

25th August 2016, *The Times*: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dont-be-fooled-these-corbynistas-are-not-trotskyites-mzb278kzn>

## **Corbynites are more like schoolkids than Trots;**

There have only ever been a few thousand hard-left ideologues and they are nothing like today's magical thinkers

*David Aaronovitch*

By the time I was 22 my revolutionary antennae were such that I could tell what brand of Trotskyist someone was from their very first sentence. Difference was everything: in those days two Trotskyist groups would hold a unity conference and four would emerge from it.

That's one reason why there never were that many Trotskyists in Britain and why there aren't many now.

True, like my own communists they made a little go a long way. Militant members managed to get four MPs elected under the Labour label in the mid-1980s, a success that had they stood under their true colours (in reality they were part of the Revolutionary Socialist League) would have eluded them. The Workers Revolutionary Party rather improbably took over the actors' union, Equity, for a while. My own party at the time - the Communist Party of Great Britain - exercised an influence in trade unions out of all proportion to its size.

Yet even at its zenith at the end of the Second World War the Communist Party had only 55,000 members. The numerous Trotskyist parties, groups and sects at their height would hardly have mustered 10,000 between them. But they and we lived in the constant belief that one day, if we struggled hard enough, sold enough of our party literature, held enough rallies, organised enough strikes, the radicalised masses would follow us, either into a peaceful, democratic transition to socialism (the communists) or to the barricades and thence the gates of the Winter Palace (the Trots).

I mention all this to explain why it is that the answer to the Corbyn conundrum is not "Trots". They're there, of course, but the numbers of people joining Labour to support Jeremy Corbyn, just like the queues snaking round the block in some cities to fill his myriad rallies, suggest something that completely transcends British Leninism. As one writer put it, a Corbyn rally is not characterised by the industrially produced placards of the Socialist Workers Party, but by nice people who "write 'I Love Jez' on a used jiffy bag in biro and wave it about". These are no professional revolutionaries. They are amateurs and there are scores of thousands of them, turning up to cheer on a man who, two years ago, they wouldn't have gone to see if they'd been paid.

I've seen and heard dozens of interviews with Corbyn supporters over the past 18 months. I've scanned the rallies for signs. I've talked to a few and encountered many on social media. Some of the older ones, it is true, are retreads from various left groups, many are ex-Labour people who left in disgust when Labour won power or looked suspiciously like winning it. Quite a few are Greens. Most, though, are new. They're not unemployed, they don't come from impoverished areas, they're very likely to work in the public sector with its enhanced sense of transferred personal virtue. They are highly educated, very articulate and, for the most part, intensely well-meaning.

These people do things Trotskyists do not do. Trotskyists revere Trotsky but I don't think I ever once saw a poem written in his honour. Jeremy Corbyn, however, attracts the earnest schoolkid inside some. Take this: "Softly spoken/ Crooked tie./ Cheeky twinkle/ In his eye./ He's on a mission/ To make things fair/ To give us hope/ And ease despair." Not a parody. Real.

So, a man with a beard who was on a mission to give hope and ease despair? Remind you of anyone? He'd also be the kind of person who might be filmed on the floor of a crowded train, passing up his entitlement to dwell in first-class luxury, preferring instead to literally get down with the demos. That film of Jez among the seatless lepers was posted by Corbyn supporters and the symbolism of it was unmistakable. He might have been talking about rail renationalisation; they were seeing the YouTube Nazarene.

Their reaction yesterday when Virgin pulled the rug from under the Jez On The Train parable ("the CCTV clearly shows that the buffet attendant has plenty of loaves and fishes") was instructive. Some suggested that the film in which Corbyn walks past empty seats was faked. Others went instead for the "who needs evidence when it's JC versus the evil billionaire?" option. More concentrated on testimony of two passengers who said there were no seats (though the CCTV clearly showed there were).

The most realistic sort-of accepted the obvious truth but then suggested that the media was blowing it all up. And my favourite was a very successful Scottish screenplay writer who tweeted in all conspiraloon seriousness: "Don't think for a second the British Establishment isn't trying to hobble Corbyn on the day Labour Party polling papers went out."

As with the train story, so with all contrary facts. Corbyn is an electoral liability? No, Labour won a parish council election in Kent. Polls concerning Corbyn are way beyond disastrous? Well (a) that's the fault of the rebels (b) polls are rubbish anyway and (c) this rally in Bristol is the largest I've ever seen!

This goes slightly beyond everyday confirmation bias - our tendency to recognise what confirms our views and deny what doesn't. It is something else that you can find exemplified in a Corbyniad delivered to thousands in Liverpool recently. "We're strengthened by our resolve," he told them. "We're strengthened by our determination. Above all we're strengthened by our collective hope." It is a classic example of what Freud and others called "magical thinking".

There is a stage in childhood when we believe that things happen because of us - that we can somehow project our mental states into the surrounding world. The aircraft is held in the air by our attention; the world is transformed by our desire for change. One quite sympathetic writer described a Corbyn rally where "the tone of the speakers was bullish, and the audience was tensely excited, forever on the brink of applause, rushing gratefully into it at any opportunity".

The left's vice has always been selfrighteousness, just as the right's is smugness. But when you add the sense of entitlement that is characteristic of so many of the younger middle-class people in Britain, you can end up with an impatience with compromise coupled to a belief that anything that is strongly felt must somehow be enacted. Or, as Jez also told them: "There's a poet in all of us, there's a musician in all of us, there's an author in all of us."

It's disappointing, but growing up in life and in politics means discovering that there really isn't.