# Pop-socialism:

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# Pop-socialism: A new radical left politics? Evaluating the rise and fall of the British and Italian left in the anti-austerity age

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## Abstract

This article draws from primary research – including 46 semi-structured interviews – to provide a comparative analysis of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the British Labour Party between 2015 and 2020, and Nichi Vendola's leadership of the Italian radical left between 2010 and 2015. It is claimed that both cases represent a new form of left politics – which we term pop-socialism – that combines popular-democratic appeals to the 'people' with the traditional class-based demands of democratic socialism. This contributes to recent literature on radical left politics and left populism by providing an insight into the underexplored relationship between popular-democratic and class politics. Moreover, the article provides an important empirical account of Corbyn and Vendola's rapid mobilisation but also their equally abrupt decline.

## Keywords

Corbynism, democratic socialism, Italian radical left, left parties, populism

## Introduction

The 2010s were a tumultuous decade for the radical left in the Global North. New leftist 'outsider' leaders emerged such as Nichi Vendola in Italy, Alexis Tsipras in Greece, Pablo Iglesias in Spain, Bernie Sanders in the United States, and Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom. Some achieved unexpected success: Syriza won the 2015 Greek general election, Podemos came third in the 2015 Spanish general election less than 2 years after they were launched, and leftist Jeremy Corbyn came from obscurity to win the 2015 Labour leadership contest. However, by the end of the decade, the radical left had not been established as 'mainstream' (see March and Keith, 2016). In July 2019, Syriza had lost a general election and fallen back into opposition. Podemos, meanwhile, were only able to win 12.9% of the vote in the November 2019 general election. Corbyn, moreover, had been

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replaced as leader after a devastating defeat at the 2019 general election. Ultimately, the radical left have not taken advantage of the supposedly golden opportunities arising from the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), despite the decline of social democratic parties (Manwaring and Kennedy, 2018).

Many authors have described these parties and their leaders as examples of left-wing populism (Damiani, 2020; Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019; Santana and Rama, 2018; Smith, 2019). This literature mainly contends that populist appeals to the 'people' and the 'elite' have replaced the traditional focus on class cleavages. However, left populist scholarship sometimes conflates instances of rhetoric for a fully developed populist politics (Dean and Maiguashca, 2020), and subsequently downplays the variety of ways in which appeals to the 'people' can be combined with class politics. In some cases, appeals to the 'people' might contribute to the renewal, and not the replacement, of the traditional class-based demands of democratic socialism.

We propose 'pop-socialism' as a different conceptualisation for interpreting the relationship between popular-democratic appeals and class politics among some left parties. The first section explores the main features of pop-socialism – we claim that it emerged on the intersection between democratic socialist groups orbiting left parties, and left groups in the anti-austerity movement seeking party representation. The second section describes the research design and methodology. The third section draws from empirical research to explore two cases of pop-socialism. In British politics, leftist Jeremy Corbyn defied expectations to win the 2015 Labour leadership contest, and guided the party through a successful 2017 general election in which they increased their share of the vote by 9.6%, the biggest swing since 1945 (Dorey, 2017). Corbyn's rise, however, was matched by an equally abrupt decline; at the 2019 general election, the Labour Party plummeted to its lowest share of seats since 1935 and Corbyn was replaced as leader. In Italy, Nichi Vendola, a former member of the parliament (MP) of the Communist Refoundation Party (CRP), emerged as a national leader in 2005 when he won the centre-left primaries for the regional elections in Apulia. In late 2009, Vendola abandoned CRP to create a new party, 'Left, Environment, Freedom' (LEF), and formed a satellite organisation alongside LEF, 'Nichi's Factories' (Damiani, 2011: 87). However, Vendola went through a rapid decline after the formation of Mario Monti's technocratic government in 2011, leading to the end of his career in 2015 after his term as president of Apulia ended. In the concluding remarks, we discuss two primary reasons for the decline of pop-socialism. First, we identify an 'insider-outsider' dynamic between supporters that focused on forming a Praetorian Guard around the leader against hostile party factions, and other activists who demanded the introduction of movement-like and innovative forms of participation (see Muldoon and Rye, 2020: 10–13). Second, we argue that overdependence on the leader led to a rapid demobilisation after that leaders' popularity declined.

## What is pop-socialism?

This section identifies the three main features of pop-socialism. First, pop-socialism foregrounds appeals to the 'people' as part of a renewal of conventional socialist politics, rather than the replacement of it that some left populist scholars call for. Second, pop-socialism aims to *activate* its 'people' as a 'popular-democratic' challenge to representative democratic structures, in distinction from 'authoritarian populists' who mobilise the 'people' as a *passive* audience to insulate elites from the checks and balances of

representative democracy (see Hall, 1985, 1988, 2016). Third, borrowing from Dean (2017), the article describes how 'pop-star' leaders forged pop-socialism by providing a space for the convergence of movement-based and party-based groups. Their leadership initiated what we term the 'Radical Left Network-System' (RLNS) – formed through the interaction between the leader, established left parties or factions, and movement-like satellite organisations – which provided a platform for the leaders' supporters.

The concept of pop-socialism aims to address certain flaws within the two primary approaches to populism – the 'discursive' school and the 'ideational' school. First, it challenges scholars from the 'discursive' school who conceive the renewal of left parties as founded on the replacement of outdated class ideologies with left populist discourses (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019; Kioupkiolis, 2016; Ramiro and Gomez, 2017). Popularised by Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2018), the discursive school argues that populism is the fundamental essence of any political project: by articulating a 'people versus elite' antagonism movements are able to mobilise a plurality of essentially different demands into a contingent popular frontier. As part of this, Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 178) argue that the 'socialist dimension', which has always contained a populist element, should be seen as only '*one* of the components of a project for radical democracy, not vice versa'. In this reformulation, class-based socialism is seen as a background feature of a much broader 'strategy for radical and plural democracy' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 178). This line of thought has had a considerable influence on left populist scholarship which bases its analysis of today's radical left on the claim that 'the traditional left conception of the capital/labour cleavage [. . .] no longer produces much political effect' (Damiani, 2020: 167). Conventional class-based demands of socialism, according to this view, are peripheral to the broader populist struggle which characterises the radical left today.

However, in some cases, such as pop-socialism, appeals to the 'people' have attempted to revitalise, rather than replace, the class-based demands of socialism. Democratic socialism typically combines a more grassroots vision of democracy with demands for the transformation of capitalism (March and Mudde, 2005); popular-democratic appeals to the 'people' are one way of illustrating these credentials. Even in the more explicitly left populist Podemos, for example, research has demonstrated that their populist discourses appealed mostly to those who were already on the left and supported Podemos because of their traditional left-wing policies (Marcos-Marne, 2020). As Panitch and Gindin (2018: 1, 2) – in their survey of Corbynism, Bernie Sanders, and Syriza – elaborate,

> These socialist leaders are drawing fresh political attention to the dynamics, structures, inequalities, and contradictions of capitalism as the systemic core of neo-liberal globalisation and ruling class privilege and power [. . .] their affiliation with parties of the centre-left is not only directly concerned with mobilising support for these socialist leaders [. . .] but also using this support as a springboard for advancing class struggles.

The 'ideational' school, meanwhile, describes populism as the common denominator for political actors adopting a 'thin-centred ideology' that perceives society to be ultimately separated into two antagonistic groups – '"the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people' (Mudde, 2004: 543; Stanley, 2008). This tradition claims that populists perceive checks and balances in liberal democracy as a negation of the legitimate majoritarian rule

of the people. As well as anti-elitist, populists are 'anti-pluralist' because they view politics as divided between 'a morally pure and fully unified [. . .] people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some way morally inferior' (Muller, 2016: 19, 20).

However, whilst the ideational school recognises substantive differences between left and right-wing variations, they do not do enough to differentiate between populist and non-populist forms of contestation; all radical politics is subsumed by the rubric of populism (Dean and Maiguashca, 2020). Consequently, this school does not distinguish the various directions in which the 'people' can be mobilised as a political force. Put simply, the 'people' can be mobilised as either a democratic challenge against established representative political structures and their elites, or conversely to protect political elites from the accountability of democratic institutions. The catch-all label of 'populism' sometimes obscures the substantive differences between these different forms of contestation.

We therefore see pop-socialism as a way of conceptualising new forms of radical left politics which combine appeals to the 'people' with class-based ideologies. To provide an alternative to the overstretched concept of populism, we propose returning to Stuart Hall's (1988) distinction between 'popular-democratic' and 'authoritarian populist' to delineate this relationship. Authoritarian populism refers to movements which are 'legitimated by a populist groundswell below [. . .] to win for the authoritarian closure the gloss of populist consent' (Hall, 1985: 116). The discourse of the 'people' here is mobilised to protect elites from democratic challenge by constructing them as *passive* agents saying '"yes" to power' (Hall, 2016: 239). However, in contrast to authoritarian populism, a politics that is interested in constructing a 'culture that is genuinely popular' (Hall, 2016: 239) is 'inextricably linked with [. . .] the widening of popular-democratic struggle' (Hall, 1988: 124, 125). The 'people' are presented as *active* agents that can be mobilised upwards as a democratic challenge against established elites (Hall, 2016: 239). Participatory education is key to this process because it raises 'people to a new level' (Friere, 1996) of critical reflection which equips activists to challenge elites from below.

Importantly, Hall's conception of popular-democratic struggle was connected to his support for socialist politics. Popular-democratic appeals were a means by which 'socialism might be constituted' (Hall, 2016: 239) by shedding light on divisions 'along the line of the exploited and the exploiters, which, in turn, alone might provide conditions for a more sustained socialist advance' (Hall, 1988: 125). From this perspective, the concept of popular-democracy is more appropriate than that of populism for illuminating how appeals to the people might be combined with a conventional socialist politics.

Pop-socialism emerged on the intersection between protest groups from the anti-austerity movement seeking representation in existing political parties, and socialist groups orbiting left parties aiming to appeal to the impulses of the anti-austerity movement to renew the socialist tradition. Gerbaudo (2017) has described the transformation of protest culture during the anti-austerity movement from 'neoanarchism' – which presented the movement as a leaderless and anti-statist – towards a 'democratic populist' revival, which sought to break down the mediation between the 'people' and representative political structures by democratising state institutions. In the view of this article, this created a natural crossroads with democratic socialist groups orbiting left parties that 'accept parliamentary democracy, but retain a radical commitment to systemic transformation, usually through a commitment to grass-roots democracy and (especially) through a rejection of capitalism' (March and Mudde, 2005: 34). This combination of forces gave rise to 'popular leftism', which describes, among other things, the marked 'reconstitution of left politics status, impact and visibility within mainstream politics, culture, and public life' (Dean, 2020: 7).

However, without the final dimension of pop-socialism described in this section, the 'pop-leader', pop-socialism would not have crystallised. Before Corbyn became leader, there were attempts to connect the protest cultures of the anti-austerity movement towards the renewal of Labour's democratic socialist tradition, but these remained independent of the party mainstream due to the parliamentary leadership's acceptance of austerity measures (see Panitch and Leys, 2020: 185–188). However, Corbyn's entrance into the 2015 leadership contest forged the space for the convergence of various party-based and movement-based strands around a mainstream party: the ensuing rise and fall of pop-socialism was intrinsically tied into Corbyn's personal successes and failures. There are several contemporary leaders on the left – Bernie Sanders, Pablo Iglesias, or Alexis Tsipras, for example – who have been central to the mobilisation of a diversity of left strands in their respective countries and who may fit this description of the 'pop-leader'.

Dean's (2020) concept of 'politicising fandom' provides a useful heuristic for understanding the contours of the pop-leaders' relationship to supporters. Dean identifies four dimensions to politicising fandom. First, *productivity and consumption* describes how celebrity leaders and their fans co-constitute (in an *active* and not a *passive* relationship) the properties of a collective political community in a 'dynamic relationship between the individual fan, other fans and the fan object' (Dean, 2017: 412). The bedrock of this process is the second dimension, 'affective orientations' – 'the palpable sense of warmth, excitement and anticipation' (Dean, 2017: 418) at leaders' rallies – which enables the formation of shared bonds between individuals and groups. This, in turn, sustains 'a sense of *community*' (Dean, 2017: 413) with other activists who share the same normative values: plural supporters come to 'identify with a specific political leader and, in so doing, affirm their sense of communion with a broader political community who feel the same way' (Dean and Maiguashca, 2020: 21). The final dimension, *contestation*, recognises the distinctly political aspect of these communities; the shared association with a political leader prompts supporters to turn outwards towards a shared critique of society and a desire to change that society. As the article will aim to demonstrate, the process of politicising fandom was key to the convergence of a diversity of left traditions around both Vendola and Corbyn during the initial 'boom' period in the first part of their leadership.

The pop-leader's unexpected rise instigated the establishment of a movement-like 'satellite' of the leaders' supporters (see Dommett and Temple, 2018). The satellite provided the platform to drive through transformational change in existing left parties and in social movements (see Muldoon and Rye, 2020). We have defined this network of political actors – involving the leader, established left parties or factions, and a movement-like satellite organisation – as a RLNS. We see activists in the RLNS as radical left because they share a critical view of liberal democracy and capitalism (see March and Mudde, 2005). They are a 'network-system' because they are neither a singular organisation with demarcated boundaries nor a multiplicitous unbounded 'network' (See Nunes, 2014). Our empirical analysis will show that while these hybrid forms of organisation enabled a steady 'boom' period for pop-socialism, they also contained intrinsic tensions which contributed to its eventual decline.

## Research design and methodology

We selected the two cases because preliminary observation had demonstrated that they comprised features which we considered typical of pop-socialism, but they emerged from different institutional contexts (Seawright and Gerring, 2008). On one hand, both are led by what

have been termed 'celebrity' leaders (Dean, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2011), have been described as socialist (Panitch and Leys, 2020), but have also been labelled as populist (JA Smith, 2019; Romano and Cassano, 2011; Watts and Bale, 2019). On the other hand, they are members of different party families – the Labour Party is widely considered a centre-left party, whereas LEF is part of the radical left (Chiocchetti, 2016). Moreover, the British political system is characterised by a stable two-party democracy prompted by the first-past-the post electoral system, whereas Italy has been characterised by high levels of volatility in a multi or bipolar system during the last decade (Bull and Pasquino, 2018).

There are three main benefits to selecting these two cases. First, it enabled us to explore in-depth understandings of complex dynamics within organisations (Yin, 2017). Second, they are suited to an abductive logic of inference which involves the refinement of theory through a continual dialogue with empirical data (George and Bennett, 2005). Third, they enable a comparative analysis within and between cases which helps to strengthen the theory by exploring the underlying phenomena that underpinned the emergence and decline of pop-socialism in different circumstances (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

The research was conducted through the analysis of multiple sources of qualitative data across the root and branch of the RLNS, but primarily through 46 semi-structured interviews with activists, officers, and leaders. In the British case, this included 26 semi-structured inter-views. The majority of participants were active in Momentum either at the grassroots level, as staff members, within their main decision-making body, or as founders. Momentum were set-up to provide a platform for Corbyn supporters and so it was felt that they could provide the clearest insight into the nature of Corbynism. Interviews of leadership aides and Labour MPs were also conducted, and participant observation was carried out at a range of meetings, demonstrations, and at the Momentum branded festival The World Transformed (TWT). In the Italian case, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with activists in LEF and/or Nichi Factories and TILT, and we analysed LEF's manifestos as well as strategic papers approved at the party's conferences. In both cases, a small number of contacts were identi-fied, and then the pool of participants grew as existing contacts helped us meet more partici-pants. We stopped interviewing participants when the data saturation point was reached, and we felt no new relevant insights could be gained by continuing.

The participants were sampled because they could enable us to identify recurrent patterns leading to the emergence and decline of the pop-socialist RLNS. Accordingly, we had com-mon questions around the following four topics: (1) normative reasons for supporting the leader and the 'movement', (2) relations between new and established activists, (3) the role of the leaders, and (4) the relationship between the different components of the RLNS. The specific orientation of the questions was adapted according to the participants' position, experience, and relevance to the research. After the interviews were completed, we con-ducted a thematic analysis around three main themes: first, the combinations of popular-democratic and democratic socialist ideologies; second, the factors connecting the political leadership to grassroots activists; and finally, the interactions between social movements and political parties in the anti-austerity era (see Braun and Clarke, 2006).

## Pop-socialism in action: Emergence and crisis

### Corbynism

Corbyn's entrance into the Labour Party's 2015 leadership contest forged the space for pop-socialism. His victory opened a window of opportunity for a range of left groups

drawn from the anti-austerity movement to join a mainstream centre-left party in a period of crisis following its recent election defeat. This created a natural intersection with remaining democratic socialists orbiting the labour movement and Labour Party – establishing the conditions for pop-socialism. Corbyn's role in bringing the different strands together was recalled by one participant:

> There was always a constituency of left-wing people they just didn't have a [. . .] specific objective that could unify them and bring them together in a way that was meaningful and Jeremy's leadership provided that in quite an instinctive way [. . .] he was very-well known to people on the left [. . .] and extremely trusted and respected. (Interview 7)

The dramatic result was an unanticipated consequence of reforms to the leadership elections under Miliband which reduced the gatekeeping power of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) by introducing One Member One Vote (OMOV) for the membership, a new category of 'registered supporters', and individual trade unionists that signed up as 'affiliated supporters' (see Collins Review, 2014). This laid the groundwork for Corbyn's victory, which was partly due to his support for a redistribution of power away from the PLP and towards the membership (see Ward, 2021). The context in which Corbyn won contributed to a continued division between a supportive membership and a hostile PLP, which endured throughout the period in question, later providing an incentive for the leadership to pursue an ultimately aborted attempt at members-led democratisation. Large sections of the PLP continued to resist Corbyn in the subsequent years, reinforcing the widespread perception that he was an 'outsider' in the party he was leading.

Corbyn's 'moral mythology' was key to his support across the left (Bolton and Pitts, 2018). His personal biography – as an anti-war, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-austerity, and environmentalist politician – fuelled the perception that he was 'sincere' (Bolton and Pitts, 2018: 12), 'authentic' (Bolton and Pitts, 2018: 22), and had been on the 'right side of history for over 30 years' (Bennett, 2016). This was a part of the broader process of 'politicising fandom' described by Dean (2017). Activists identified with Corbyn's values, creating a shared sense of association between activists from different traditions. Importantly, this was turned *outwards*, as Dean states, towards the opponents of Corbynism – the 'ruling elite, the City and the tax-dodgers' (Corbyn, 2017) – as well as parliamentary elites in the Labour Party.

Another factor which contributed to the process of politicising fandom was Corbyn's treatment as a 'rock star' on the leadership trail in 2015, which reached its climax with the period of 'Corbynmania' throughout the summer of 2017, most notably the adulation he received at Glastonbury after taking to the Pyramid Stage to deliver a speech shortly after the 2017 election (Dean, 2017; Nuuns, 2018). One senior staff member at Momentum described what they called the 'celebrification' of contemporary political leaders who – fuelled by social media – 'share their personal lives in an authentic way, creating an emotional connection which transcends their politics or the party that they represent' (Interview 24). They agreed that 'Jeremy did that in his own way. It was less him and it was more the fact that he didn't get a hearing in the press, so social media in that sense was very important' (24).

Despite the fanbase that Corbyn enthused he remained an outsider in need of some institutional backbone – the PLP was dominated by figures to his right, and he did not initially have a majority on the National Executive Committee (NEC), or full support in the party bureaucracy and Shadow Cabinet. Momentum were hastily launched in response

to this immediate pressure before they had resolved internal differences – between more movement-oriented and more party oriented groups – regarding their internal organisation and formal relationship to the Labour Party (Interview 19). They would become the platform for the various left strands that had converged around Corbyn's leadership: post-GFC 'extra-parliamentary, social movement activism', preceding 'protest coalitions', the 'existing Labour Left', and the 'left of the trade union movement' (Klug et al., 2016: 37, 38). Momentum fitted with the criteria we would expect of the RLNS – they were a 'satellite' of the leaders' supporters which remained aligned to the party but formally independent of it (see Dommett and Temple, 2018; Muldoon and Rye, 2020).

Corbyn's unpopularity among the PLP reached its pinnacle when a motion of no confidence was forwarded in the summer of 2016 and followed by another leadership contest, but he once again illustrated his support among the membership with an overwhelming victory against challenger Owen Smith. The continued perception that he was an outsider, encouraged by an unwelcoming media, underpinned the decision from around the end of 2016 to adopt what was described by leadership aides as a left populist communications strategy that aimed to create 'an enemy' (Interview 26). In the subsequent general election, Corbyn (2017) declared that he does not 'play by the establishment's rules' and vowed to redistribute wealth and power back to the 'people'. He named the 'elite' – billionaires, tax 'dodgers', bankers, the media, and even MPs – claiming that 'We don't fit in their cosy club. We're not obsessed with the tittle-tattle of Westminster or Brussels. We don't accept that it is natural for Britain to be governed by a ruling elite' (Corbyn, 2017).

He also named the 'people' that his politics transverse: 'when we win it is the people, not the powerful, who win. The nurse, the teacher, the small trader, the carer, the builder, the office worker, the student, the carer win. We all win' (Corbyn, 2017). This language found its way into the manifesto title 'For the Many, Not the Few' where according to one senior LOTO aide, the aim was 'to have a clear antagonism – say who is going to be made to pay, who is going to benefit, transformational, and use the outrage of the media to spread your message' (Interview 19).

At face value, this reinforces the assertion that Corbynism was left populist (Smith, 2019). However, Corbyn and most participants describe themselves as socialists. This research is not the first to note the combination of class and populist politics – Bolton and Pitts (2018) consider Corbynism an unhealthy amalgamation of populism with classical Marxism. Alternatively, we claim that popular-democratic appeals were essential to the rejuvenation of socialism at a time of crisis and following a long period of decline. Presenting Corbyn along '99% vs 1%' lines first of all renewed the socialist tradition by mobilising activists to join the party in support of a left-wing candidate, and then won support among the general public for the redistributive and public ownership commitments of the manifesto (see Labour Party, 2017).

The pursuit of grassroots party democracy, moreover, provided added weight to the popular-democratic credentials of pop-socialism. It forged a shared strategic horizon between the Labour new left – who had always seen party democracy as essential to the pursuit of democratic socialism (see Panitch and Leys, 2020) – and movement oriented actors seeking to introduce democratic demands into the party. A senior leadership aide highlighted the centrality of party democracy to their vision of socialism:

> The reason you need to have democratic pressure from below as much as possible into state institutions is because powers from above have huge amounts of influence in those institutions [. . .] and so I think it's absolutely necessary, if you're trying to pursue a socialist strategy of

reforms, Westminster is not the mother of all parliaments. The form of political contestation is also part of the fight, is also part of the debate, it is something that requires change. We need to democratise the space if we are to democratise the economy. (Interview 19)

This 'grassroots vision' (see Pettitt, 2018) of party democracy targets the members ('the people') upwards as a popular-democratic challenge to the oligarchic tendencies of party and parliament (Watts and Bale, 2019), in distinction to authoritarian populism which points the people downwards to insulate elites from accountability (see Hall, 1988). A key aspect to the upwards mobilisation of the 'people' is education, as outlined in the conceptual section. This is most visibly manifested by the annual political education festival The World Transformed (TWT) which was launched in 2016, in which a central ethos is to enable participants to develop their critical capacity through regular discussions, general assemblies, and the sharing of educational resources. There are a range of available resources and discussions which aim to 'activate' participants through workshops on topics such climate change, public ownership, radical cultural democracy, and trade union struggles. When an organiser of TWT was asked why political education was so important, they stated that Corbynism was,

> A serious socialist project and the task always was to try and get [. . .] at least the active section of the membership to be politically educated to be able to understand what was going on so they could go out into their communities and know what needs to be done. (Interview 24)

Pop-socialism does, however, contain some intrinsic tensions. Momentum were continually riddled by a conflict between 'movementists' and 'institutionalists' over their governance structures, the extent to which they should be embedded in the Labour Party, and their relationship to the party leadership (see Kogan, 2019). On the other hand, the 'institutionalists' wanted Momentum to be a 'mobilising campaign, a very effective Praetorian Guard, defend Jeremy, win all the internal elections, get out on to the doorstep, run a really effective GE campaign, but is very top-down' (Interview 6). On the other hand, the 'movementists' demanded a model that was 'bottom-up, consists of lots of local groups having rows, that has a democratic process, but is fundamentally messy and creates bad press, headlines and [. . .] is quite difficult to manage' (Interview 6). In the end, Momentum landed on an institutionalist governance structure rather than the more 'movement-like' set-up that some activists preferred. The episode illustrated a dilemma for the pop-socialist RLNS – the demand for more direct and participative forms of democracy had to be counterbalanced with the need to form a Praetorian Guard around the leader in a hyperfactional party. Momentum were pulled in these competing directions and became susceptible to the criticism that they were not in favour of democracy but 'were like any controlling group or faction: they change the system to suit what gives them power' (Interview 12).

The tension between the need for factional control and the pursuit of more direct forms of democracy also played out in controversies over major party reform. As stated at the beginning of this section, Corbyn won the leadership contest partly due to his commitment to members led democratisation, and this was followed by some minor reforms (see Quinn, 2018). However, the two reforms which generated considerable enthusiasm among the grassroots – the Democracy Review and 'open selections' (which would have seen every MP face a reselection contest between each election) – eventually fell by the wayside (see Ward, 2021). Corbyn achieved few reforms during his tenure in the face of

intense opposition by the PLP who opposed internal party democracy (IPD) because of the limits it placed on their autonomy in parliament; the leadership could not risk further aggravating the PLP and losing control over the House of Commons with an election immediately on the horizon. This gave rise to the feeling among Momentum participants that the leadership refrained from substantial reform because of resistance from the party machine when it came to changing 'an old, unwieldy institution like the Labour Party' (Interview 24).

Moreover, IPD risked amplifying party splits should the membership come to a different view than the leadership – a dilemma which was exposed during the evolution of Labour's Brexit policy (see Ward, 2021). The membership overwhelmingly supported a second referendum, whereas the leadership was reticent to follow this path because of the threat that it posed to Leave-voting constituencies (Bale et al., 2018). The leadership resisted grassroots demands to commit to a 'people's vote' at the 2018 conference – instead backing a compromise 'public vote' if they could not force a general election – which incited the criticism that they were only willing to listen to the demands of the membership so long as it matched their own agenda. This instigated a split within the leadership between a faction which supported a second referendum and another that thought a second referendum would be an electoral catastrophe. In the end, Labour went into the 2019 election with an ambivalent Brexit policy which pleased neither side. This exposed an enduring challenge confronting pop-socialism; calls for a more direct and participatory democracy mobilised a diversity of left currents, but this had to be balanced with the hierarchical demands of a parliamentary party.

## *Vendola*

Central to pop-socialism in Italy was the 'boom' (2009–2011) and 'bust' (2012–2015) of Nichi Vendola's leadership. His popularity was boosted by victories, in 2005 and 2010, in the centre-left primaries and elections in Apulia – a region traditionally ruled by right-wing parties. The decision by the centre-left to have open primaries for local and national leaders was essential to his rise, as they opened a window of opportunity for radical figures to take advantage of increasingly popular demands for the disruption of established political élites (Sandri et al., 2020). His re-election in 2010 was particularly crucial, because, when the Democratic Party (DP) failed to replace him with a more moderate candidate, Vendola came to prominence on a nation-wide basis, becoming the centre-left's most well supported politician, especially among below 30 years (Damiani, 2013: 315). At the time, he was perceived as the best equipped to challenge Berlusconi's government during a severe crisis of popularity as it implemented harsh austerity measures.

As with Corbyn, Vendola's ability to cultivate an emotional connection with his 'politicised fans' unified citizens from plural political cultures in a unified collective community. From the outset Vendola was treated like a 'rock star' (Telese, 2010). LEF's former chairman in Genoa, who hosted a meeting in 2011, described the scene when he entered the hall for a speech: 'the crowd went crazy. People literally surrounded him, desperately trying to touch him. A scene I have seen at rock-stars shows, not political rallies' (Telese, 2010: 33). Vendola's biography was essential to the 'myth' surrounding him; his eclectic background as a communist, catholic, and queer was turned from a source of criticism by the 'moderates' into a strength, and these features were exploited through an aggressive style of communication. For instance, in the election campaign in 2005, Vendola commissioned famous posters defining him as 'Subversive' (in bold) above the caption 'because

I always put the last first'; or 'Dangerous' – 'as are all honest people' (Gerbaudo, 2011: 5). His 'fans' were brought along by 'the idea of an epic ride. It worked because you could prove that you could be leftist, radical, within the centre-left coalition, and win your positions' (Interview 33).

As in the case of Corbynism, Vendola was the node around which the RLNS was established. Initially, Nichi's Factories had been the organisational cornerstone of this architecture. Launched to sustain Vendola's regional campaign in 2010, they became a nation-wide phenomenon that supported Vendola in the primaries for the centre-left's leadership in the forthcoming general elections. They were, as recalled by one of its founders, a 'network', with a loosely formalised structure that had local committees coordinating on a Facebook page, and 'no formalised leadership, but figures in charge of technical rather than political tasks' (Interview 39). Former activists describe the Factories as 'creative spaces' (Interview 28), 'laboratories of culture and politics' (Interview 32), and 'an incredible experiment to shout out: we want space!' (Interview 35). The innovative and efficient use of digital platforms was essential for this organisational model, enabling Vendola to establish daily communications with citizens (Bordandini, 2013; Telese, 2010: 25). According to an officer responsible for the Factories' online communication, the investment in social media was prioritised for the following two reasons: to demonstrate that they were genuinely experimenting with horizontal forms of mobilisation as a way to challenge 'politics as usual'; and 'to overcome the hostility by mainstream media towards Vendola: the best way to disintermediate the communication between Nichi and citizens' (Interview 39).

Besides the Factories, a new radical left party (RLP), LEF, was established in 2010 – gathering former members of the CRP, the Greens, and Left Democrats – which attempted to unify the highly fragmented Italian Radical Left, and to provide a route into parliamentary institutions. This meant that the RLNS was configured as a space with 'one head' (Vendola) and 'two bodies' (Interview 39; the Factories and LEF). In the short term, this architecture provided 'momentum' for the pop-socialist experiment, although in the medium-term, as we will see, it also proved to be fertile ground for intense factionalism.

Vendola successfully organised the RLNS around one common purpose. His popular-democratic appeals attracted young activists from social movements, in particular, the anti-austerity students movement and the movement to bring the water supplies into public ownership, both at their peak in 2010–2011 (Interview 27, 37). These protesters were more interested in innovative movement-like practices than traditional representative politics: 'from Chiapas' Zapatistas, organising resistance through the internet, up to Obama, mobilising millions of Americans to register to vote through social media' (Interview 27). Furthermore, Vendola's popular-democratic stances against mainstream parties – which he described as 'disgusting dead-bodies' (Interview 30) – matched the growing anti-party feelings of many Italian citizens. However, like with Corbyn, these popular-democratic appeals were conceived as a route for innovating socialism, not for replacing it. For example, Vendola claimed there was a need to hybridise 'the pace of the reformist and the horizon of the revolutionary' to 'prepare a new route that seeks to sever the root of modern alienation in productive life and in the organisation of social reproduction' (quoted in Damiani, 2011: 377). Moreover, traditional socialist demands for greater public ownership were central to his policy platform, and presented as a challenge to 'the myth according to which markets, free from public interventions, are the best way to maximise wealth for all' (Vendola, 2011: 36).

Pop-socialism was put into practice through ongoing organisational experimentations, the aim of which was to 'educate' growing shares of citizens through active and direct

participation. For instance, Nichi's Factories typical activities mixed forms of prefigurative activism with 'educational' workshops, such as bringing water supplies into public ownership and supporting start-up cooperatives to challenge jobs' casualisation, typically aiming to scale up at a national level, the policies implemented by Vendola's regional government. As one activist recalled, 'one of our messages was "Pugliamo l'Italia"' (Interview 37), a pun meaning both 'Let's clean Italy' and 'Let's make Italy as Apulia'. Indeed, the fact that Vendola was President of Apulia was essential in building-up the 'credibility' of the pop-socialist project, as this institutional power provided weight to his claims (Damiani, 2013). As one activist put it, Vendola's role as president created a sense of possibility as 'he could prove that it is possible to radically reform the system' (Interview 27).

However, the Italian pop-socialist RLNS only succeeded in the short run. As the prospect of an early general election waned from around 2011, Vendola's position as the innovative or radical candidate for the centre-left leadership was gradually undermined by intra-network tensions between 'movementists' and 'institutionalists'. The 'movementists' wanted to prioritise the Factories over LEF by keeping them autonomous, organisationally 'open' and 'ideologically plural' (Interview 39). However, the 'institutionalists' demanded a more robust ideological core, and emphasised the need to bring the movements into formal party institutions (Interview 27).

The 'institutionalists' prevailed during 2011–2012, which led to the shut-down of the Factories in an attempt to draw their activists into LEF. However, as this process was pursued without any democratic mandate, 'the result was that most of the activists abandoned politics' (Interview 37). From then onwards, increasing 'insider-outsider' clashes affected the RLNS, contributing to the de-mobilisation of activists and the marginalisation of Vendola's project. The 'insiders', typically officers and activists coming from former parties and unions, were concerned by what they saw as excessive attachment to Vendola, and demanded that the RLNS remained 'attentive to party's repertoires and traditions, according to which the organisation comes first' (Interview 33). However, the 'outsiders' saw the RLNS as a space to experiment with organisational innovations and participatory democracy. This fissure was observed by one participant who remembered a meeting in Milan where an activist 'claimed that we shouldn't become Nichi's "fan-club." However, a young activist interrupted him, shouting: "you don't understand: we don't have to save LEF from Vendola: we must save him from LEF!"' (Interview 27). A clash between generations increasingly undermined the Italian RLNS; when some young activists created a new movement after the Factories' shut-down – called TILT – alongside anti-mafia associations and squats' movements, they found strong resistance by the institutionalist 'officers coming from the unions' (Interview 30). As a result, further defections among the younger activists affected the innovative image of Vendola's project.

These tensions illustrate two related dilemmas which we identify as the main sources for the crisis of Italian pop-socialism. The first concerns the centrality of the leader versus the horizontal dimension of the 'network'. On one hand, rapid mobilisation was only possible thanks to Vendola's victories. However, this process resulted in an over-dependence on the leader which facilitated a massive de-mobilisation when Vendola's popularity decreased. The second regards the failure to address the conflicts between the hierarchical practices typical of parties and the demands for forms of participatory democracy. The power of factions from former parties meant there was a lack of organisational innovation, which was seen by many activists as an important reason for Vendola and LEF's collapse. As stated by an LEF activist,

> Since Genoa 2001 innovation was important for social movements [. . .] which prioritized platforms, horizontality, and direct democracy. However, trying to innovate political organisations whose leading actors don't believe in change can only result in failure. Our downfall paved the way for the emergence of a post-ideological movement, the 5 stars, that succeeded at championing innovation precisely because they didn't have any 'burden' from past political traditions. (Interview 37)

Therefore, Italian pop-socialism ended up in a cycle of success and crisis that did not result in a long-lasting renewal of the radical left, because it failed to find a new synthesis between diverging goals and strategies. Vendola retired from frontline politics when his term as Apulia's President came to an end in 2015, a crisis which led LEF to split in 2016 between those who joined the DP and those who established a new RLP, Italian Left (IL).

## Discussion and conclusion

This article has identified pop-socialism as a recent form of left politics in Britain and Italy. In both cases, the emergence of a 'pop' leader forged an institutional space for the convergence of a broad range of left strands drawn from both parties and social movements. This facilitated the combination of popular-democratic appeals to the 'people' with the conventional demands of democratic socialism. Both leaders remained 'outsiders' in their relative political spaces which fuelled the demand for a new set of organisations – Momentum and Nichi's Factories – to assemble the plurality of left groups that had converged around the leader and drive through transformational change within existing left institutions. Pop-socialism proved to be a successful innovation for a period of time. Corbyn achieved one of the 'biggest shocks in British electoral history' at the 2017 election (Dorey, 2017: 308). Vendola, meanwhile, was the centre-left's most popular politician during the peak of the anti-austerity movement.

However, in the end, pop-socialism declined because of tensions between its normative demands and its organisation through traditional party structures. First, there was a tension between the demands for popular-democratic forms of participation, the representative structures of centre-left parties, and the need to secure internal party control over competing factions. On one hand, the 'insiders' in Momentum and Nichi's Factories prioritised the need to secure internal party control over rival factions. On the other hand, the 'outsiders' were more concerned with innovative forms of participation and democracy and the idea of 'movement-like' transformation. In the end, the need to maintain centralised control in a hyperfactional context meant that pop-socialism lost traction after becoming embroiled in conventional party political contests.

Second, centralisation around the 'pop' leader was essential to the rapid mobilisation of activists, but it also condemned pop-socialism to an over-reliance on the leader. 'Corbynism without Corbyn', as activists were wont to say, has proven difficult. The radical left has been forced to retreat since Keir Starmer became leader in 2020; Starmer has reaffirmed the 'parliamentary independence' view of party management in favour of Corbyn's more 'grassroots control' vision of party politics (see Pettitt, 2018), the left has lost key positions in the party bureaucracy and been deprived of its majority on the NEC, the shadow cabinet has shifted to the right, and fissures have surfaced in Momentum in the build up to its own internal elections. In the case of Vendola, meanwhile, his decline accelerated after he ran as the radical left candidate in the centre-left national primaries in 2012 but scored only 15% (Damiani, 2013). This precipitated a split among his

supporters. Some were drawn away from Vendola and towards the emerging Matteo Renzi, as he championed the disruption of 'old' left-wing elites despite pursuing a moderate reformist agenda (Damiani, 2016). Others, meanwhile, pursued a 'pure' RLP, IL, with the goal of stabilising some of Vendola's achievements while radically opposing the DP.

The future of pop-socialism remains to be seen. On the one hand, there are a few factors which could facilitate its continued re-emergence. First, the importance of social media means that celebrity culture and political leadership are likely to remain in proximity to one another. Second, further waves of austerity must be expected in the post-pandemic context, which are in turn likely to trigger further anti-austerity protests: socialist groups orbiting left parties will almost certainly seek to mobilise such a movement towards the renewal of traditional class demands. Third, the strength of the anti-elite common sense which has underpinned the recent phase of post-GFC politics is likely to persist and might even sharpen depending on how political elites respond to the post-pandemic context.

On the other hand, there are some factors which may prevent the re-emergence of pop-socialism. The possibility of their permanent irruption into mainstream politics may have been exhausted for the foreseeable future. In the two cases in this article, the defeat of the pop-socialist experiment has been followed by a reassertion of the centre-left. Observation suggests that other instances of radical left politics in the Global North have faced a similar fate: Bernie Sanders was ultimately defeated by Joe Biden in the Democratic presidential primaries, Podemos' hopes of disrupting the Spanish two-party system appear to have ended, and Syriza have recently slipped back into opposition.

Moreover, although post-pandemic austerity programmes are probable, there are signs that free market capitalism's monopoly is waning while state interventionism is going through a revival (Gerbaudo, 2021). This may well aid the return of a radical left politics oriented around state intervention, investment, and public ownership. However, if interventionist politics became the new zeitgeist, then the space for an 'outsider' challenge based on a more statist programme may well be reduced.

To conclude, the analysis offered in this article has contributed to the wider literature on left politics in several ways. By shedding light on the ongoing relationship between a popular politics of the 'people' and traditional class politics, the concept of pop-socialism offers an alternative to the overstretched label of 'populism', providing a useful heuristic for explaining certain forms of radical left politics. Moreover, the concept of the 'pop' leader contributes to a burgeoning literature which aims to explain the changing role of leadership in today's political landscape (Dean, 2017; Pike and Diamond, 2021). Finally, by conceptualising the pop-socialist RLNS, we introduce a new framework to understand the organisational reconfiguration of party and movement politics in the recent phase of radical left politics.

These contributions open up several fruitful avenues for future research. If pop-socialism represents a unique brand of left politics, as we have claimed, then further studies should interrogate how other left-wing ideologies combine the concepts of 'people', 'class' and 'democracy'. In particular, research should explore whether appeals to the people are intended as a replacement or a revival of class politics, and if, moreover, the 'people' are mobilised as a 'threat' or a 'corrective' to democratic institutions (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012).

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