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Corbyn's Momentum: Social Movement or Something Else?

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Abstract:

Throughout its existence, Momentum has defined itself as a 'movement'. So far, researchers have generally taken this categorisation as a starting point when analysing its organisational nature. For example, it has been labelled as a 'movement faction' (Dennis, 2019) or 'party-driven movement' (Muldoon and Rye, 2020). Indeed, in terms of its nature and function, Momentum straddles different types of organisational models, drawing from several different traditions within political and community activism. Differences are also apparent between Momentum's earlier and later development as well as between the national organisation and local branches. This article accordingly questions the extent to which 'movement' is an accurate descriptor of the organisation. Drawing upon ethnographic research undertaken during the final stages of Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party in 2018 and 2019, it argues that although self-definition as a movement may have played a role in member recruitment and retention, this categorisation does not authentically reflect Momentum's actual organisational structure and activity, nor its practical function within the Labour Party or the wider UK social and political landscape. Furthermore, activists' own conceptions of Momentum as a movement differ. The article finds that relative length and/or depth of commitment to the Labour Party and the extent to which their own identities are primarily aligned with party-political activism are central to whether activists perceive Momentum as a movement and to their continuing commitment to the group following Corbyn's departure as Labour Leader.

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Introduction

From its origins during the Labour Party leadership campaign in 2015, Momentum attempted to attract new members and supporters by targeting activists previously put off by mainstream politics, emphasising Corbyn's 'new politics of bottom-up, participatory democracy' and opposition to the political 'orthodoxy' (Klug, Rees and Schneider, 2016, p. 38). It also consistently self-identified as a movement, seeking to connect with those who were more comfortable at Stop the War or Occupy protests than at Labour Party meetings. Momentum also associated itself with Corbyn's own history as an activist and actively built links with and learned from other political movements and movement parties in Europe and the United States (Klug & Rees, 2018). On this basis Momentum had remarkable success in recruiting activists and supporters and contributed to Labour Party membership increasing to a modern high of over 500,000 in 2018 (Burton and Tunnicliffe, 2022). Distinguishing itself from mainstream politics by advocating for grassroots power and harnessing the energy associated with extra-Parliamentary movements was key to attracting support to a party system seen by many of these new members as corrupt, boring and bureaucratic (e.g. MacAskill, 2016).

Social movements can be effective and highly visible vehicles for political change and have historically played vital roles in the development of Western democracies. Even without exploring social movement theory in detail, many of the key characteristics of social movements can be seen in iconic movements such as the American civil rights movement, the animal rights and environmental movements, or more recently Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and #MeToo. These movements demonstrate the classic diffuse, horizontal, umbrella-like structures that bring together different organisations and individuals (Muldoon & Rye, 2020; Schwartz, 2010). The goals of "getting Jeremy

Corbyn elected as Labour Leader", followed by fighting two general elections specifically to realise a "Corbyn-led Labour government" (as several participants in the research put it), lent coherence to Momentum as a movement and an approximation of a single-issue focus that movement activists within Momentum could anchor their collective identity onto. Indeed, many activists were recruited to Momentum on the basis of its self-identification as a movement, which is still advertised prominently on its homepage (Momentum, 2022a):

This is just the beginning | Momentum, https://peoplesmomentum.com/

As Kitschelt (2006) acknowledges, clear defining lines between movements, interest groups and parties can be difficult to identify in practice. Nevertheless, it is important to attempt categorisation in order to establish a theoretical context for analysing the lived experiences of those involved. Written from the perspective of an unaffiliated outsider of generally leftist political persuasion, this article examines Momentum's organisational nature, testing the veracity of its identification as a movement. The methodology of the research is outlined along with a brief review of relevant social movement literature, a discussion of Momentum's role and function within the Labour Party and Momentum's potential movement characteristics, followed by a concluding section containing a summary assessment of Momentum's credentials as a social movement. This article concludes that, although it employs some social movement tactics and utilises a movement-like identity in the recruitment of its activist base, in practice Momentum does not function as a 'true' social movement. Moving beyond

analysing it on this basis can lead to insight into why many activists quickly abandoned Momentum and the Labour Party following the 2019 General Election setback.

Methodology

The analysis and data relied on in this paper was generated during doctoral research which began in early 2018. My academic interest in Momentum grew directly from concern over the growing democratic deficit in the UK, evident in consistently low election turnout and general political apathy exhibited by many, particularly among those on lower incomes (Mair, 2013). Activism, motivated in large part by this interest, has always been an important facet of my own identity, and experience, at various points, as full-time secretary of the Blackburn with Darwen branch of UNISON, secretary of Blackburn and Darwen United Against Racism, and secretary of the Hyndburn Green Party branch. These experiences had significant bearing on my research choices and design. Having been ultimately disappointed in the effectiveness of each of these organisations in addressing the democratic deficit and related inequality of political power in the UK, I turned to small-scale, independent, cross-party community activism on my local housing estate and was still looking for a political home when Corbyn became Labour Party leader. The hope and energy associated with Corbyn's political rise and the development and activity of Momentum as an organisation seemed to have the potential to contribute to a solution to the crisis of UK democracy, and thus represented a topic worthy of further study. I recall this personal history because in designing an ethnographic study of Momentum it was necessary to acknowledge the influence of my political convictions and experiences. On-going self-reflection, as well as actively choosing not to become a full member of either Momentum or the Labour Party while undertaking the research, have been methods which I have employed to maintain a degree of separation from my subject of research. Modern-day ethnographers accept that achieving true objectivity in their research is an impossible task (Madison, 2012), but I felt that undertaking this research as an 'insider' would result in a personal investment in Momentum that could make it more difficult to be constructively critical in my analysis. Additionally, I felt that

assuming the role of a Momentum activist alongside my research would have caused a division of attention, negatively impacting on my general effectiveness as either an activist or researcher.

Ethnography has been usefully employed in research on social movements (e.g. Plows, 2008), and is also becoming established as a respected, if infrequently utilised, methodology within political science to study a variety of subject matter (e.g. Benzecry and Baiocchi, 2017). Indeed, when discussing the benefits of political ethnography, Tilly (2006, p. 410) argues:

> ethnography has great advantages over most other conventional social scientific methods as a way of getting at cause-effect relations. Most methods depend on correlations and comparative statistics, asking whether observed variation corresponds to plausible consequences of one condition or another. Ethnography engages the analyst in looking at social processes as they unfold rather than reasoning chiefly from either the conditions under which they occur or the outcomes that correlate with them.

Furthermore, at its heart political expression is arguably a fundamentally social behaviour and, whilst it may not be a mainstream point of view within the political science discipline, as Glenn points out, 'if you want to understand why someone behaves the way they do, then you need to understand the way they see the world, what they imagine they are doing, what their intentions are' (cited in Weedeen, 2010, p. 259). It is hoped that utilising an ethnographic approach provides a unique insight to the data gathered as compared to more structural or theoretical political research or primarily quantitative approaches, like those traditionally used to examine voter behaviour for instance (e.g. Clark and Lipset, 2001).

This article primarily draws upon interview data which is a well-established method within the ethnographic tradition (Madison, 2012). Twelve semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009) were undertaken with grassroots Labour and Momentum activists between August 2018 and October 2019, and participants were recruited using a snowball approach (Sharma, 2017). The first interviewees were approached through personal and professional connections and participants were

asked to assist with identifying other individuals they felt might be interested in contributing to the research. Inquiries were also sent to the general email addresses for three local Momentum branches in the Northwest area. All positive responses and recommendations were followed up. In the end, four local authority areas from the Northwest region were represented. Participants were all active in either Momentum, the Labour Party, or in most cases both. All self-defined as on the left politically as well as, at minimum, broadly supporting the Corbyn/Momentum project. Two participants had personal experience of Momentum activities on the national level besides participation in their local branch. Five had served as elected officers within Momentum. Four were elected as local councillors with the support of Momentum. Three participants were significantly more active in their local Labour Party branch than Momentum itself, generally due to pre-existing commitment and lack of additional capacity. Participants were asked consistent guide questions, but, in the spirit of ethnographic research, were also encouraged to share thoughts and opinions which they identified as important to understanding their experiences of activism within Momentum.

Interview data was examined using thematic analysis, which is a flexible approach to analysing qualitative data, particularly ethnographic data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). It represents a 'powerful method to use when seeking to understand a set of experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a data set' (Kiger and Varpio, 2020, p. 847). A standard thematic analysis was undertaken on the interview data, involving a multi-step process:

1. Familiarisation with the data: Choosing to transcribe the audio recordings of the interviews myself represented an effective opportunity to immerse myself in the data, which included over 100,000 words of text.
2. Generating initial codes: Preliminary codes were identified during this stage.
3. Searching for themes: General themes were extrapolated from the initial codes.

4. Reviewing themes: Codes were examined to ensure a 'proper fit' within themes (Kiger and Varpio, 2020, p. 852). Where necessary, codes were refined and reapplied to the data. The themes were reviewed to ensure they faithfully reflected the body of data. This stage involved an iterative and recursive process that was continued until it no longer resulted in substantive changes.

5. Defining and naming the themes: The final themes were defined and a narrative description developed for each.

6. Producing the analysis: A full thematic analysis report was compiled. This article analyses those results which focused specifically on the nature of Momentum as a social movement.

Where appropriate, participant observations (Spradley, 1980) and relevant documentary data in the form of web content, social media, meeting minutes, and published material such as from Momentum's *Organiser* newsletter are presented to support and extend the interview data through triangulation (Thomas, 1993). Participant observations were undertaken between March 2018 and December 2019, as detailed in the following table:

Table 1: Participant Observations

Date	Event
18 March 2018	Political Education Event (local Momentum branch, 'Deep Canvassing')
September 2018	The World Transformed, Liverpool (Saturday and Sunday, various events)
26 July 2019	Video Recording session (local Momentum branch, "I'm voting for Corbyn because…")
31 August 2019	Prorogation Protest Rally (Liverpool)
19 October 2019	Corbyn Rally (Grand Central Hotel, Liverpool)
30 October 2019	Momentum launch of election campaign (internet conference call)
1 November 2019	Momentum Let's Go Group training (internet conference call)
6 November 2019	Videos By the Many (internet conference call with Momentum staff and Ken Loach)

13 November 2019	Strategy meeting (internet conference call with John McDonnell)
13 November 2019	Online Teams Recruitment Call (internet conference call with Momentum staff)
14-15 November 19	Volunteering with Momentum's online Research Team
15 November 2019	Research Team Training (internet conference call with Momentum staff)
24 November 2019	Strategy Call (internet conference call with Momentum staff)
1 December 2019	Strategy Call (internet conference call with Momentum staff and John McDonnell)
4 December 2019	Labour Strategy Call (internet conference call with Owen Jones, Mark Steel, John McDonnell, Angela Rayner)
15 December 2019	Post-Election Conference Call (internet conference call)
Various dates	Slack platform, research team activities, various internet tools for Momentum's 2019 general election campaign

Wherever possible, observations were entirely overt; both interview participants and activists present during my observations of local Momentum events were fully briefed on my project and my status as a non-member of both Momentum and the Labour Party. In all cases I was welcomed despite both my research capacity and not being a member. I was registered with Momentum as a 'supporter' in order to be included on national and local Momentum emails and invitations to events. Some events, such as rallies and The World Transformed, were large-scale in nature and open for anyone to attend, and so were treated as public events for the purpose of the research; it was not feasible to introduce myself or my research during these observations. There was no vetting process at all to participate in Momentum's online general election campaign in 2019. Anyone possessing the Zoom links could attend meetings, indeed large open attendance was actively encouraged by the organisers, therefore these were also treated as essentially public events. Additionally, anyone was allowed to participate in online activities and have access to Slack forums as long as they digitally signed a GDPR agreement. Organisers freely admitted that they expected

there to be "spies" in attendance as a result. It was not possible to effectively announce my presence without unduly disrupting these events, but activists from the local branches of Momentum I was in contact with were aware of my online participation in election activities. All data collection ceased following the immediate aftermath of Labour's defeat in the 2019 general election, and Corbyn's announcement that he was stepping down as leader. This was taken as a natural endpoint to the remit of this research. Although Momentum has continued to operate and develop as an organisation since Corbyn's departure, this study therefore focuses on the initial period of Momentum's history from the creation of its predecessor organisation *Jeremy For Leader* during Corbyn's first leadership campaign in 2015 until the end of Corbyn's leadership in early 2020.

Social Movements

There is an ever-increasing body of academic literature examining the role of movements and movement parties in national politics, as well as the relationships between these movements and traditional political parties. Social movements can be broadly defined as 'networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations, engaged in political and/or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared identity' (Diani, 1992: p. 3). Another definition describes a social movement as 'a collective, organized, sustained, and noninstitutional challenge to authorities, power holders, or cultural beliefs and practices' (Goodwin & Jasper, cited in Schwartz, 2010, pp. 588-9). They may form around any number of different issues and agendas, ranging from specific single-issue campaigns, to much broader remits such as the environmental movement. Generally, social movements are informally constituted in nature, with a broader participant base that is closer to what is often referred to as the grassroots of a population and which often engage in collective action such as protests or marches and other highly visible activities (Diani, 1992). An important defining feature of social movements is their role in pursuit of societal change, but they do not participate directly in formal political processes, for example through forming recognised parties or by fielding candidates in elections (Kitschelt, 2006).

Furthermore, movements are distinct from lobbying and political interest groups in important ways. For instance, interest groups generally aim for limited change or policy direction within an existing framework rather than wholesale 'changing the rules of the game' (Touraine, 1985: p. 753). Movement activity also takes place in the form of protest or other direct action rather than being confined to voting or lobbying of individual politicians (Diani, 1992). Movements may also often be more transitory in nature than lobby and interest groups, or represent a phase of development in ways these groups do not. As Zald and Ash (1966) observed, many movements dissipate due to either success or categorical failure in their goals, or due to loss of interest or political energy; some may revise or transform their goals; others transition successfully into other more permanent entities like non-governmental organisations.

However, movements have also been observed to interact with political parties. Drawing from research conducted in the United States, Schwartz (2010) examined several empirical examples of social movements, categorising several ways in which these different movements interacted with political parties at an organisational level and forming corresponding general hypotheses regarding those types of interactions. The types of interactions were grouped into three categories:

1. 'Coordinated Interactions', including alliances and mergers;
2. 'Invasive Strategies', including insurgency, displacement and co-option; and
3. 'Hostile Strategies', including disruption, discrediting, and purges (Schwartz, 2010).

Within a UK context, Lent (2001) examined ways in which movements formed links with the Labour Party in the 1980s. His study identified three distinct ways in which movement activists forged relationships and interactions with the Labour Party. First, many joined the Labour Party as individual members and expanded their activism to include party-political activities. Second, movements and other community groups received direct funding from more left-wing Labour councils. Third, some movement activists took up paid employment in local government organisations, again under more

left-wing Labour councils, for example in equal opportunities positions to assist with tackling discrimination in the workplace.

Schwartz's and Lent's analyses focus more on the interactions as strategies or tactics in support of accomplishing the social change goals of the movements, rather than as attempts to transfer their social movement culture and traditions of organising to political parties. But social movements may also develop into political parties in their own right (della Porta, et al., 2017). Theoretically, a movement party can be defined as a social movement which possesses sufficiently structured institutional processes and policy agendas to allow it to compete meaningfully within a party political democratic system. It thus represents a 'hybrid' between political party and social movement (Kitschelt, 2006, p. 278), or as a political party with 'particularly strong organisational and external links' with a specific social movement (della Porta, et al., 2017, p. 4-5). The origins of the UK Labour Party exemplifies this process, growing out of the labour movement (Wainwright, 1987). The UK Independence Party (UKIP) also arguably is an example of a movement party. It grew out of the movement for Britain to leave the European Union, and enjoyed some success in European Parliament and local elections. However, it didn't break through into Westminster and, arguably having seen its movement goals achieved, UKIP declined in relevance following Brexit (Evans and Mellon, 2019).

Movement parties develop more easily in countries where democratic systems are accessible to smaller and newer parties, with recent notable European examples including Podemos in Spain and SYRIZA in Greece (della Porta, et al., 2017; Kitschelt, 2016). In the UK, however, the first-past-the-post electoral system makes entry into parliamentary politics difficult for new parties, particularly within national politics, and in this respect it may be more comparable to the political climate in the United States than to nearer neighbours in Europe (Clark & Lipset, 2001; Muldoon & Rye, 2020). The less rigid structures of American political parties (Schwartz, 2010) also conceivably make it easier for

movements to effectively influence American political parties than the more strictly delineated UK

parties. This means there are less resource-intensive alternatives to establishing movement parties,

There are also greater opportunities for mergers with existing parties (Muldoon & Rye, 2020;

Schwartz, 2010). This combination of systemic and political characteristics imposes particular

constraints on movement parties in the UK, and by extension on the strategic development options

available to social movements.

Momentum within the Labour Party

In relating this literature on social movements to Momentum, we can see that a crucial milestone in

the development of Momentum's organisational identity was reached in early 2017 when all

Momentum members were required to hold concurrent membership with the Labour Party

(Chessum, 2018). This represents a watershed moment in its evolution. If it ever was a 'true' social

movement, arguably from that point on it becomes extremely difficult to categorise Momentum in

this way. Instead of freely operating across the party's boundaries, Momentum's official organisation

was suddenly constrained by the structures of the Labour Party, which had various effects on the

activity and leverage of the group within Labour. This formal association contributed to a divergence

of agendas and activity between the National Office and local branches that has also been observed

by other authors (e.g. Dennis, 2019). Although always closer to both the Leader of the Opposition's

Office (LOTO) and the Labour Party more generally, the purpose and function of Momentum

nationally converged around Labour Party processes and interests, leaving more movement-related

activity to be undertaken primarily by local groups. Importantly, this development also legitimised

the organisation. Although Momentum had previously recommended slates of preferred leftist

candidates, the constitutional changes meant that it was now more acceptable for candidates to

publicly advertise their membership of Momentum during campaigns for positions in powerful

internal Labour Party structures, such as the National Executive Committee, or when competing in

candidate selection processes. It also allowed Momentum to more effectively counter claims of

entryism to the party and damaging comparisons to 1980s group Militant (e.g. Shaw, 2015), as well as develop a response to issues surrounding Labour's refusal to allow registered supporters who were accused of conflicting loyalties to vote in Corbyn's second leadership campaign in 2016 (Wilson, 2016). For many, concurrent membership with Labour was easily compatible with their activism. However, as recalled by one participant, this change to Momentum's constitution resulted in the formation of a short-lived splinter group called Grassroots Momentum, established by members who were opposed to the changes (Participant 12). These activists were concerned that the proposed constitution made Momentum too centralised and undemocratic, which they felt also undermined its social movement character. Nevertheless, drawing from both interviews and publications (e.g. Chessum, 2018), whether members agreed with the changes or not, the decision was broadly considered unilateral in that the new constitution was adopted without due democratic process. Ward & Guglielmo (2021) argue that these tensions between social movement and party political identity have particular implications in laying the groundwork for the eventual collapse of Corbyn's 'pop-socialism' in the disastrous 2019 General Election.

Membership of Momentum arguably became a primary signal of identification with one of the Labour Party's internal factions, in opposition to rival groups such as Labour First or Progress.[1] Indeed, although initially conceptualising Momentum as a bigger, modern version of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) (Kogan, 2019), founding director Jon Lansman, later expressed an explicit desire for Momentum to become 'a left Progress' within the Labour Party (Ghadiali, 2018, n.p.). Tensions existed since Momentum's inception between activists who wished it to retain a clear social movement character and others, such as Lansman, who envisioned Momentum as being firmly enshrined within Labour Party structures (Chessum, 2018). For some members, close association with Labour presented a conflict because they were already members of organisations that had been proscribed by the Party and seeking full membership of the Labour Party would necessitate a choice between allegiances. However, to understand the significance of this for many other Momentum

members, it can be useful to draw from identity theory (Snow and McAdam, 2000). When becoming active in a social movement, committed individuals adopt its collective identity, which forms a basis for their dedication to that movement. For many Momentum members who came from a social movement background, their personal and collective identities aligned with anti-establishment organisations which were often diametrically opposed to participation within traditional mainstream party politics. These members had great difficulty reconciling their movement identities with the Labour Party, contributing to internal conflict within Momentum. For these activists, Momentum could be a Labour Party faction or a social movement, but not both.

However, many members of Momentum were comfortable identifying the organisation as a left-wing faction in competition with other Labour factions representing contending ideological positions. One participant felt this factional conflict keenly in their local constituency, where their branch of Momentum
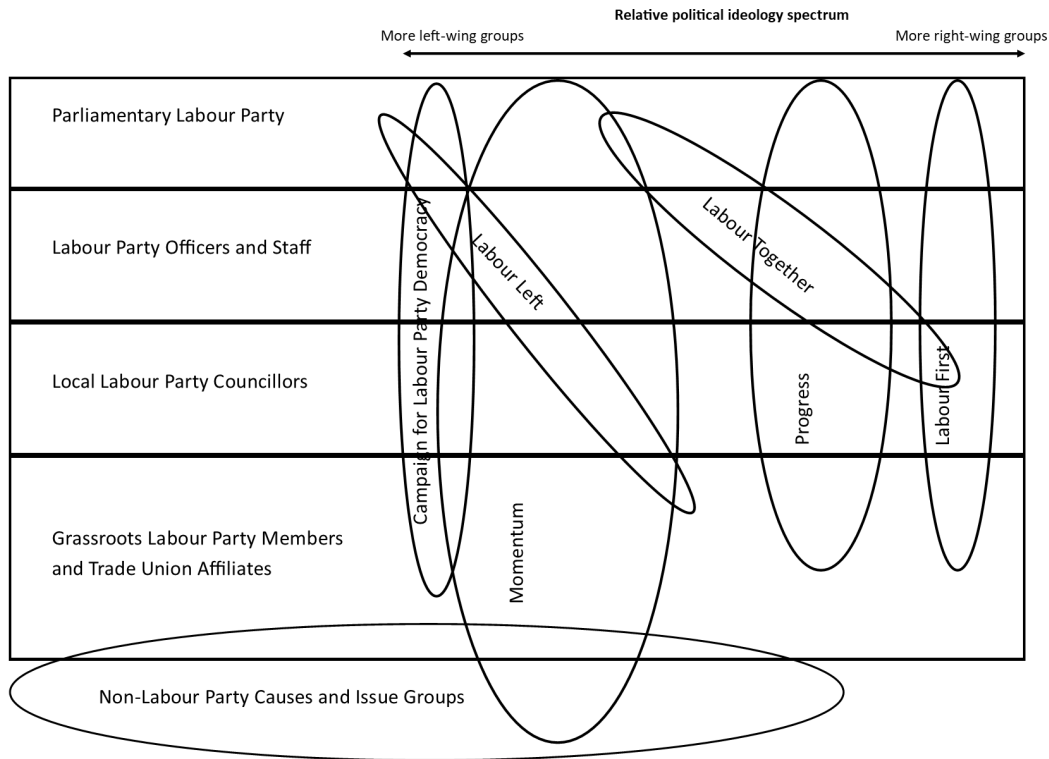
> was obviously quite left wing compared to [the local branch of] Young Labour which was dominated by the relative right of the party, Blairites and um, quite a strong body of them. And when they found out about [our local] Momentum, uh, I later learned that I was seen as very sort of, like are these lefties going to try to take us over? And um, there were complaints that we were being very factional (Participant 12).

Momentum and their intra-party factional counterparts engage in many similar activities. These include regular social media activity, organising members to assist with on-the-ground political campaigning such as canvassing during elections for candidates, contributing to policy debate and running events both in conjunction with Labour Party conference and at other points throughout the calendar (e.g. Labour First, 2017; Momentum, 2019; Progress, 2018). Furthermore, the groups often identify each other as direct opponents in a battle for power and influence within the Labour Party,

Factionalism can also be seen in the regular production of 'slates', identifying each group's preferred set of candidates for internal Labour Party elections (e.g. Chappell & Rodgers, 2021; Rodgers, 2021). This direct participation in party politics represents another aspect of Momentum's activity that sets it apart from more iconic social or political movements.

Dennis (2019, p. 1) observes that, unlike both existing party political groups and its own national office, local Momentum branches rely heavily on social media and a grassroots, 'people-powered' approach to their activities. He argues that Momentum, therefore, is a hybrid organisation, containing organisational elements that include characteristics from both party factions and movements. He describes the group as a 'movement faction', giving primary emphasis to the factional nature of the national organisation over the more movement-like attributes of local groups. In contrast, Muldoon and Rye (2020) critique Dennis's analysis, arguing that although it exists within the Party, Momentum is too distinct from the Labour Party to be considered primarily as a faction, and that the movement aspect of the organisation should be emphasised as the primary identity. They characterise Momentum as a movement that has 'emerged *from the party itself* [original emphasis]', and coin the term 'party-driven movement' to emphasise the movement identity over the party-political aspects of its hybrid nature (Muldoon and Rye, 2020, p. 2). Drawing from my own research, the following diagram helps visualise Momentum's relative position within the Labour Party alongside some other prominent groups:

Figure 1: Diagrammatic Representation of Momentum within the Labour Party

Relative political ideology spectrum

More left-wing groups ← → More right-wing groups

Parliamentary Labour Party	
Labour Party Officers and Staff	
Local Labour Party Councillors	
Grassroots Labour Party Members and Trade Union Affiliates	

Campaign for Labour Party Democracy | Labour Left | Labour Together | Progress | Labour First | Momentum

Non-Labour Party Causes and Issue Groups

Aside from their ideological differences, the main operational difference between Momentum and internal Labour groups such as Progress and Labour First relates to the level of support for, participation in, and links with non-Labour Party activity and movements: for example, the McStrike action by McDonald's workers (Team Momentum, 2018, personal communication), Save the Women's Hospital in Liverpool (Liverpool Momentum, 2018, personal communication) and the enthusiastic promotion of general nationwide protest against Boris Johnson's Brexit-related prorogation of Parliament in 2019 (Laura Parker, Momentum, 2019, personal communication). It has been well documented, and is further supported by the interviews and participant observation conducted for this research, that many Momentum members were previously primarily activists in local and national movements and campaigns such as these, and other larger social movements such as Stop The War or the LGTB+ movement. Many of these members had never been involved in mainstream party politics before (e.g. Klug et al, 2016; Kogan, 2019). These activists openly brought movement traditions to Momentum and to their activity within the Labour Party, for instance through exploring more 'movement-led campaigning' during the 2017 General Election (Rhodes,

2019, p. 174). If there is one clear overarching aim of Momentum separate from its support for Jeremy Corbyn, it is what activists routinely describe as "push[ing] the Labour Party to the left" (Participant 2). However, both individual members and local Momentum groups are free to exercise relative autonomy to assist with and endorse other causes on the ground as and when they arise.

Momentum arguably has roots in the legacy of David Miliband's grassroots organising group, Movement 4 Change; similarly, Movement 4 Change was established during Miliband's ultimately unsuccessful leadership campaign in 2010 and was disbanded immediately following Labour's general election defeat in 2015 (Scott & Wills, 2017; Ford, et al, 2021). Continuing in the tradition of Movement 4 Change (Scott and Wills, 2017) and arguably acting in concert with recent community-based initiatives from Unite the Union (Unite, 2022), Momentum also sought to develop models of community organising alongside the more traditional Labour Party election tactics, such as canvassing and voter registration drives. These initiatives further distinguished Momentum from other factional groups like Progress, and also served as a bridge between Momentum activists and local interest groups. Under Corbyn, the prominence of these activities reached a zenith during the 2019 general election campaign with the establishment of the Community Organising Unit under direct management of the LOTO team (Forde, 2022). Such activities have also been further developed since Corbyn's departure, for example through the formalisation of non-member supporters as 'Movement Builders' (Momentum 2022b). However, from the interviews and participant observation, it is apparent that these activities were not a notable feature of all local Momentum groups. Although the community activities of branches were publicised regularly in Momentum's *Organiser* newsletter, none of the project's interview participants considered this aspect of Momentum's remit important enough to mention.

Activists displayed a range of opinions concerning the specific organisational identity of Momentum, and differing expectations regarding the role of Momentum both within the Labour Party and the wider UK political landscape. Many participants emphasised the link with Corbyn's leadership and the support of a leftist shift within the Labour Party, as typified through comments such as: "I think Momentum are <u>primarily</u> there to support Corbyn's leadership, [and a] change in direction of party policy" (Participant 1). Others placed far more emphasis on Momentum's role in organising and politicising a younger, more tech-savvy generation of activists, branding Momentum as "a giant WhatsApp group" (Participant 5).

In response to the challenge of accommodating the expectations of more traditional party-political and social movement activists in one organisation, Momentum evolved a two-tier structure with clear differences between local groups and the national office. The national office represents a standard organisational structure, with elected officers alongside paid members of staff, including a National Coordinator who takes managerial responsibility for the day-to-day running of the group and the National Coordinating Group made up of elected representatives from each of Momentum's regional areas. Local branches of Momentum operate more or less independently, although member data is owned and controlled centrally by a separate registered company with Jon Lansman as the sole director (Companies House, 2021b; Momentum, 2021). Arguably, the establishment of such formal structures drives Momentum's organisational nature away from the diffuse, more informal networks commonly observed within social movements (Schwartz, 2010), although the local groups clearly gave members sufficient freedom for them to maintain a shared identity as social movement activists. Observations and interview data suggest two archetypes for local Momentum branches, the first characterised by Momentum representing an overlay on top of pre-existing groups of traditional left wing Labour activists. Activity in these groups has not changed significantly as a result of identification with Momentum, and existing traditions, structures and ideologies remain largely intact. Momentum offers these activists an additional or alternative forum for activities rather than a

materially different approach to organising or conducting local politics, whether in more left wing or more centrist local authority areas.

The second type of group is dominated by newer members, many of whom came to Labour from outside movements and backgrounds, or existing Labour Party members who became active specifically as a result of their involvement with Momentum. The influx of this type of member into Momentum has been noted by other authors (e.g. Klug & Rees, 2018). In the four local authority areas I studied, I found that this type of activist profile predominates in areas where there was no pre-existing formal organisation among leftist Labour activists. Consequently, the two types of local Momentum groups possess generally distinct member composition and identifiably different local traditions and ways of working. Many Momentum members who were new to the Labour Party were less attached to Labour traditions and often did not have the same party loyalty as those who have a longer history on the Labour Left. However, some of these newer party activists were successfully recruited into higher levels of constituency involvement, including running for local council positions and even competing for selection as MP candidates. This increased their personal identification with and commitment to the Labour Party.

Furthermore, under Corbyn's leadership there was significant two-way traffic between LOTO and Momentum's national office in terms of staff, and this direct exchange of personnel also represented the tendency for national office staff to prioritise Labour Party allegiance over movement identity. For example, James Schneider, co-founder of Momentum, became Corbyn's Director of Strategic Communications in 2016 (Ford, et al., 2021), and Laura Parker, Momentum's National Coordinator from November 2017 until December 2019, took up her post directly from service as Corbyn's private secretary (Parker, 2021). Additionally, in September 2019, one participant with strong connections to the National Office spoke of many Momentum staff members "leaving to work on the LOTO team" in anticipation of an imminent General Election, and commenting that Momentum does

not set its own policy positions and priorities because it "exists to be the spokesman [sic] of the Leader's Office. [We] would not want to contradict" (Participant 7). This lends weight to the characterisation of Momentum as Corbyn's 'private army' (e.g. Wilby, 2016) or 'Praetorian guard' (Ward & Guglielmo, 2021). Identifying a movement so specifically with a single individual rather than a social goal has left Momentum open to accusations of being a 'cult of personality' (e.g. Blakely, 2016; Kogan, 2019). Similarly, in Ward & Guglielmo's (2021, p. 5) analysis of the appearance of 'popular socialism', or 'pop-socialism', in the UK, Corbyn's position as 'pop-leader' was fundamental to the development of connections and coordination between left-wing political actors and activists, which were formalised by Momentum as an organisation. Momentum's structure and relationship to the Leader's Office under Corbyn, from the constitutional changes enacted in early 2017 through the 2019 General Election, is illustrated in the diagram below.

Figure 2: Momentum's Structure under Corbyn, 2017-2019
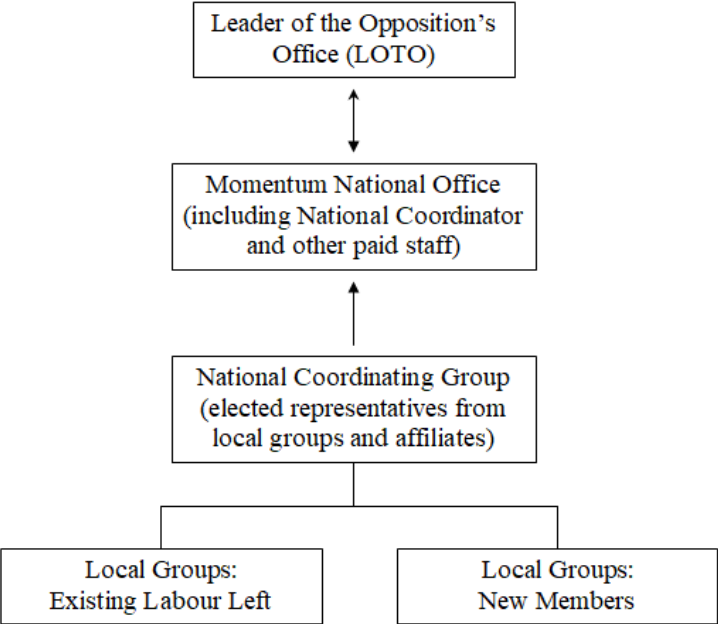
Moreover, by fielding candidates and campaigning for them on the basis that they belong to Momentum, and by running for and holding official positions within the Labour Party whilst identifying publicly as Momentum members, it is not hard to see how Momentum left itself open to

accusations such as those from Owen Smith, that it is operating as a 'party within a party' (Edwards, 2016, n.p.) rather than a traditional social movement as such.

Momentum as a Movement

There is a long-standing tradition in some sections of the Labour Party of engagement and cooperation with extra-parliamentary movements. This was a hallmark of Tony Benn's leftist politics, whose political legacy Corbyn believed he was reviving (Wainwright, 2018). Benn argued that by prioritising the interests of social movements over those of the City of London and other capitalist institutions, the Labour Party had an opportunity to make an important move towards popular sovereignty as opposed to parliamentary sovereignty. Indeed, earlier in his career Corbyn was active in many of Benn's initiatives such as organising joint conferences between social movements and local Labour Party constituencies (Wainwright, 2018). Furthermore, many active Momentum members admire Benn's politics and believe they are contributing to a resurgence of Bennism within the party. For example, one participant characterised their local Momentum group as "the main body was sort of old members in a kind of Bennite tradition who had rejoined recently... they saw Corbyn as a reflection of that, an end to the New Labour era" (Participant 12). Whereas Benn was ultimately unsuccessful in securing the deputy leadership role in 1981, Corbyn's leadership offered an unprecedented opportunity to explore how these political traditions could be implemented.

Indeed, Corbyn's first leadership contest in 2015 was, in essence, a continuation of the broader historical struggle by Labour Left to attain power within the Party. What made his campaign different, and what many argue helped form the basis of Momentum's social movement character (Klug, et al., 2016), was the breadth of different supporters that were attracted and who were able to vote as 'registered supporters' (Nunns, 2018). Allowing individuals to participate with a lower level of political commitment to the party meant that Momentum could attract a diverse group of people, including activists from non-Labour organisations and from inside the party. In addition to some

former members being drawn back to Labour, some who may not previously have been politically active were also inspired. The effective use of social media by Corbyn's campaign and the informal, local grassroots character of many of the organisation's activities at this stage arguably gave many activists a comfortable forum to explore and express their political opinions at the same time as feeding off the energy associated with participating in a social movement (Dennis, 2019). This was a potentially attractive combination for people inexperienced with formal party politics.

Corbyn's own political identity also burnished Momentum's movement credentials. He had participated in many political and social movements during his career such as the Stop the War Coalition and support for Palestine and other international causes (Bower, 2019; Gilbert, 2016). Several of my participants felt that Corbyn's activism and political style offered encouragement for supporters to behave as though they were operating within a social movement context as opposed to traditional party politics, even as elected councillors. For example, one participant commented:

> I see myself as, like, a Labour Party councillor but very much like a Momentum activist and belonging to that, because that's the forum that's... we bring ideas to each other. [...] So it's about questioning things in the council and being an activist. You know, I think that's like the main thing. You can't get complacent (Participant 11).

The 2015 leadership campaign appealed directly to the more anti-establishment fringes of the Labour membership and UK society more generally, reflecting Corbyn's underdog status in the contest and, at the same time, serving to maximise his potential support by drawing from those who previously may have had little interest in or influence within the Labour Party. With new movement parties effectively blocked from full participation within the UK first-past-the-post Parliamentary system (Muldoon & Rye, 2020), the opportunities for these groups to attain meaningful power had previously been limited.

Overall, participants who identified primarily as Momentum activists (as opposed to Labour activists) tended to have history participating in activism outside of Labour and were also much more open to categorising Momentum as a movement, even if their comments do not directly reflect the theoretical definitions of 'social movement' presented above. Two participants were particularly specific in their descriptions of Momentum as a movement:

> I would say that it functions primarily as a social and campaigning movement and to support the election of a Labour government with anti-austerity and socialist policies (Participant 9).

> I still see it as like one body of people that feed into something and then that gets filtered into a direction. Um, so we run alongside the Labour Party but I think we also present campaigning and alternative narratives, or we provide a platform for like many discussions that sort of get pushed to the side because they're not in the mainstream media. [...] So, Momentum, the social movement side of it, is that it gives an alternative narrative and it gives platforms, a platform to ideas that usually wouldn't have that platform (Participant 11).

However, the characteristics identified previously should make us cautious about accepting such claims that Momentum is a social movement. For example, Momentum has a wide-ranging policy programme, as expressed through its annual recommendations for conference motions, and relatively rigid national organisational structure that included an average of 21 paid members of staff in 2018 (Momentum Campaign (Services) Ltd, 2019). These are characteristics of a very different sort of organisation than more iconic, diffuse, non-institutional social movements (Schwartz, 2010). Momentum's relationship with Labour in the 2010s was in many ways comparable to Lent's (2001) description of social movement involvement with UK Labour Left in the 1980s: individual activists taking up roles and activism within the party without abandoning their social movement

involvement, traditions, and roots, albeit with a great deal more conscious and deliberate bureaucratic organisation originating from within the left wing of the party than apparently took place decades ago.

Furthermore, none of the participants who had a long history with the Labour Party, or who associated their personal identities more with Labour rather than Momentum, supported describing Momentum as a movement. Some were quite strongly opposed to this categorisation:

> It's not trying to get a mass movement of people and as far as I know that's the only way to get radical transformative change, when millions of people are making it clear that it's going to happen. [...] Well, it was initially to try and ensure that Corbyn was elected and stayed re-elected as leader... but then secondly it was to try and get a Corbyn-led Labour Party in government. Although it's been mainly reduced to organising within the Labour Party rather than campaigning externally (Participant 2).

> It's designed to be a 'pressure group'. To effect change within the Labour Party. So, you can't have all these positions and them sort of mirroring the Labour Party. No. [...] Momentum's a pressure group designed to do one thing which is to achieve the socialist Labour-led government by Jeremy Corbyn. And also to change the Labour Party's policies on many things (Participant 3).

Others simply did not see the distinction particularly important:

> Well, I think this is perhaps the first time I've heard that use of language used, as being a social movement. A debate that's often had is: to what extent is Momentum's role within the Labour Party? and outside the Labour Party? (Participant 12).

I can't define it. Sorry. I haven't got a definition. Because it's a loose group isn't it? And will remain so as long as it doesn't have any power. Power as in changing anything in government or causing changes in legislation. We haven't got a Labour government... (Participant 10).

Whilst being 'part of the movement' was of great importance to some participants, others were primarily concerned with Labour Party activism and more traditional ways of party organising and campaigning.

Momentum is often discussed alongside European movement parties such as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, in the context that Momentum is a similar phenomenon that evolved differently due to the particular constraints of the UK's democratic system (e.g. Bush, 2016; Prentoulis and Thomassen, 2017; Ward and Guglielmo, 2021). Arguably, this is directly linked to attempts to conceptualise the organisation as representing a melding of movement and party-political activism, whilst acknowledging the fact that, unlike Podemos and Syriza, it was not formally established as a political party in its own right. However, one participant, at the same time as supporting describing Momentum as a movement, was quite clear in their rejection of direct parallels with these European movement parties:

I think there was one point where it looked like it could have gone that way [movement party like Podemos], where Momentum could have gone to like, say not, we're not ascribing to the Labour Party, we're actually, we're Momentum and we're going this way. But I think there was a very strong pull then, back to the Labour Party and Momentum as a social movement is there to support the Labour Party. Because we, I would agree with this, we couldn't trust the machinery of the Labour Party at that point. We had to have something different. We had to have something... related, but different (Participant 4).

Returning to Kitschelt's (2006) characterisations of different modes of collective action within his seminal chapter on Movement Parties, provides a potential theoretical insight into Momentum's organisational identity, and also argues against its categorisation as either a movement or a movement party. Kitschelt's model (2006, p. 281) restricts social movements to operating as 'extra-institutional disruption'. Despite its self-categorisation as a movement, such extra-institutional disruption was foreclosed to Momentum given its constitutional association with the Labour Party. Additionally, the group has a relatively wide policy remit compared to Kitschelt's social movements. As such, Momentum might be categorised as what Kitschelt (2006, p. 281) describes as a 'lobbying club', designed to influence rather than participate directly in electoral representative politics. Indeed, arguably, other Labour factional groups such as Progress and Labour First may also fit this description. However, where Momentum arguably differs from other Labour party factions, and other lobbying groups, is the tactical importance ascribed to public identification as Momentum members for its preferred candidates for internal Labour Party positions, and local and Parliamentary seats. These activities appear more characteristic of what Kitschelt (2006, p. 281) refers to as 'cadre parties'. Indeed, at the same time as contributing to arguments against Momentum's characterisation as a social movement, this categorisation also potentially goes some way to establishing why Momentum was frequently portrayed as a 'party within a party' (e.g. Dennis, 2019). Alongside expressing a desire for Momentum to act as more of a 'lobbying club' than a 'movement', one participant specifically identified Momentum's effort to establish democratic structures within the organisation as the source of these criticisms . They felt,

> it shouldn't have opened itself to be like some sort of democratic, like sort of... I'm saying this as a democratic person meself [sic], but, it's meant to be a pressure group. It's not designed to be a party within a party. You start going down that path, you're mirroring then a party within a party (Participant 3).

All participants expressed a personal desire for a shift to the left within the Labour Party specifically and UK politics more generally, and its relationship to Corbyn and his left-wing agenda was the primary reason participants gave for their support of Momentum. Where participants differed was in their vision regarding both the nature of this shift and the steps necessary to bring it about. The division discussed above was once again present. Participants identifying as primarily Labour activists saw shifting Labour Party policy as the primary goal rather than wholesale organisational change. On the other hand, movements exist as change agents, and so, perhaps unsurprisingly, the activists who believed they were part of a movement, also often believed Momentum was, and should be, aiming to fundamentally change the Labour Party itself rather than just its policies. For example, advocating large-scale reselection of Labour's MPs, so that "we have a Labour Party that is inherently socialist" (Participant 11). This was often justified as an effort to return the party back to its roots. As this participant put it,

> We all had this idea that the Labour Party, the reason that we hadn't been members before was because we didn't see it as a left-wing party. We didn't really see it as, um, a political group that presented what we thought the Labour Party should be. And I remember like a few of us having conversations that we felt that like during the Blair years that the party had gone very centrist, that it had sort of betrayed its working-class roots (Participant 11).

The large majority of participants freely admitted to wanting to change the Labour Party, in some way or another, because it had become too 'right-wing'. To justify their position, there is a general reliance on the belief that the majority of grassroots Labour members are more left wing than the body of Labour MPs, largely based on the strength of rank-and-file support for Corbyn during his two leadership elections. However, despite many left-wing activists' deep commitment to Labour as being 'their' party, socialism has historically struggled to gain a foothold in the Party. Prominent Momentum-supporting author Hilary Wainwright (1987, p. 1) opened her first book with the

statement: 'the Labour Party has always seemed to me to be a conservative party', and it is arguably this history that forms the basis for accusations of entryism in response to Momentum's desire to remake the party in a socialist image. It is important for modern activists to appreciate the long history of left-right conflict within Labour alongside the entrenched small-c conservatism of the party, and to take account of the corresponding feelings of ownership of the Party on the part of many members of Labour's 'right wing'.

Conclusion

Language is important in organisational context, and can carry both overt and subtle meanings. Considering the message critically, Momentum's invitation on its webpage to join 'the' movement can have different interpretations, each with its implications. One reading begs the question: which movement? On the other hand, the language could also imply that Momentum itself *is* the movement, conjuring an image of a vibrant, energetic force for large-scale societal change. Promising a potentially exhilarating and gratifying experience, this is an effective recruitment and advertising tool, as evident from the influx of both Momentum and Labour members during Corbyn's leadership. Many other organisations and campaigns also seek to capitalise on the appeal of membership of a movement. Recent examples are wide-ranging and include the description of the Time to Change mental health charity, publicly endorsed by the former Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, as a 'social movement' (Time to Change, 2022, n.p.), and Boris Johnson's exhortation to the British public to 'join the movement' and get their Covid booster jabs (Boyd, 2022, n.p.), as well as Sport England's current 'Join the Movement' campaign (Sport England, 2022). Even Momentum's rival, Progress, has described itself as a 'movement of centre-left Labour party members and supporters' (Progress, 2018, n.p.). However, at least nationally, Momentum seems to have positioned itself firmly within the context of Labour Party factionalism, with groups like Progressive Britain and Labour First being main rivals, and, for the local groups represented in my research, its

active membership operating primarily within the party's traditional structures as local councillors and constituency members.

The different phrases that have been coined to describe Momentum's movement-like attributes, particularly their tactics during election campaigning and the links to extra-parliamentary groups, place significant emphasis on its identification as a movement organisation. Muldoon and Rye (2020, p. 2) argue that Momentum as a 'party-driven movement' is a hybrid organisation on the basis that membership is drawn primarily from the social movement activist community and that it utilises 'certain aspects of movement organising'. These aspects do link the group to social movements, but in my view the authors do not go far enough to justify the use of the word 'movement' as the primary descriptor. If the primary and/or overriding goal or activity is electoral support or campaigning for a particular party or candidate, this does not in itself constitute the pursuit of social or systemic change which is a defining feature of social movements (Schwartz, 2010). Although 'party-driven movements' may mobilise significant numbers of people in a manner similar to social movements, this also does not offer sufficient distinction to separate their function from political party activism. The groups continue to work within existing systems rather than fundamentally challenge them, and the party-movement cooperation prioritises the party's electoral success over movement goals thereby undermining the non-institutional nature characterising movements in general. On the other hand, Dennis's (2019) 'movement faction' categorisation recognises that Momentum is primarily a faction within Labour, but that it manifests movement qualities through their use of social media and member-focused organisation at the local level. However, while my research supports characterising Momentum as a factional group, there is more to being a movement than tactics and being member-led. Dennis's arguments again appear to take Momentum's nature as a movement for granted, without fully examining or testing that claim. In Momentum's case, whilst it might advance the interests of an identifiable ideological tradition within

the Labour Party, it does not directly represent any particular interest group or movement from the wider UK societal context.

As mentioned, at the local level Momentum does support a variety of extra-parliamentary initiatives, such as social justice campaigns, local interest groups, or community activism. Through this, Momentum could be seen to be contributing to different movements, either large or small in scale, but this is not the same as actually *being* a movement in itself, nor does it help identify *which* movement Momentum primarily represents. As part of the 2022 National Coordinating Group elections, Your Momentum, a new faction that has emerged within Momentum itself, identified a key aim as being to '[build] the socialist movement' (Your Momentum, 2022, n.p.). If adopted as an official Momentum position, this might go some way to answering the question of *which* movement. It would clearly present Momentum as contributing to a movement rather than *being* one, although it could also imply an exclusion of other movement causes that might be valued by the membership.

However, from the perspective communicated by the activists I interviewed, it could be argued that, in practice, Momentum's movement actually had a different goal. From their experience, getting Corbyn elected as Labour Leader, then achieving a Corbyn-led Labour government, *was* the movement. Taking this view potentially provides clarity and definition to Momentum as a movement and also goes some way to explaining why many members left Momentum following the categorical failure in this goal after the General Election defeat in 2019. Indeed, this picture of Momentum as a personality-driven movement is consistent with observations made by Ward and Guglielmo (2021), who identified Corbyn's role as 'pop-leader' as both central and vital to the establishment and development of Britain's version of 'pop-socialism' as expressed through Momentum. However, a personality-driven movement does not represent actual societal change as such. Therefore, my findings align with Ward and Guglielmo's characterisation of Momentum as part of a 'new form of left politics' (2021, p. 1) as opposed to a social movement or a movement hybrid.

This conclusion is reinforced by returning to my interview participants after Corbyn stood down from the party leadership. The four newer Labour members who had not sought an elected position in local government ceased active involvement in Momentum and the Labour Party within a few months following the 2019 election defeat. All then either left the party or allowed their membership to lapse soon after Starmer became Leader. In contrast, the eight who were either long-standing Labour members or activists whom Momentum supported to pursue electoral politics maintained a similar level of activism after Corbyn's departure. With hindsight, given that many members were attracted to being part of a social movement rather than becoming Labour Party activists, Momentum should have expended more time and energy establishing a clear movement cause beyond that of "getting Corbyn elected". The extent to which Momentum can do so in a post-Corbyn era is therefore an area of interest for future research on the organisation.

Notes

1. In May 2021, Progress announced its decision to rebrand itself as Progressive Britain (Progressive Britain, 2021). However, it was 'Progress' for the duration of data collection and the scope of this PhD project so comparisons with Momentum during the Corbyn era are made with reference to Progress rather than Progressive Britain.

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