

Post Brexit, post Labour?

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In a few days Brexit will be history and the negotiations about a trade agreement between a newly sovereign United Kingdom and what is left of the EU will begin. Quite possible that the EU will again choose to play hardball and drag out the process, leading to another “no deal” chicken game. Certainly there are indications enough that the supranational centralists still have not understood the lessons of the Brexit struggle and its outcome.

Even more important may be the utter devastation suffered by the Labour Party in the December election. Labour is now about to join other social-democratic parties in Europe on their march into irrelevance. The Corbyn project, so crucial for the European Left, is dead, and very likely forever; rejuvenating socialism by binding together the traditional working class and the social movements of the victims of neoliberal “reform” has dismally failed. Did it have to? With hindsight it collapsed before it could really be tested, over a massive strategic blunder of the Corbyn leadership: underestimating the significance of national sovereignty for left politics under globalization and trying to be on both sides at the same time in the battle of the Brexit.

Not that Corbyn’s job had been an easy one, and perhaps there was no good solution at all for him. While Labour’s core constituents had voted “leave” in the referendum, the Blair-ites and the “cosmopolitan” section of the middle-class, fascinated with “Europe” as a symbol of social modernity and political purity, passionately supported “remain”. From the referendum to the electoral disaster of 2019, the Labour leadership tried to downplay the issue of sovereignty and fudged the question of what side it was on, hoping that this would keep the party united and make Labour electable for leavers and remainers alike. With a German phrase, this was neither fish nor meat. In the end the Remainers suspected that a Labour gov-

ernment would leave whereas the Leavers feared it would remain. So the party lost on both sides of the political divide that had so dramatically disunited the United Kingdom.

With hindsight one can see how catastrophically the Labour Party, even under Corbyn, had misread the mood of its core constituency, the left-behind old or not-so-old working class. Two points in particular stand out. One was that the party never understood the depth of the determination among its voters no longer to allow their national government to enlist “Brussels” or international summit meetings or a European court or “the world market” as an excuse for refusing to protect their interests. Voters, especially those dependent on an active interventionist state, wanted to be reassured that the state of the United Kingdom was their state, not the state of international markets or globalizing technocrats. To this extent Brexit was about nothing less than the restoration of political accountability and of trust in political leadership after the excuses of the Third Way. In downplaying its significance Labour risked and lost the little trust that had remained, as well as what Corbyn had rebuilt during his short tenure.

Second, somehow Labour had failed to comprehend the extent of the cultural cleavage between the old working and the new middle class. Until Election Day, Labour strategists expected voters in the working class constituencies of Northern England to vote Labour in spite of its wavering on Brexit, simply because they could never bring it about themselves to vote for the Tories. This underestimated the strength of working class conservatism and patriotism. It also overlooked the emotional wreckage caused by the attacks of a new Left denouncing those who wanted Brexit to help them protect their accustomed way of life, as xenophobic, homophobic, misogynic, racist, anti-Semitic “Little Englanders”. A party whose cultural elites consider its traditional supporters deep-down-in-their-hearts fascists cannot hope to retain their confidence. As in so many other countries, replacing class in political discourse with identity caused an identitarian backlash from those for whom the national state has remained a principal focus of collective identification.

The election of December 12 may have sealed the divorce between the British working class and its traditional party; it may for a long time have realigned British politics. If Boris Johnson is the cunning political animal that he sometimes seems to be, he may try, and may succeed, to turn the pro-Brexit working class voters into pro-British Tory voters. This would require him to move from the neoliberalism of his years of political apprenticeship to a one-nation Toryism in the Disraeli tradition, as tried in vain by his hapless predecessor, Theresa May. If he could win his party for this – and he will for a long time be the only Prime Minister they have got – it would pull the floor from under Labour’s feet. To secure Tory rule for the next two or more decades, Johnson may even let the Scots go their way, thereby creating a natural Tory majority in what will remain of the United Kingdom. Labour could then join the Liberal Democrats to celebrate together with them a “woke” cosmopolitan lifestyle, competing for the representation of all kinds of “minorities” and for the votes of what the French call the “bobos”: the bourgeois bohemians of the big cities.