The Red Flag and Other Signs: Reconstructing Socialist Identity in Protest as Performance

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Bio

Rebecca Hillman's work with trade unions and political campaign groups informs her work as a writer, theatre maker, and Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Exeter. She enjoys teaching her module 'Activism and Performance' to examine with students how people harness performance and cultural forms to make change in the world. Her recent publications explore theatre as a tool for political organisation and reflect on her collaborative efforts to strengthen links between artists and labour movement activists. Rebecca is an advisor for Future's Venture Radical Independent Art Fund and a member of the Exeter's Centre for Social Mobility.

Abstract

Obituaries of the Left have been written many times over at least since the 1970s, as faith in socialism as a viable ideology or economic system diminished in the West. The ascent of neoliberal globalisation has meanwhile resulted in a democratic deficit and crisis of representation at the level of lived experience. Political movements of the 1990s and early 2000s commonly eschewed hierarchy and homogeneity in their approach to organisation. As such, the vanguard became the multitude, and the march to power the practice of assembly, decentralisation, direct action, and democratic decision making in temporary autonomous zones. Yet recent years have seen significant reclamations of symbols and practices associated with socialism and communism, specifically. Focusing on the appearance of large red flags between 2015 and 2019 at street protests, political rallies, in community theatre projects, on social media sites, and a revolutionary battleground, the essay analyses what this tells us about contemporary politics.

Keywords: protest, performance, socialism, communism, left political movements

Résumé

La mort de la gauche a été annoncée à maintes reprises depuis les années 1970 au moins, alors que la croyance dans un socialisme en tant qu'idéologie ou système économique viable dans l'Ouest se diminuait. A même temps, la montée de la mondialisation néolibérale a entraîné un déficit démocratique et une crise de représentation quant à l'expérience vécue, tandis que les mouvances politiques des années 1990 et du début des années 2000 ont fréquemment rejeté les approches organisationnelles hiérarchisées et homogénéisées. À ce titre, l'avant-garde s'est muée en multitude, et en une marche aspirant à alimenter les pratiques de décentralisation des assemblées, d'action directe et de prise de décision démocratique dans les zones temporairement autonomes. Pourtant, les symboles et pratiques de réhabilitation importants ont été, ces dernières années, associés au socialisme et au communisme en particulier. En se focalisant sur l'apparition, entre 2015 et 2019, de grands drapeaux rouges dans les manifestations dans la rue, les rassemblements politiques, les projets de théâtre communautaires, les réseaux sociaux et les champs de bataille révolutionnaires, cet article examine ce que cela révèle au sujet de la politique contemporaine.

Mots-clés: manifestation, performance, socialisme, communisme, mouvements politiques de gauche

Introduction

In 2015, Member of Parliament (MP) for Islington North and member of the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs, Jeremy Corbyn, was elected leader of the Labour Party of Great Britain. His election was won on the back of significant campaigning by grassroots party activists (Hillman and Weston 2019). As Leader of the Opposition between 2015 and 2019, Corbyn campaigned on issues with wide popular support that had been outside of the political mainstream for many years, including free access to education and healthcare, regional investment, and re-nationalisation of key industries and transport systems.

Corbyn's policies marked a radical return to the left and to the representation of working-class interests after the party's shift to the political centre, which happened most concertedly between 1994 and 2007 under the leadership of Tony Blair, when the party was rebranded as 'New

Labour'. Blair had rewritten elements of the party's constitution, replacing values rooted in its formation from socialist parties and trades unions and replacing aims such as 'common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange' with the vaguer language of social justice (Bevir 2005). Bloc voting of the labour unions was also revoked at this time, and neoliberal economics were incorporated into parts of the party's policy (Thorpe 2008: 8).

Although Labour gained power during this push for a more modernised, 'moderate' party, the socialist base were alienated. However, Corbyn's leadership brought many back into the fold, as well as a new generation of activists. Despite overwhelmingly negative media coverage of and numerous challenges to his leadership from within the party, membership grew exponentially from one hundred and ninety thousand in May 2015 to more than five hundred and fifty thousand by the end of 2016, making Labour the largest political party in Western Europe (MacAskill 2016). Memberhsip continued to grow until Corbyn stepped down as leader. Corbyn's unexpected popularity and the activities that manifest to support his leadership became known, and simplified, as 'Corbynism'. This essay is interested in ambitious initiatives occurring within and in connection with this movement that took advantage of the Corbyn's leadership, not only to create cultural experiences to reach potential voters, but to build a political consciousness that could endure beyond it.

Labour's increased membership, but also widespread grassroots campaigning, was harnessed after Corbyn's election in a formalised organisation called Momentum, which operated as both a central organisation closely linked to Labour leadership, and as a few hundred satellite groups that acted largely autonomously in their local areas (Hillman and Weston 2019). Momentum has always been concerned with political culture, and in 2016 it launched *The World Transformed*: a cultural organisation and annual festival that has run alongside the Labour Party Conference ever since, drawing participants from across the country to weeklong programmes of discussions, workshops, performances, screenings, parties, and other social events.

I joined the Labour Party and Momentum in 2015. Over the next four years, a common feature I encountered at many of the political and cultural events I attended, from protests and rallies to community theatre productions and gigs, were large, plain, red flags. In this essay, I apply Baz Kershaw's 1997 framework for analysing protest as performance to some of these

experiences, to help me question the meaning of the flags in situ.[1] I consider how the flags function within broader histories of the labour movement in the UK, and also how they are indicative of the international reach of the movement and suggest an ideological continuity through diverse contexts.

This analysis of political events as performance and my practice as an activist in the Labour Party and labour movement at this time enables me to uncover political articulations that have been missed by influential theorists writing on contemporary popular protest, who identify democracy as the only remaining ideology, signifier, or methodology through which progressive change is organised. Representative historically of revolution, socialism, and communism, as well as 'Old Labour',[2] I argue that the red flags operated in the events I analyse as a nostalgic evocation of worker's power, whose roots go back to the French Revolution of 1789 to 1799.[3] However, by reading the red flags in relation to other elements that contributed to the overall 'dramaturgy' of specific events, the events in relation to one another, and historical and theoretical reference points cited by the activists involved, I argue that the flags were also used to reclaim and popularise histories and ideologies including Soviet era Marxist socialism and Marxism-Leninism specifically.

The essay is structured into three main sections. The first explains why I think it is important to analyse protest as performance in the first place and considers how the analysis of protest has been shaped by postmodern philosophy and modes of political organisation and at the turn of the century. It also references Chantel Mouffe's influential thesis on left populism to ask what this brings to the analysis of protest as performance, as well as what it overlooks. The second section describes my experience of participating in the 'red bloc' at anti-austerity protests in 2015 and 2017, and how red flags were choreographed within those protests to create meaning for participants and audiences at a symbolic and affective level. It also considers the significance of red flags that appeared in Rojava and Syria, between these marches. The third section focuses on Manchester Momentum's cultural programme between 2015 and 2019

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[1] See also Chapter 3 of Kershaw's 1999 book *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, where he develops this framework, as well as arguments that are broadly relevant to this article.

[2] 'Old Labour' is a term used to describe the traditional identity of the Labour Party and its policies, including nationalisation, redistribution of income and wealth, and to distinguish this phase of the party from the approaches of 'New Labour' of the 1990s to the 2000s.

[3] This was before the flags accumulated iconic status transnationally as a symbol of socialism and communism in subsequent left-wing revolutions, including the Paris Commune in 1871.

where red flags framed some of their activities, and describes how red flags were used as props in Salford Community Theatre's 2016 performance of *Love on the Dole*.

Ultimately, the essay suggests that the red flags described are emblematic of an underappreciated paradigm shift, concomitant with the shift that was happening in the Labour Party at this time. I argue that they were part of an effort to manifest, as well as to represent, socialist and communist sensibilities in the twenty-first century, and to signal the possibility of common and positive identification with a cause as a necessary response to neoliberalism. In such a way, the essay contributes new insights into approaches to agency, organisation, and endurance of the Left.

Analysing Protest as Performance and Accompanying Ideological Frameworks

In his article 'Fighting in the Streets: Dramaturgies of Popular Protest, 1968–1989', Kershaw develops a methodology that applies a semiotic lens to acts of protest and civil unrest, to make protest legible 'as' performance. By analysing three post-Second World War protests and their reliance on performative dimensions, including symbolism, dramatic dialogue, soundtracks, and satire, he contends that most forms of protest are shaped by 'performative considerations' and that while they often involve spontaneity, they tend to follow 'scripts or scenarios', which are performed for an assumed audience (1997: 260, 274). He also argues that analysing protest through a performance lens 'may reveal dimensions to the action which are relatively opaque to other approaches' (ibid.).[4]

Through this 'protest as performance' framework, Kershaw troubles a tendency in mainstream reportage to dismiss civil unrest as simply disorganised, unstructured, or violent (1997: 258). He builds a case for performance analysis to interpret multi-dimensional, unpredictable, and ephemeral acts of protest, whose 'theatrical impulses' usually constitute an 'interweave of actions' incorporating 'changes of direction, tempo, and focus' (ibid.). Furthermore, he contends that 'dramaturgies of protest' once decoded can offer clues to understanding major socio-political change through their negotiation of tradition and innovation in the form of resistance, enabling a 'suggestive description of the links between the politics of state […] and the ideologies circulating in civil society at particular moments in cultural history' (274). For

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[4] As well as Kershaw's *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (1999), Jan Cohen-Cruz's book of the previous year *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology* offers numerous historical examples of twentieth-century protest and/as political performance.

Kershaw, performance analysis may therefore 'discover aspects to protest which resonate with their historical moment in especially telling ways' (260). Moreover, he considers activists' utilisation of performance aesthetics to be powerful, and their analysis pertinent, in highly mediatised, late-capitalist multi-party democracies, where 'performance is central to all socio-political processes' and operates as 'a powerful weapon of political conflict' (257).

I adopt Kershaw's framework to analyse the events and images discussed in this essay and their significance. This facilitates close examination of the symbology of the red flags and how they were choreographed into complex performative displays. Like Kershaw, I interpret the dramaturgies of protest I focus on as 'a kind of historical relief map of changing civil desire' at a time of radical social and political change (256–7). I am particularly interested in how the events I examine 'embody their historical context through their location in identifiable traditions' to 'disrupt socio-political expectations and produce new kinds of public discourse' concerning collective power, socialism, and communism, specifically (257). However, while Kershaw focuses on 'street protests' and his three examples of protest involve numerous people in public spaces, in addition to street protests I analyse how the flags function in a scene of protest *within* a community theatre production; a demonstration of international solidarity; and as part of the aesthetics and branding of an influential online forum. The red flags, I argue, connect these apparently disparate sites, through what they articulate politically at a certain point in time.

My thesis departs from Kershaw's in a few other key ways. Firstly, his incentive to explore dramaturgies of protest arguably responds to what Benjamin Arditi identifies as 'a practical acceptance of multiplicity and pluralism' across sectors of the Left since the early 1980s, which contributed to 'a dislodge of progressive thought from strictly Marxist and party-based paradigms of politics' (2003: 310). I also understand Kershaw's analysis to reflect a connected tendency in theatre and performance studies to move away from the analysis of the kind of politically committed dramatic theatre that had supported organised left movements of the twentieth century, and to refigure the fundamental relationship between performance and the political.[5] However, this essay focuses on political demonstrations and politically committed theatre emerging from the contemporary organised left that recalls signifiers and relational dynamics associated with communist and socialist political systems of the last century.

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[5] See, for example, Kershaw 1999; Howe-Kritzer 2008; Kelleher 2009; and Sekallaridou 1999.

Secondly, Kershaw observes that the dramaturgy of late twentieth-century protest followed a paradigm shift towards postmodernity and became 'variously detached from any specific political ideology', demonstrating 'as much an expression of difference as of unity' (265). This thesis, which he develops in his 1999 monograph *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, understands the cultural shifts affecting dramaturgies of protest as the same as those that had recently 'rendered traditional forms of "political theatre" redundant', as people '[shook themselves] increasingly free of the metanarratives that had given those forms their meaning and utility' (1997: 274). Kershaw, reflected positively on this at that time, insofar as he interpreted a civil desire that was becoming 'more sophisticated, complex, and multi-faceted' (274). Subsequent analyses have similarly examined performative dimensions of protest in terms of plurality. Judith Butler has considered the political assembly in terms of 'a plurality of bodies who enact their convergent purpose in ways that do not require strict conformity to a single kind of acting, or to a single kind of claim, and who do not together constitute a single kind of subject' (2015: 164). Larry Bogad understands plural and 'transideological' tendencies of protest in the 2000s as effective but also ethical; where hybridity constitutes the 'sweet spot of artistic activism', but where 'Movements that strive for purity — in ideology, form, or action, spawn monsters' (2016: 61, 43). While I would not describe the protests and performances I analyse here as 'striving for purity', I do consider the significance of their distinctly unified aesthetic. Moreover, I do not find this indicative of a monstrous regime and observe its origins in a political movement founded on inclusive organisational processes and principles.

As Arditi implies, a method of political organising and world view embracing plurality also came to define the the alter-globalisation movement, also known as the global-justice movement; a social movement that emerged in the 1990s. The alter-globalisation movement saw ongoing experiments in participatory democracy since the 1960s merge with the *encuentros* of indigenous resistance movements in Latin America, to coordinate an international frontline against rapacious impacts of capitalism on the world's people, ecology, and environment at the turn of the century (Maeckelbergh 2012: para. 8). Constituted of multiple sites of solidarity and confrontation, the movement saw protests proliferate in every region of the world (Pleyers 2013). Sensitive to the distinctiveness of specific struggles as well as their systemic oppression, this 'movement of movements' held the local and global in a delicate balance (Mertes 2004). It embraced commonality in difference, and configured itself primarily

along pluralist, horizontalist and prefigurative lines (Maeckelbergh 2009). Explicitly postmodern and anarchistic in tone, alter-globalisation activists fought for 'unity in diversity' in 'a world where many worlds fit' (Notes from Nowhere 2003: 119, 29). In this mode of political organisation, the vanguard became the multitude, and the march to power the practice of assembly, decentralisation, and democratic decision making in temporary, autonomous zones (Hardt Negri 2000; Bey 2002).

In line with Kershaw's observations and Bogad's concerns, movement activists have often articulated a conscious departure from organised displays of unification, including those of communist regimes, specifically. For example, Notes From Nowhere describe alter-globalisation movements as operating through a 'collision of subjectivities' that replaced 'one dogma' or 'one party line'. 'There is no single banner we march behind', they explain, and 'no little red book' (Notes from Nowhere 2003: 14). Marianne Maeckelbergh distinguished the movement's 'progressive' approaches from 'orthodox' practices of the twentieth century, noting that while movement actors may 'speak of "revolution" in a general sense, they do not speak of a revolutionary moment' (Maeckelbergh 2009: 17–18). For Maeckelbergh, processual and creative approaches of global justice movements were no longer 'cloaked in the language of consequentialist revolutionary strategy' (Maeckelbergh 2011: para. 45).[6]

Yet, at the same time, long running concerns over the loss of a robust analytical and political metalanguage of the Left,[7] were joined by analyses of the risks of activists' over-reliance on self-organised networks characterised by free choice, growth, and preferential attachment, as well as a deficit in those movements of collective identity (Dean 2016; Faser and Honneth 2003). Beyond the barriers to political organisation presented by identity fragmentation and horizontalism, scholars began to examine how a lack of coherent identity or a fetishisation of leaderless networks risk creating anti-ideological vacuums, susceptible to moral and conceptual content of any political persuasion, including fascism (Butler 2015: 182; Nagle 2017: 24).

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[6] Similar perspectives characterised journalistic interpretations of the wave of uprisings between 2011 and 2013. See, for example, Paul Mason on the replacement of traditional working-class structures of political solidarity and organisation by contemporary models that offered greater practical and ideological flexibility (2013a), including online platforms that 'killed [hierarchical structures] spontaneously' (2011: para. 11), as millennial activists, having read 'Foucault rather than Marx', avoided at all costs the 'risk [of] creating another 20th century' (2013b).
[7] See, for example, Jameson 1991; Murphy 2012; Jackson 2010 .

Focusing on Western Europe in 2018, Chantel Mouffe went some way to proposing a solution to such concerns. She argued for a counter-populism to undermine the recent gains of the far-right and exploit the political awakening occurring after the financial crisis of 2008, while the neoliberal hegemony was in crisis. This would be done by reinstating and popularising the term 'left' to reaffirm partisan positions and by deploying art and culture in the service of the new frontier between 'the left', or, to use Mouffe's preferred term 'the people' and 'the oligarchy' (76, 84–5). The importance this theory placed on symbols of common struggle also led to the sanctioning of leaders, who would not, Mouffe assured, necessitate a return to authoritarianism (70).

However, Mouffe uses familiar terms to maintain a strategic plural framework to encompass diverse aspirations and to distinguish the 'populist political frontier' from the traditional frontier of the left and right, or, 'the people' from 'a homogenous subject in which all the differences are somehow reduced to unity' (83, 62). She discusses socialism and communism in the past tense, considering them neither productive nor viable in the construction of a contemporary political imaginary or as objectives around which to organise, claiming 'People do not fight against 'capitalism' as an abstract entity because they believe in a 'law of history' leading to socialism' (50). Rather, she suggests, 'It is always on the basis of concrete situations that they are moved to act' (ibid.).

She does identify democracy as a crucial signifier in the political imaginary, however, and a point from which people can be mobilised (41). She also argues that 'It is through the language of democracy that many citizens can articulate their protests', recalling how, in the 2011 movements of the squares in Greece, the people 'did not call for "socialism", but for a "real democracy"' (41). She claims that since the collapse of the Soviet model many sectors of the left are 'unable to visualise an alternative to the liberal view of politics other than the revolutionary one that they have discarded' (37) and criticises the 'extreme left' for an over-attachment to theory and an inability to 'engage with how people are in reality', claiming '[t]heir anticapitalist rhetoric does not find any echo in the groups whose interests they pretend to represent' (50).

It is possible to trace an ideological, practical, even dramaturgical inheritance from the alter-globalisation movement to protests since 2008. In 2011, the flavour of the 1990s Reclaim the

Streets movement, for example, was detectable around the sound-systems, carnival astmosphere, and occupations of the protests against education cuts in Britain, where global justice veterans passed on legal advice cards and other tactics to first-time protesters (Lunghi and Wheeler 2011). When protesters occupied Times Square in New York, later that year, as well as utilising street art, canivalesque costume, and music to animate the cause, protesters utilised hand signals and vocal techniques developed by alter-globalisation activists to practice directly democratic decision making within their assemblies. Slogans of movements at this time were often personally inflected ('I wish my boyfriend was as dirty as your policies')[8] or they were broad enough to stand not only for people participating in similar protests around the world, but on behalf of almost entire populations (e.g., 'we the people' and 'we are the 99%').[9] In this way, dramaturgies of these protests align with Mouffe's strategic plural framework, insofar as individual expression and capacious symbols encompassed diverse aspirations of people who were able to unite over systemic injustice. This galvanised strength, at least symbolically, in numbers.

However, frustration with a disconnect between spectacular mass protests of this era and organised political resistance was one catalyst for the re-emergence of other ideologies, approaches, and symbols that Mouffe and others have not considered. In the UK, elements of student and anti-capitalist movements joined with sites of political organising of the traditional left, including trade unions and left political parties. Support for socialist policies in the Labour Party was signalled by the reaffiliation of various major trade unions, while the Communist Party of Britain refused to field candidates between 2017 and 2019 (before commencing with one of their biggest electoral campaigns since the early 1980s, when Corbyn stepped down as leader).

Meanwhile, Corbyn's unlikely mandate was supported by a movement steered by significant, often youthful factions who, while not necessarily affiliated to far-left parties, far from being indifferent to the promise of socialism or discarding a revolutionary point of view, actively embraced these ideas as central to their organisational principles. To rebuild the social bases necessary to support a socialist political programme, these activists interrogated creatively, at

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[8] Coral Stoakes's placard used in the student protests of 2011.

[9] 'We are the 99%' was a slogan that became synonymous with the Occupy movement, which referred to the vastly increased concentration of wealth among the top 1% of income earners. For an analysis of 'we are the people' and the assembly as performative embodiment, see Butler 2015.

the level of grassroots activism, theories and practices that examined what 'effective solidarity looks and feels like' and how to achieve it[10] and which called for reconfiguring the affective dimensions of political organising and protest to centre around collectivity and commonality (Dean 2016; Fisher 2014).

Although Mouffe criticises the Left for an over-attachment to theory and a detachment from what is really going on, her analysis overlooks these new, positive articulations of socialism and communism, which were harnessed by activists to answer their crises of precarity, class oppression, material inequality, and the organisational shortcomings of alternative political systems.

The Red Flag: 'Making Communism Look Cool Again'

In 2015, and then again in 2017, I attended demonstrations organised to protest policies of the Conservative Party Government, whose annual conference was held in Manchester those years. Tens of thousands gathered in the city on each occasion, to march in diverse contingents including trades and student unions, anti-austerity, and environmental organisations, as well as non-affiliated groups (Pidd 2015). In 2015, I was invited to join a particular group called the 'red bloc'. The organisers of this bloc had staged a similar protest at an anti-austerity rally in London earlier that year that I had not attended, but were more ambitious this time, bringing activists together from across the country to create and carry large, red flags. The red bloc was organised with specific reference to the political possibility represented by Corbyn's recent election as Labour Party leader and turned out to be an important meeting place for activists who would go on to organise in the Party over the duration of his leadership, as well as operating as a political symbol and activity in its own right.

As well as an effort to increase numbers, organisers were concerned with achieving a particular vision, and the bloc was choreographed to fulfil clear symbolic intentions. Most of us on the bloc, which in 2015 must have been about 100-people strong, had been contacted a few weeks prior via WhatsApp group message and asked to turn up not only to support the demonstration as a whole, but to 'make a big show of marching in a disciplined bloc'. The message explained the bloc would be 'unaffiliated and unbranded', but that the aim was to 'make the imagery of socialism/Communism look cool again' (personal communication with bloc organiser, August

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[10] See, for example, Fisher 2014; Gilbert 2018; Milburn 2017.

2015). Details were given of the number and dimensions of the flags we would carry, the formation we would take, and links to photos and videos of the first incarnation of the bloc earlier that year as a template to follow. The demographic of our intended cast, as well as other elements that would set the tone were also stipulated in the message: 'we'll mobilise a mostly younger crowd' to march to 'a sound system playing post punk etc.'. In due course, details were circulated as to the meeting time and place.

When we finally assembled, towards the front of the bloc people hoisted 30ft x 8ft flagpoles flying large red flags, with numerous smaller red flags brought up the rear (Fig. 1).

[Place   figure   1   around   here]

In the interest of symmetry and unification, the 8ft flags were not only distributed in terms of the bloc's breadth and depth; people's height and any involvement in the original red bloc earlier that year were also taken into account, with experienced marchers prioritised in terms of flag distribution and responsibility. Once on the move, marshals wearing high-vis jackets gave firm direction to achieve an orderly display, straightening the flanks with spare flagpoles, held horizontally. This task was taken seriously, creating a focused, sombre atmosphere.
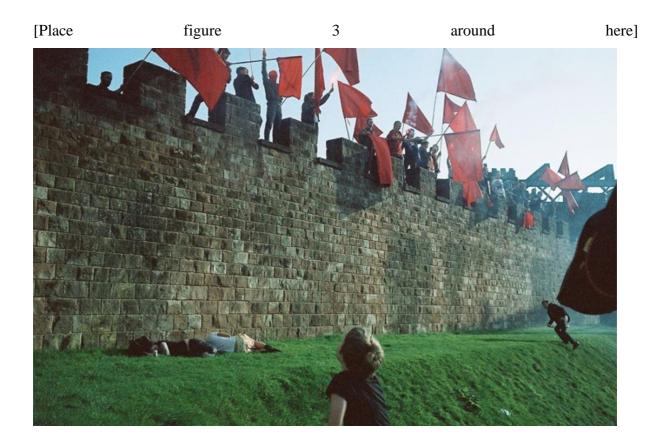
Looking out from the bloc towards people on the side lines, I wondered what they made of us. I worried a bit over the confusion I thought I perceived among the anarchists or the nervous

glances I thought I saw from broad-church groups like Left Unity and The People's Assembly. Within the bloc, those in the know appeared to get on happily with the task in hand, while I speculated on the experience of demonstrators who, apparently attracted by the red flags, joined the ranks last-minute. I was close to the front of the bloc for a while, near a group who kept straying out of line to find their position repeatedly corrected by high-vis jackets or flagpoles. I wondered what they were thinking before they ducked away from the tight-knit display and into the wider march. I thought about what was being achieved and forfeited in our unification.

I remembered my experience of similar self-consciousness and questioning on an anarchist black-bloc some years before. I was curious as to why the red bloc felt as transgressive, if not more so, despite the fact that red bloc members had not dressed to conceal their identities, intimidate, or fight the police. Perhaps this was due to the way the red flag was centred in our performance, whose controversial reference to communist regimes was heightened through the bloc's synchronised and regimented choreography.

Then, as we turned a corner towards the conference centre, red flares were lit, shifting the bloc's mood and formation dramatically (Fig. 2).

[Place figure 2 around here]

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The tight ranks split, as people and flags dispersed in the smoke. Neck-scarves were hoisted over noses and a few red balaclavas flashed among the flares. The bloc marched along Deansgate to the ruins of a Roman fort, where protesters mounted the old wall, flags and fists to the sky (Fig. 3).

[Place   figure   3   around   here]

Climatic in one sense, breaking the original, clean formation of the bloc in a gesture of immediate, revolutionary desire also felt like a retreat to more familiar territory, aesthetically but also in its performance of civil desire (Kershaw 1997: 256–7). The original formation of the red bloc, rather than organising its protest dramaturgy to signify — and potentially to realise, as black-blocs traditionally have done, viable physical opposition to the arm of the state — represented desire for an organised, indeed orderly, communitarian alternative to the political hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, as well as to an anarchistic or plural assembly.

The reappearance of the red bloc at the 2017 protest, which maintained and diverged from the dramaturgy of the 2015 bloc, offers clues to understanding changes within the Labour Party at that time, and more broadly in British society. The 2017 bloc was considerably bigger, emerging from a stronger and more networked socialist left. Less tightly controlled, it lost the

orderliness of 2015 in exchange for a constant flow of people moving in and out of its porous flanks during its long procession through the city. Organisers at the front of the bloc (also a larger group than before) elevated a banner, whose colour scheme, asymmetric typography, and reversed 'R's to become the 'Ya' or 'Я' of the Cryllic script, reflected the Marxist-Leninist influence within the movement (Fig. 4).

[Place   figure   4   around   here]

The mood was more relaxed. At the peak of 'Corbynism', perhaps this indicated an ability to celebrate, rather than a need to establish or defend, the bloc's identity. The post-punk soundtrack was this time interspersed with dance tracks whose adapted lyrics created accessible political reference points. GALA's 1990s single *Freed from Desire* became 'Corbyn's on fire – Teresa May is terrified', before the bloc chorused sweetly in a rendition of The Smiths' *There is a Light That Never Goes Out* and then raised the red flags even higher to the socialist and traditional Labour Party anthem *The Red Flag*.

Despite the soviet-communist aesthetic of the leading banner, I perceived our observers as warmer this time. I noticed smiles rather than frowns as we passed through the roadside crowds, speculating that this could be in response to our playful, sometimes local soundtrack, which was carried by more voices this time around. Or perhaps it reflected my own journey since 2015, which found me feeling at home somewhere within the party-political system for the first

time and aligned politically with a broader community of people than I'd realised existed. Either way, if we consider the 2017 red bloc and its reception as an example of Kershaw's 'historical relief map of civil desire', it makes sense that it contributed to my impression that a socialist movement had developed beyond any expectations in 2015, and that this development had something to do with the way activists were reclaiming 'identifiable traditions [to] produce new kinds of public discourse' (256–7).

This interpretation is also supported by other appearances of the red flag between 2015 and 2017 (Fig. 5).

[Place figure 5 around here]

Reminiscent of the 2015 photograph of protesters mounting the roman wall at Deansgate, but taken in a very different context, this photograph depicts the 'Bob Crow Brigade': the name a group of British volunteers gave themselves when they joined the Women's and People's Defense Units in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in Rojava, Northern Syria.

The 'Rojava Revolution' has been supported by socialists and left organisations from around the world, and this image makes the unlikely link between the battleground of Rojava and the

2016 South Western train strike that was underway at that time in the UK. The late Bob Crow, who served as General Secretary of the Rail, Maritime, and Transport Union between 2002 and 2014, was known for his strong leadership and Communist Party membership and remains an influential figure on the left of the UK labour movement. This image, which was circulated on social media before it was picked up by the mainstream press, depicts grafitti, a large red flag, and the Kurdish flag,[11] to imply that while the struggles of the soldiers and train guards are ostensibly remote, they are ideologically connected.

The site on which the image first appeared was Red London's Facebook page. Red London established itself as a Facebook Group in 2015. Accumulating one hundred thousand followers at its peak a few years later, posts on the group page averaged a few hundred responses each. Posts were typically strongly pro-Corbyn, responded to current affairs, and were distinctive for their strong Marxist-Leninist stance and use of Soviet imagery. The group's politics were held as defiantly as their mockery of other factions was merciless. Their commentary, whether appearing as a meme, a doctored film/photograph/cartoon, archival material, or a combination of these things, could be sharp to the point of predicting political events, including the improbable outcome of various leadership and snap elections within the Labour Party.

The red bloc and their flags at Deansgate had featured as Red London's cover photo shortly after the 2015 Manchester demonstration, and for a few years afterwards, while The Red Flag anthem, itself a reworking of Jim Connoll's lyrics from 1889, was also reappropriated on the group's 'About' page, to emphasise the connection between the past and the future: '*Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer we fight on, proud of our past and sure of our socialist future*'[12]; lyrics that also reclaim the theme of failures of the old Left to project a stronger, more unified future trajectory (Fig. 6).

[Place figure 6 around here]

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[11] The red of the Kurdish flag also symbolises the blood of martyrs who have died for freedom; a meaning associatively shared with the plan red flag, which is also referenced in The Red Flag anthem mentioned in the next paragraph. (The colour red also bears the same significance in many other nation flags.)

[12] Original song lyrics: https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/music/lyrics/en/red-flag.htm [accessed 25 May 2017].

The next section of the essay charts other appearances of the red flag over the next few years, in connection with the same broad movement. I consider theoretical and historical references of the activists who used the flags, to reveal the explicit and self-conscious links they have made between socialist and communist movements of the twentieth century and their own initiatives.

Making Socialism Appear: Manchester Momentum, the Disco Turn, and Salford Community Theatre

Large red flags provided a striking backdrop to Corbyn's address to the crowd at a Manchester rally in the run up to the snap election in June 2017 (Fig. 7).

[Place figure 7 around here]

The appearance of the red flag at rallies, as well as in song, became associated with Corbyn's leadership and a realignment with the founding purpose of the Labour Party to represent working-class interests.[13] Used as a smear by the right-wing press as much as to celebrate his leadership by elements of the left, it was chosen by some activists on the left of the Party over the red rose, which had replaced the red flag as official Party emblem in 1986.

The flags also found their way onto various stages in community halls, squatted buildings, and arts centres, framing talks by academics, artists, political commentators, and politicians at events organised by Manchester Momentum between 2015 and 2019 (Fig. 8).
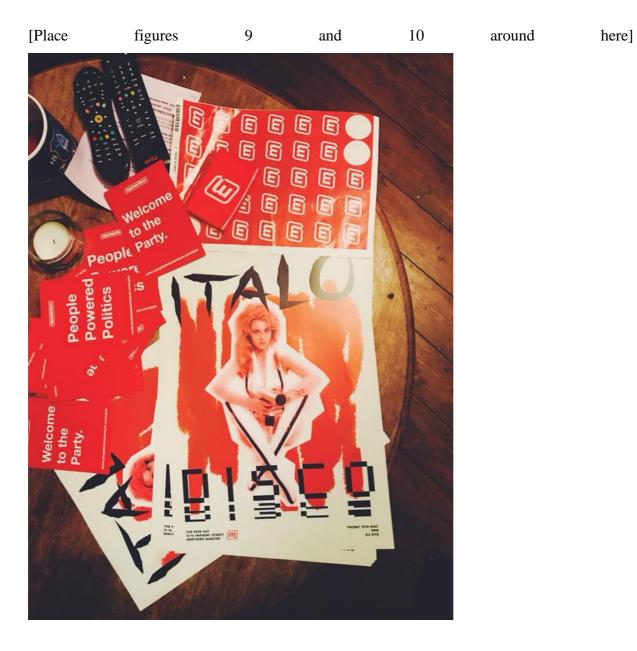
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[13] Corbyn's victory party at Westminster, at the closing of the annual party conference, also on the red bloc protests.

For some activists, political culture offered an answer to a loss of socialist culture on the left and the internalisation of individualistic and competitive traits characteristic of neoliberal ideology. Momentum activist and Women's Officer for Northwest Young Labour Beth Redmond cited the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher's damning indictment of a tendency of the UK Left to replace collective and structural concerns with identities that are 'shaped and distorted by capital' (Fisher 2013: para. 32 cited in Redmond 2019a), where 'class has disappeared [and] solidarity is impossible' (Fisher 2013: para 15). For Fisher, in late capitalism, the Left had moved dangerously close to 'naturalised neoliberalism', where 'the possibility of projecting new futures has diminished' (2014: paras. 7, 4). However, he saw glimmers of hope in learning, or re-learning 'how to build comradeship and solidarity' (para. 1), through feelings of belonging to a political movement. Capitalism, he pointed out, 'hasn't offered anything that competes with that' (para. 22).

Between 2015 and 2019, the Labour Party provided a locus for experimenting with some of these ideas (Milburn 2017). Experiments in 'Acid Corbynism', a term developed from Fisher's concept of 'Acid Communism', drew inspiration from cultural political movements of the

1960s to promote sites of collectivity, creativity, and pleasure, such as parties, festivals, and dance floors; social infrastructure and 'powerful countercultures'; arenas that might offer a glimpse of 'the embryo of postcapitalist collectivity' in 'moments of soundtracked togetherness' (Phull and Stronge 2017). For political theorist Jeremy Gilbert, the alienating individualism of capitalist culture might be overcome on the dancefloor, by 'feelings of collective joy' (2017: para 19) that would be 'built by people pushing together not pulling apart' (DJ Luke Blackwax quoted in Phull and Stronge 2017: para 20). These ideas inspired Manchester Momentum to create eclectic social programmes to run alongside their political-education events, designed to attract diverse constituents and bring new members into the Party, as well as to strengthen bonds between long-term members (Hillman and Weston 2019; Redmond, Rose, Weston and Yousif 2018). The suite of activities on offer, to foster a good time and a sense of togetherness, included Italo Disco Nights, karaoke, barbecues, unsociable hours film clubs, socialist football, and rambling in the Peak District, to commemorate the mass trespass of Kinder Scout organised by the Young Communist League in 1932 (Figs. 9 and 10).

The movement's interest in deeper historical initiatives can also be found in formal statements and proposals intended to impact Labour Party policy. In 2018, member of the Young Labour National Committee Max Shanly put forward a proposal for inclusion in Labour's Democracy Review, in which he acknowledged the loss of 'a once vibrant socialist culture that existed in [British] working-class communities' (Shanly 2017: 6). In the proposal, Shanly argued that a retreat from the kind of 'grounded sentiments of collective resistance' built up over generations by the labour movement has meant a critical detachment of party voters and potential activists (ibid.). Marcus Barnett, International Officer for Young Labour, inspired by socialist artists based in Salford in the mid 1900s, made a case for rebuilding 'ecosystems of socialist culture', which would 'weave together youth culture with socialist organisation' (Barnett 2018: paras. 19, 30). He also observed 'red bases' that were appearing at the time, including socialist food and clothing banks, sports and social clubs, and community theatre companies; initiatives that

with structural support he believed would have the potential to place 'popular left wing politics […] convincingly in a local context', counteracting 'demoralization and far-right activism' and instrumentalising no less than 'the revival of British socialist politics' (paras. 29, 32, 35).

Salford Community Theatre can be located in this context. Founded in 2016, the company draw on working-class histories of Salford to make politically relevant plays with a local cast, most of whom have not acted before. In 2019, company members wrote about their work as standing 'firmly within [the] tradition' of socialist theatre of the twentieth centuray, as well as part of a broad cultural and political turn whereby ideas of the radical left had re-entered mainstream political discourse, and, more specifically, the initiative to rebuild the left under Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party (Rose and Weston 2017: para. 2). Supported by the local labour movement, they consider political community theatre like theirs has 'a powerful role to play' in the broader struggle of the left, where consciousness raising and 'bottom up, popular political education will be key' (para: 17).

Their first production was an adaptation of *Love on the Dole*, a novel by Walter Greenwood about unemployment and impoverishment in Salford and the surrounding area in the 1930s. To dramatise parallels between past and present, the company devised a promenade performance, during which, large red flags held by community actors, stewards, and audience members were marched from Islington Mill to Bexley Square (Fig. 12).

In this sequence, Salford Community Theatre sought to loosely recreate the 1931 demonstration against the Means Test that had been led by Salford's National Unemployment Workers Movement (NUWM) and which had culminated in 'The Battle of Bexley Square', involving police brutality and mass arrests (Fig. 13).

Playwright and co-director for the company Sarah Weston has written about how this part of the performance became a 'real demonstration', as members of the public understood the historical re-enactment as a contemporary demonstration, in some cases responding accordingly by joining the march or unfurling a red flag from an upstairs window as the procession passed by (Weston 2019: 175).

Whereas the red bloc drew on a network of activists to convey through performance a political idea, as part of a larger political demonstration, Salford Community Theatre fostered political activism through the long-term and embedded work of creating a community play and, eventually, brought a political demonstration into being, as part of a theatrical event. In such a way, the activists in each case chose a different route to create political community, with the theatre company taking on the challenging task of building political participation from scratch rather than relying on an existent activist community. In both cases, representation, participation, and performance were key, while the red flags link them as part of the broader

project I have been discussing, to 'make socialism appear' (Redmond, Rose, Weston and Yousif 2018).

Salford Community Theatre have described how, through theatre, socially engaged subject matter 'can be felt as well as discussed' and a world can be brought to life, 'building space to explore a range of utopian possibilities' (Rose and Weston 2019: para 18). Cast members have described the rehearsal process as one of 'rejecting individualism […] re-learning collectivity [and having] the basic foundations of socialist society instilled in us' (Redmond 2019a), while Weston and producer Isaac Rose also describe the theatrical process in terms used in descriptions of Acid Communism, quoted above. They claim theatre can offer the kinds of 'collective, joyful experiences' necessary to 'counter the apathy and individualisation that the current order relies upon', as well as 'real, living examples of how we can live and work together [towards] a common goal' (Rose and Weston 2019: paras. 20, 17, 19)

As though in direct response to Maekelbergh's pursuit of prefiguration and Mouffe's dead-end socialist road, Rose and Weston also go on to argue that the Left should adopt community theatre and other cultural projects into the heart of the movement because they constitute 'a profound example of the world we wish to build' and 'strengthen our resolve in the political struggle that will be necessary to build it'; concluding that community plays 'teach us that socialism is in the end, worth it' (para: 20).

Concluding Thoughts

Many on the left lost faith in the progressive potential, even the possibility, of struggle underpinned by collective aims, objectives, and identities. Radical political writing since the 1980s has often held fast to notions of freedom in autonomy and the absence of a common language, programme, or class-based analysis (Dean 2016: 24–5). Millennial movements have often been conceived in direct contrast with Marxist theories of social change despite the enduring influence of those theories, while unification of intent or form has been equated with oppression by political theorists and performance scholars alike (Hardt and Negri 2004: 86; Bogad 2016). However, the twenty-first century has also seen renewed critical interest in creating collectivity and ways of being together, and even an appreciation of the potential of the political party as a site for both the experimentation and coherence needed to implement change (Dean 2016: 24–5). Some of these ideas have been drawn on recently in mass left movements,

whose activists have also cited cultural programmes of communist and labour movements of the twentieth century as inspiration.

This essay has considered alternative performances and processes that have been created to intervene in the isolated and fragmented terrain of neoliberal capitalism, to provide the experience of, as well as to represent, collectivity. It has suggested that while political theory plays catch up, by analysing the aesthetic and dramaturgical dimensions of popular political interventions, 'a suggestive description of the links between the politics of state […] and the ideologies circulating in civil society' can be located (Kershaw 1997: 274). In terms of what these dramaturgies of protest tell us about changing civil desire between 2015 and 2019, the red flags in each of the images above connect diverse situations: from the tightly controlled red bloc to battlements in Rojava; the clean red line at Corbyn's rally to the procession in *Love on the Dole*. By recalling histories of workers' struggle and solidarity through the performative present, they construct a symology of the Left to signify the enduring presence of international socialism. Gilbert described 'the Corbyn moment' as an example of 'a crack in Capitalist Realism […] through which a flood of pent up postcapitalist desires have burst' (Milburn 2017: para 9).

Interestingly, in relation to histories of the global movements traced in the first half of this essay, Shanly described the mass membership of Young Labour under Corbyn as an opportunity for popular mobilisation, which might '(bridge) the gap between horizontalist networks and the labour movement's well-established and traditional hierarchies and internal culture' (Shanly 2017: 7). Perhaps there are also clues in the perspectives of the actors with the most at stake. Rizgar Dêrik, a Scottish man interviewed about his reasons for volunteering in Rojava, talked about political alienation at home, where he felt anarchist politics was disconnected to the realities of working-class life (O'Riordan 2017). Tommy O'Riordan suggests that economic crisis, austerity politics, precarity, and deepening economic and social division have played an important role in a mass politicisation across Europe, and that this is evidenced across wide ranging phenomena, from volunteers in Rojava to the unprecedented support for the Labour Party under Corbyn (ibid.). Throuhgout this essay, I have interpreted the red flags from my own perspective as a movement activist, which offers insight but also creates a reading inevitably coloured by my own political persuasion. Important interpretations of the red flags are yet to be found in the perspectives of other spectators of the protests and images discussed.

In terms of how the reclamation of politics that celebrates collective identity can be read against Kershaw's equation of sophistication and progress with multiplicity and difference (1997: 265, 274) or against Bogad's 'monsters' (2016, 43), I want to suggest that while we have witnessed a popular, youthful reclamation of political identities associated with 'grand narratives' of the early twentieth century — and while the formation of their demonstrations may at times be tightly controlled! — that this ideological shift and attendant choreographies of protest do not necessarily signify an oppressive politics. Founded on socialist principles, each of the groups I have referenced is staunchly anti-fascist, anti-racist, and they are feminist. While frustration with the procedural stumbling blocks of anarchism has inspired new approaches, in my experience the movement and groups I described are propelled by a fundamentally democratic ethos, while their influential organisers include activists previously involved in the alter-globalisation movement whose sensitivity to difference and the beauty of plurality remains intact. More specifically, Momentum aims to organise at the grassroots through initiatives that are community-based, as well as to democratise the Labour Party. The founders of Salford Community Theatre handed the company to the cast of *Love on the Dole* at the end of 2016, playing a supportive rather than directorial role in projects the community wanted to pursue (although came back on board by popular demand in 2019 after a period of inactivity in the company, to direct a new play). In Rojava, soldiers fight to defend an autonomous region founded on the principles of direct democracy, socialism, and feminism.

The red flags I have focused on are loaded with historical significance and steeped in political intent; despite their plainness, they are anything but a blank canvass. While they offer themselves as signifiers to be raised in multiple projects, they celebrate socialist achievements and seek to repair, partly through performative means, a fragmentation of the collective spirit. I hope this essay will create more awareness of this kind of collective praxis, ideology, and power that still often tends to be dismissed through association with the last century. I also hope that by highlighting the way politics becomes visible through the performance of protest and political culture, that theories of political organisation will grow to accommodate practices that have gone under the radar, and consider their implication for the future.

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Image Captions

Fig. 1. Red bloc protest, Manchester, 2015. Photo by Manchester Momentum.

Fig. 2. Red bloc flares, Manchester, 2015. Photo by Manchester Momentum.

Fig. 3. Protesters mount the wall of the old Roman fort at Deansgate, Manchester, 2015. Photo by Red London. www.Facebook.com/redlondon17.

Fig. 4. Red bloc banner, Manchester, 2017. Photo by Manchester Momentum.

Fig. 5. Bob Crow Brigade, Rojava, Syria, 2016. Photo by Alexander Norton.

Fig. 6. Red London Facebook page, 2017. Author's own.

Fig. 7. Labour rally 2017. Photo by Manchester Momentum.

Fig. 8. Momentum public talk, 2018. Photo by Manchester Momentum.

Fig. 9. Italo Disco poster, 2018. Photo by Manchester Momentum.

Fig. 10. Communist football match. 2019. Photographer unknown, author's personal collection.

Fig. 11. Kinder Scout hike, 2018. Photo by Manchester Momentum.

Fig. 12. Salford Community Theatre, street scene from *Love on the Dole*, 2016. Photo by Colin Armstrong Photography.

Fig. 13. Salford Community Theatre *Love on the Dole* scene at Bexley Square, 2016. Photo by Colin Armstrong Photography.