**1. Jeremy Corbyn: Politics, fashion and brands**

This paper focuses on Jeremy Corbyn as a case study to reveal attitudes to dress and fashion within politics and how in a branded culture these can contribute to political discourse and ideological shifts more widely. Before I talk about this I want to place this analysis in the context of the past years tumultuous events.

2. From the election of Trump in the US to the vote to leave the EU and the result of June’s General Election in Britain many political certainties have been shaken to the core. The year has been symbolized by horror but also by hope. The former has included four terrible murderous terrorist attacks. But for many it was the shocking fire at Grenfell Tower on the morning of Weds 14th June which epitomized the awfulness of recent times. In ‘The Violence of Austerity’ Whyte and Cooper document the terrible toll decades of cuts, privatization and deregulation has had on the poor in Britain all of which contributed to the Grenfell fire. I will return to Grenfell later.

3. From this political backdrop Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn offered a politics of hope, that ‘another world is possible’ in the words of the anti-globalisation movement. Revitalizing the UK Labour Party as decidedly left-wing Corbyn was *twice* elected leader - first in June 2015 and again in September 2016 by massive majorities of Labour members. Under unprecedented attack from both the majority of his own parliamentary party; the liberal intelligentsia as well as the right-wing British establishment Corbyn was widely pronounced an electoral liability by the ‘mainstream’ media. Its coterie of political pundits, experts, journalists and pollsters concurred he would lead Labour to its most crushing electoral defeat yet as it would hemorrhage millions of working class votes. Corbyn they proffered was set to repeat Michael Foot’s disastrous 1983 election campaign – a defeat which lead to its leftwing manifesto being dubbed ‘the longest suicide note in history.’

In substantial part this judgement which proved so far wide of the mark was based on Corbyn’s left-wing programme. A political perspective that was broadly speaking anti-war, austerity and cuts, and pro-public sector, unions, public investment in welfare and renationalization was seen as naïve. Its premise that ‘the overton window’ of legitimate political opinion could be prized open, and moved leftward to allow Labour to establish an anti-austerity alternative as a credible political discourse was seen as untenable. In short Corbyn’s break with neo-liberalism and his return to old fashioned Bennite reformist socialism was seen to be a pipe-dream.

**4**. But significantly too, I would argue part of the judgement that Corbyn would fail electorally, was based also on his appearance or rather his widely perceived lack of the acceptable image expected of a contemporary political leader. His apparent lack of concern with his appearance and casual presentation was framed by much of the media as evidence of weakness and a lack of competence. **5.** In a prima-facie case of the relevance of Barthes’ argument for the need to attend to the rhetorical codes of fashion in the making of its symbolic meaning, **6.** his failure to fashion himself according to the norms of political self-presentation hewn from the look-book of conventional bi-millenial politics from JFK to today – political leader equals clean cut, well-groomed banker-type in a suit – drew persistent pejorative fire. But I would argue just as Labour’s Manifesto disavowed the absolute ascendency of business and its political priorities, Corbyn’s shabby chic style offered a symbolic challenge to the sartorially embodied hegemony of corporate business and its influence over politics

**7.** Clearly, then the mainstream media and the commentariat did not bank on the possibility that dress though a language was a much more open and contested system of meaning than the words and images which Barthes argued constituted its discursive framing and context. Tired of politicians who not only said the same things but dressed in the same way Corbyn in Simmelian terms stood out as much as he fitted in.

His dress sense broke from the rules and norms of political discourse, and helped to embody his ideological position. Offering a political alternative made visible not through an anti-fashion aesthetic, but one which was anti-political-fashion, I would argue, helped Corbyn to suggest another world was possible. In contrast to the contemporary slick media politics led by rational appearance, soundbites and spin; his appearance suggested authenticity, depth and gravitas.

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**8.**Interestingly in a speech two days into his general election campaign which set out the terms of his left-populist insurgent campaign Corbyn drew on the class infused tropes of British dress culture to proclaim to the establishment, ‘they think there are rules in politics, which if you don’t follow by doffing your cap to powerful people, accepting that things can’t really change, then you can’t win.’ Whilst his look is not anti-artifice per se its end product is none-the-less striking in its rejection of the current conventions of political self-presentation.

Seen in the context of the often wearisome symbolism of status and class embodied in the culture of British dress - Corbyn’s look encapsulates a disruption of hierarchy and neo-liberal business as usual.

**9.** Think Corbyn and you think chunky square capped 90s shoes, tufty socks and sandals, floppy denim Lenin or Breton cap, tousled hair and graying fraying beard i.e. not the regimented corporate dress code of the former.

**10.** Corbyn’s beard might well be his most transgressive sartorial statement. The last British Premier to have one was the Conservative Lord Salisbury who was in office between 1895 and 1902. His substantive refusal of the sartorial codes of designer managerialism epitomised by New Labour leaders from Kinnock to Blair and Mandelson and beyond, Corbyn’s style, I think, represents an embodiment of his political stance. It mobilises a form of anti-political fashion as symbolic sartorial resistance. Setting itself against the fetishistic top-down micro-management of both politics and the style of politics which created the carefully crafted and honed political performances of a canon of British political leaders cut from the same cloth from Thatcher to Blair and beyond.

**11.** Focusing on one of the centrepieces of his dress sense - Corbyn’s choice of oversized suits some might say ironically or post-ironically - cut loose and large seems to fit the current fashion for post-soviet chic. Writing in The BoF recently JE Sebastian incisively called out as this trend emblematic of the designs of Gosha Rubchinskiy, Demna Gavassalla and Lotta Volkova as the ‘faux authenticity’ of Russian ‘reflective realism’ It is interesting to note here that for Corbyn though, the loose and large aesthetic works to anchor his authenticity not to detract from it.

Whilst authenticity remains a difficult and contested concept in what Susan Banet-Weiser following Celia Lury argues is the ‘logos’ or branded culture of late capitalism understanding its role in Corbyn’s success means rejecting the binary antithesis of impure (commercial) spaces and practices versus pure commercial ones, just as understanding Corbyn’s look is as I have indicated not simply a matter of counter-posing the fashioned to the unfashioned or the raw to the cooked.

**12.** Whilst David Cameron who once told Corbyn at PMQs ‘to put on a proper suit, do up your tie and sing the national anthem’ wore £3500-a-go Saville Row suits by Richard James with critical impunity and Theresa May was caught up in a spat over her choice of £1000 leather trousers – revealing both persistent sexist double standards in dress and the awkwardness of her claim to be turning her party into the party of the working class - it was the Labour leader who attracted the ire and condescension of Tory tabloids and much of the wider media for his choice of garments.

**13.** For sure in the run-up to the General Election campaign Corbyn’s style was then itself modified and his grooming regime honed as you can see in this slide. But his overall look remained substantively the same. Corbyn was labeled a ‘scruff’ whose sartorial code and disposition was framed to represent his standing as a ‘mutton headed old fugwamp’ in the words of the Tory ex-mayor of London Boris Johnson. **14.** The Daily Telegraph for example, ran this piece attacking Corbyn. ‘Clothes may maketh the man, but Jeremy Corbyn’s disheveled outfit at the Battle of Britain memorial service’, the caption reads, ‘just shows his poor judgement.’

**15.** Yet contrary to all expectations it was Corbyn who despite not making it to number 10 emerged strengthened from the General Election as the Labour leader and many would argue PM in waiting. Contrary to all the efforts of his many detractors Labour achieved the biggest increase in share of the vote (plus 10%) for any major political party since the end of the War. As well as this success being attributable to the series of decidedly old-fashioned mass rallies held in towns and cities during the campaign – culminating in his celebratory appearance on Glastonbury’s Pyramid stage in front of 150,000 people - Corbyn, as Thomas Hobbs recently pointed out in Marketing Week, was able to amplify his appeal particularly to the young by using social media, UGC, co-creation and peer-to-peer advocacy. In doing this his campaign made use of critical elements of contemporary branding as identified by both Marxist critics of social media notably Christian Fuchs and post-Marxist theorists such as Adam Arviddson.

**16.** What might all of this tell us about fashion and politics and the politics of fashion and branding? This shift of electoral opinion in the face of concerted media and state hostility towards Corbyn’s Labour marks a significant break in British politics and a move away from austerity - the cornerstone of contemporary neo-liberalism. This shift in opinion has been registered in the British Social Attitudes Survey 2017 which revealed 83% of respondents now support government spending to create new jobs, 72%, increased redistribution of wealth from rich to the poor… 83% supported more on spending on health, 71% more on the NHS and so on.

Drawing on the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci Paul Mason characterises this as a sea change in the ideological common sense in Britain. ‘Even if he hasn’t won he has publicly destroyed the logic of neoliberalism’ he argues. This swing to the left in popular consciousness and in Corbyn’s favour I would argue is further characterised then by a widespread rejection of the formulaic dressing up and over of politics of its conventional packaging and commodification and of the spin, hype, autocue and sharp suits formula beloved of New Labour. It appears to be emblematic of search for a more truthfully authentic and socially engaged politics of belief and values driven by a rising tide of anger from those who seek a more egalitarian and socially just society.

Contemporary practices of branding stand in a contradictory relationship to this shift. Emerging in the 1980s as a set of marketing practices which sought to fill the neo-liberal emptying out of democracy – the collapsing of the consumer sphere into the public sphere and the subsumption of the political into the commercial/economic domain and the vacuum in politics articulated by the Thatcherite acronym TINA - brands offered up ambiguous spaces of consumption literal, figurative material and immaterial into which the hopes and dreams of millions of young people poured …..on condition of purchase.

For Adam Arviddson borrowing from Hannah Arendt the commercial harvesting of this ‘ethical surplus’ resulted in the subsequent conversion of at least some of this value into economic profit through the cultural raising of the price of commodities in circulation alongside the tendency to inflate the speculative share value of brands.

**17.** For Mason the new Gramscian common sense emerging in Britain is driven not by class and shifts in the balance of class forces but by the actions of networked millenials united post-class around a common ethical agenda. In my view Mason is both right and wrong. A new kind of politics of the social and a mass movement against austerity **is** emerging out of the mediatised and brand mediated culture of the self. But what we are seeing is not the disappearance of class but rather something more in line with what Dyer-witheford proposes is the recomposition of the working class as a cyber-proletariat. (1877)

18. Finally in more one ways than one the tumults and shocks of the past year both affirm and deny brand culture. The whole of the commodity value form and its capitalist logic is, I would argue, is now being subject to unprecedented scrutiny as the contradictory imperatives of use value and exchange value unwind before our eyes. Just as images of the Rana Plaza disaster momentarily cracked open the shell of the fashion commodity so the image of Grenfell is defetishising the housing commodity revealing the exploitative class ‘relationship between people’ which Marx argued lay behind the appearance of commodities on markets as an ‘apparent relationship between things’.

Yet the new mass movement against austerity itself is successfully drawing upon many elements of contemporary branding drawing out, re-appropriating and reversing the tendency of the brand to commercially propagate what Marx - analysing the tendency of capitalism to collectivise our creative capacities - once termed the ‘General Intellect’.

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