks at the affect of this revolt on the growth of young, radical movements organising in and against the state.

On the 12th April 2019, the *Daily Politics* show - the BBC's political magazine programme - broadcast an interview between the journalist Ash Sarkar and the Italian theorist-cum-father of contemporary autonomist Marxism, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. Sarkar had travelled to Bologna in order to interview Berardi, whose work she would claim, alongside that of the late anthropologist David Graeber, had greatly informed the political orientation of the student movement she had belonged to in 2010.

To say this interview reflected some aspect of the Overton window that had opened in the wake of Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader of the Labour Party would be an understatement. It suggested a clear continuity of activity between those who had once composed an anti-statist current within a domestic student movement and the burgeoning social movement emerging in support of Corbyn's leadership since 2015.

As Sarkar identified over the course of this interview, 'when we occupied our university in 2010 it was like a crash course in activism/Only two Labour MPs visited us, and they were Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell.' This act of solidarity wasn't mono-directional as 'years later, all those people that I shared that student movement with now work for Jeremy Corbyn or John McDonnell or the Labour Party or they're doing things with Momentum.' Implying a continuity of perspectives carried forward by student militants into the Labour Party, she asked Berardi, 'can you build and sustain a provocative, irreverent leftist counter-culture, when at the same time you are wanting to win elections?' His response was 'probably not, probably not. But who cares, you try.'

While Sarkar was not the first to proclaim continuity between a loose network of 'horizontalists' and those now found inside Corbynism's fuzzy boundaries, her profile as a journalist has added weight to previous claims, not least of which suggested that it was the urgency of activists within 2010s

student movement who had made the 'Corbyn moment' possible. While the routes between more orthodox socialist organisations and the Labour Party have long existed – in part reflective of the Leninist strategy of entryism – making sense of those who held an anti-statist orientation is far harder to comprehend, and harder still to map. In some ways, the influx of extra-parliamentary socialists into the party reflected a turn by activists towards participation in political institutions taking place across the Mediterranean basin and further afield. But in many ways it differed significantly. I believe an updated redress of autonomist Marxism and its theoretical innovations can provide a key to unlocking the re-orientation of these activists now moving toward the party, who hold, for want of a better expression, an 'in and against the state' politics.

It is in no doubt that those who shared an anti-authoritarian politics during 2010 would go on to define the contours of a particular branch of Corbynism that has remained relatively hegemonic over the political imagination of younger socialists inside the party. In particular, *Novara Media* and Momentum's 'The World Transformed' festival (TWT) have helped to guide the transition from one movement to the other. Both of these organisations drew their personnel from the student movement of 2010. Early episodes of *Novara* speak directly to the struggles at hand, reflecting the concerns of a plethora of social movements emerging in response to the financial crisis of 2008, of which the student movement was only one. As key personnel from *Novara* were active participants within this movement, it should come as no surprise that they would turn to the theory at hand to make sense of the world around them. While intellectual strands would differ from campus to campus, what was clear was a noted prevalence of both, as Myers notes, 'anarchist, autonomist and Situationist literature, as well as the more traditional literatures of the Marxist classics and poststructuralism disseminated by the different left groups and university courses'.

The formation of TWT is also useful in understanding the influence of 2010's 'horizontalists', evolving in part out of Brick Lane Debates (BLD), a radical education project, whose sensibilities and concerns can be traced to Occupy, the student movement, and wider anti-austerity struggle. After attending a meeting run by BLD, staff members from the recently founded Momentum approached BLD activists with a request for help. They had been inspired by the participatory style of debate they had witnessed and wondered if a similar event could take place alongside the Labour Party conference. It was reasoned that BLD's open and consensus model of deliberation, reflected the new form of politics Corbyn himself was advocating. Responding to this request, activists from BLD and other networks set to work on the creation of a series of events for Momentum, which quickly grew into a festival program. However, halfway through the planning of this event, Owen Smith launched a leadership challenge. As such, activists from Momentum would turn their attention toward the defence of Corbyn's leadership, setting a pattern that would go on to shape Momentum's activity in the years ahead. In need of help, activists brought in their friends to help finalise the festival program. This influx of activists ensured the inclusion of more openly anti-capitalist or revolutionary organisations. Their inclusion would begin to define The World Transformed as a productive 'encounter space' between the left of the Labour Party and extra-parliamentary social movements. At the same time, the preoccupation of activists in contesting Owen Smith's leadership challenge gave this newly constituted group a high degree of political autonomy.

The rapid growth in alternative media that accompanied the Corbyn years, and the rising stock of the World Transformed as both an exciting and heterodox intellectual space, would help to launch a series of campaigns, networks and think tanks. This milieu would shape the policy offers put forward by Labour in the years ahead and revitalise a wider anti-capitalist culture on the British left. Yet this loose 'in and against' tendency was unable to forge itself into an organised or outward expression which could take advantage of its relative power over the imagination of socialists.

However, 2015 was not the first-time libertarian-inflected socialists had entered the Labour Party, nor was it the first time their influence would give shape to activity conducted in the party's name.

Activists who cut their teeth during the campus-based militancy associated with the revolutionary upheavals of 1968, the early women's movements, housing and community struggles, and workplace organisation, would eventually find themselves operating inside the Greater London Council during the 1980s – the last mass experiment in radical municipalism with 'in and against' politics.

In a recent conversation between myself and John McDonnell, conducted for Pluto Press' upcoming republication of *In and Against the State*, John stated that he and Jeremy deeply regretted the failure to create an 'in and against' cadre. The task ahead, it was suggested, was to do just that.

Seth Wheeler is an activist and researcher. He is a founding member of Channel Rescue and a contributing editor for *In and Against the State: Discussion Notes for Socialists*, which is forthcoming by Pluto in August 2021.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Pluto Press

<https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/the-legacy-of-millbank/>