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Dressed to the left

by Anabella Pollen

On 28 September 2015, on the eve of his inaugural conference speech as the newly appointed leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn invited journalists to his hotel room in Brighton to witness him adding the final touches to his speech. What the journalists were most interested in, however, were not Corbyn's words on the page but the sandals on his feet. The photograph that was published in the *Daily Express* showed press priorities writ large in the surreptitious foregrounding of Corbyn's footwear; his papers were barely visible. Described in the accompanying text as 'the ultimate style *faux pas*', the dressed body of the so-called 'veteran left-winger' was used as a symbol for the apparently undesirable qualities of the socialist body politic. The looming red socks were red flags.

Synonymous with 'muesli-munching' and '*Guardian*-reading', sandal-wearing is a term that has long been used to disparage liberals by the right-wing press. Added to the widely circulated information that Corbyn wears jumpers knitted by his mother, takes sandwiches to Parliament in a Tupperware box and likes nothing better than digging his allotment, Corbyn and his choice of footwear were placed firmly in the frame of an old-fashioned 'loony left', evoking the 'cranks' that George Orwell dismissed in 1937. He famously complained, 'One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words "Socialism" and "Communism" draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, "Nature Cure" quack, pacifist, and feminist in England.'

The interwar socialist sandal-wearers that Orwell despised espoused a broad range of utopian ideals as part of their embrace of life reform in the round. For such campaigners,

healthy eating and the casting-off of clothing constriction were as important to the making of a new world as votes on a ballot papers. These figures were inheritors of a William Morris-influenced socialism of the late 19th century, particularly its manifestation in the writings and practices of Edward Carpenter, the person most associated with socialism in sandals. As an openly gay, libertarian poet, philosopher and mystic at the centre of a bohemian circle, Carpenter's pioneering ideas about the simplification of life, from the pursuit of a vegetarian diet to the promotion of rural crafts, prefigure many of the core aspects of alternative lifestyles in the present day.

Carpenter burned his own conventional clothing as symbols of class privilege, and dressed instead in an artistic broad-brimmed hat, silk cummerbund and knee breeches, when he was clothed at all, for he combined his dress reform with a love of nudism, or 'sunbaths'. As part of this, Carpenter believed shoes to be 'leather coffins' for the feet. Having first requested sandal samples from a friend who was living in India in the mid-1880s, Carpenter went on to adopt the footwear as a core part of his dress code. Photographs show him wearing his own designs over knee-length stockings at his smallholding near Sheffield. Socks and sandals here show the adoption of an important principle of dress reform for health in the late 19th century, where the wearing of a layer of pure woollens over the whole body for 'sanitary' purposes was popularised by the German physiologist Dr Gustav Jaeger. Carpenter's sock-and-sandal arrangement was a moral as well as a practical choice for the weather in northern England.

The photographer and writer of the *Daily Express* article may not have known of Carpenter, but the dismissive coverage of Corbyn's appearance—described as 'straggly beard and open-necked shirt'—echoes right-wing responses to other socialists' sartorial choices in more recent history. Former Labour leader Michael Foot was memorably derided for appearing at a 1981 Service of Remembrance with characteristically dishevelled hair and for looking like 'a navvy' in what was incorrectly described as a worker's donkey jacket. In the same month as the socks-and-sandals photograph circulated, Corbyn had experienced a parallel episode as he attended his first ceremonial event as leader. After he stood silent through 'God Save the Queen' at a commemoration of the Battle of Britain at St Paul's cathedral, the right-wing press rained criticism upon him. Later, David Cameron chastised

Corbyn's dress and demeanour by charging him to 'put on a proper suit, do up your tie and sing the national anthem'.

Curiously enough, Corbyn's moulded sports sandals place him in a highly fashionable contemporary category. 'Normcore', a style recognisable perhaps only to fashion insiders, involves wearing—with an ironic twist—the unassuming everyday dress of the middle aged. Alongside sweatshirts, baseball caps and so-called 'mom jeans' of comfortable and conventional cut, slip-on sandals and socks are a central part of this knowing, parodic wardrobe. As one of fashion's ever-shifting internal convulsions, what was formerly seen as outside of fashion and the height of ugliness is brought back inside, celebrated and remade in Normcore. Unwittingly, perhaps, Corbyn was on point.

Whether derided as fashion *faux pas* or repositioned as fashion forward, politicians' dress choices are always under minute scrutiny. Tabloid press photographs, with their heavy handed highlights, zoom in on the stylistic choices even of those who wish to stand outside the celebrity circus. Whether encoded as duffle coats and donkey jackets, hand-knits and hessian, or socks and sandals, those seen to bear the mantle of socialist politics carry a particularly heavy symbolic burden.