Hard Times

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The State of the Left

Table Of Contents

EDITORIAL

The State of the Left

After the financial crisis of 2008 the left did not take control of the political agenda when they had the chance to argue for an alternative to short term risk-taking in finance, rewarded by bonuses for the rich and greedy, and tax avoidance. There could have been a programme for the people and for regulating and controlling capital. In the ensuing austerity period, however, the proper left stepped in on the back of issues raised by anti-austerity movements outside mainstream politics, and provided a firm left path that gained popular support: this proper left wants to terminate neoliberalism and free markets, to redistribute wealth and create a less ecologically disastrous economy. From the Indignados to Occupy to Greece a left alternative began to rise from below. It took party form in Syriza, Podemos, in the work of Sanders and Corbyn, in Portugal, and elsewhere. There has not been a proper left revival everywhere. Die Linke, for example, has not taken centre stage (though it increased its membership and share of the vote for a short period in 2009/10) as the proper left has in other places, maybe because austerity was less harsh in Germany.

This issue looks at the changing fortunes and state of the left, especially the rise of the proper left and the return of their ideas to the mainstream, after the financial crisis and austerity. Why an international remit rather than a UK focus for this issue? The financial crisis was experienced across Europe and our issue provides a synopsis and setting side by side of left responses across nation states. This can provide evidence on how either internationally-related or nationally specific the left is today and what international solidarity could mean. The contents of the issue are shaped in part by who was able to write for us and space limits. However, we aimed to go not just beyond the UK but also beyond Europe, although Europe is the main focus.

Post-austerity the proper left has surfed the wave of protest, using it to reassert its values. Roberto Pedretti in this issue says that the crisis of the left was partly caused by its acceptance of neoliberal responses to structural transformations. It was too electorally timid and ideologically convinced to reject neoliberalism. A change has come

with the rise of the proper left rejecting this paradigm. The proper left has made it possible, in some places, to talk about socialism again 30 years after 1989. Privatisation and neo-liberalism are no longer the default benchmark. David Landy discusses the challenge to this in the fight against water privatisation in Ireland. The alternatives – social ownership and egalitarianism - are part of the mainstream agenda again.

The discussion can be less now about whether socialism is dead and more how to link the traditional left agenda that has come back in with disarming the far right, mobilising support across social strata and demographic groups, engaging with questions raised in this issue not traditionally associated with left/right binaries, and how to implement left programmes and confront fierce opposition.

Is the proper left just the old left resurging? The articles on France, amongst others, discuss the left in relation to its traditional concerns but also ones newer for socialists to take on. Sectarianism is being overcome, the plural left combining, as discussed in the articles on Portugal and Pakistan. Dogmatism has shifted too. Responses in recent years have raised issues less central for the left in the past, for instance rethinking the forms social ownership could take and responding to new social formations like precarity and issues such

as migration, Europe, climate emergency, basic income and reducing the working week. These themes have often (if not always) been shunned by mainstream statist socialists because of the latter's emphasis on growth, work and rights in the workplace. But Charles Masquelier on Hamon in France and Lee-Anne Broadhead on Canada, for example, talk about engagement with such issues. Lee-Anne adds decolonisation, an important concern that could get more attention than it has done in this volume.

The new proper left has built on bottom-up popular participation. Mélenchon's proposed assembly and his and Corbyn's popular inputs into policy are discussed in this issue. Heather Mendick's article focuses on conflict between grassroots Corbyn supporters in the UK and the more centrist party elite. In the heavily privatised UK there has been a return to social ownership as something to be rolled forward, rather than privatisation and the market as the assumed approach. This includes old-style public ownership but also co-ops and local and regional social ownership. So, there is a devolved participatory element. Hamon's interest in co-ops is discussed by Charles Masquelier. These approaches are about popular rather than private control.

The proper left has risen out of social movements, Podemos in Spain an obvious example, or there has been a

movement basis within political parties. Heather Mendick discusses Momentum in the UK and our issue has articles on France, Canada and Greece that flag up the movement aspect within left parties. All of this is beyond just the party or state delivering socialism from above and beyond social ownership as just national state ownership.

Non-economic issues are important for many of the parties, religion (in Pakistan, Poland and Ireland, for instance), gender, and migration have become a central issue for many left parties. Cultural and 'identity' issues have become added to left/right economic and social ones. Some of the left have tried to counter the threat of the far right by riding the anti-immigration bandwagon, playing their part in whipping up racism and hatred: Mélenchon in France, some voices in Poland, and Aufstehen in Germany (the latter not covered in our issue but relevant here).

The role of Europe features in Corbyn's ambivalence on the Brexit process, the coup d'etat by the Troika in Greece and Mélenchon's willingness to pull out of the EU. There is antagonism towards the EU on the left, for left as well as other reasons, as well as a more prevalent approach geared towards working within the EU. Europe is a neoliberal capitalist club, but is it to be changed from within or to be exited? The case of Syriza and Eunice Goes' article on

Portugal raise the question of how much socialist or social democratic policies can be followed within the European Union. Corbyn's position may have to do with political balancing but also his lifelong belief that membership of the EU is an obstruction to a democratic socialist government pursuing aims such as nationalisation and reversing privatisation. But which aspects of the EU are limiting for the left varies. For Eunice, in Portugal it is monetary union. Other constraints, she says, can be worked around. Eunice also raises the issue of inequalities in power between poorer and richer members of the EU.

The proper left, on the fringes just a few years ago, now has real electoral promise. Mélenchon's performance in the 2017 French election and Corbyn's in party leadership contests and the UK general election command attention. Podemos was leading in the polls soon after they were founded and have the possibility of being part of a Spanish left government at the time of writing. The anti-austerity Portuguese left is in power and Syriza won on an anti-austerity platform, although they have since compromised and lost power in the 2019 general election.

In demographic terms the rise of the precariat means that the left cannot be just about the working class. This insecure cross-class group is open to appeals from the firm left and far

right. The young and educated are also important to left support. This leads to a pluralism and populism of the left, in this context meaning popular support across social groups including but beyond the working class. So political power for the proper left seems possible and social alliances that can deliver electoral support are there to be mobilised. The issue now is less whether democratic socialism has support, but more whether that support can be mobilised to the extent it can edge past the right in elections and how opposition to the proper left can be overcome.

The proper left has succeeded in reviving democratic socialism and moving onto wider issues such as climate emergency and less work. There is a social base after austerity for a firm left politics in government. But there should be no illusions about the backlash the left in power will face, from the centre-left, the right, the media, international institutions and capital. Embeddedness in society and in popular movements willing to sustain the left will be vital.

Sebastian Berg and Luke Martell

The Corbyn Project: a View from the UK Grassroots

Heather Mendick

(London)

In the BBC documentary *Labour - The Summer That Changed Everything*, about the 2017 UK General Election, there is a scene that became a thousand memes. On election night, we see *Labour* MP (Member of Parliament) Stephen Kinnock with other Party members in a pub awaiting the results. The television announces the exit poll predicting a hung parliament, *not* the *Labour* wipe-out that many professional politicians and pundits, Stephen included, had been anticipating. He stares blankly at the screen, unable even to fake enthusiasm for his party's projected parliamentary gains. The voice-over remarks: 'I'm not sure what Stephen's face is revealing but perhaps he's realising the Corbyn-free tomorrow he's been thinking about might never actually come'. This scene captures two things relevant to this article. First, this is the moment when Jeremy Corbyn's *Labour Party* avoided the fate of our sister parties across Europe as our popular support increased

rather than collapsed. Second, Stephen's face signals the difficulties of changing the direction of an existing party whose infrastructure, including its MPs, was formed within a different political culture.

Across Europe we have seen 'the rapid capitulation of … social democratic heavyweight[s] in times of austerity', dubbed pasokification after its first victim, Greece's *PASOK*. *PASOK*, the main party of power in Greece since its democracy was restored in 1974, went from being the country's largest party with 160 seats representing 43.9 per cent of the popular vote in 2009 to being its smallest party with just 13 seats and 4.7 per cent support in 2015. Similarly,

[i]n France, the incumbent Socialist Party polled a mere 6.4 per cent in the 2017 presidential election - its worst-ever result - and won just 30 seats in the National Assembly (down from 280). In the Netherlands, the *Dutch Labour Party* was reduced to 5.7 per cent in the same year (a fifth of its previous vote). And in Germany, the Social Democratic Party

(SPD), the grandfather of the European centre-left, achieved a new nadir in last September's election, winning just 20.5 per cent of the vote and 153 seats. (Eaton 2018)

In contrast parties of the left that reject austerity have gained electoral support: Greece's *Syriza* in 2015, France's *La France Insoumise* (France Unbowed) and the Netherlands' *GroenLinks* (Green Left) in 2017, and since 2014, *Podemos* in Spain.

In the UK and Portugal, established left parties, the *Labour Party* and the *Partido Socialista*, have revived by adopting anti-austerity politics. In the UK, there is a left insurgency similar to those in Greece, France, the Netherlands and Spain however *not* through a new party of the left but within our country's social democratic heavyweight. This Corbyn Project has attracted hundreds of thousands of new members, expanded the electorate and engaged many young people in electoral politics for the first time. *Labour*'s internal revolution has parallels with the left insurgency in the US *Democratic Party*, perhaps because in both countries, the lack of proportional representation makes it difficult for new parties to gain ground. In taking on and attempting to transform an existing party with over a hundred years of history, you gain an infrastructure of elected politicians, including MPs like Stephen Kinnock, and thousands of local councillors; a party apparatus of paid staff, internal committees, and detailed rules and practices; and affiliations by the trade union movement and socialist societies. In this article I discuss the experience of engaging with this infrastructure from a grassroots perspective.

The elected politicians

In *Parliamentary Socialism*, Ralph Miliband argues *Labour* has never been a socialist party because its MPs are committed to top-down reformism, or Labourism, over the bottom-up radicalism favoured by much of its grassroots. He ends by asserting that this cannot change because *Labour*'s parliamentarians will never relinquish their veto over the leadership. Yet, in 2015, they did. Previously, *Labour*'s leader was decided by an electoral college with a third of the votes going to each, the *Parliamentary Labour Party* (PLP), the membership and the trade unions. In 2015, this changed to One Member One Vote and the electorate included people paying £3 to register as a supporter. Now MPs' votes had the same value as those of rank-and-file members. But MPs could still 'protect' the party from a socialist leader as all candidates needed backing from 15 per cent of the PLP. In response to a remarkable grassroots campaign, some MPs lent their nominations to Corbyn despite supporting other candidates.

They did this because they could not imagine him winning. As Corbyn's support grew, they launched vitriolic

"They fear you."
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attacks in the media against him and his supporters. These continued after we won culminating in June 2016's attempt to undemocratically remove Corbyn as leader via mass resignations, negative press briefings, bullying and a no-confidence vote supported by 172 out of 229 MPs. This 'Chicken Coup' was resisted by mass demonstrations and *actions coordinated by Momentum, the successor organisation to the Corbyn* for Leader Campaign. Even after Corbyn was re-elected leader in 2016 with increased support and after *Labour* made electoral gains in 2017, the assault continued. One MP called Corbyn 'a fucking racist and anti-semite' and the Twitter hashtag #TrotsRabbleDogs combines some of the insults thrown at party activists by members of the PLP during summer 2016.

In the grassroots, people are angry. Ordinary members are suspended and expelled for social media posts or public comments criticising MPs. Yet if we complain about MPs' abuse, we are told their comments 'do not go any further than political discourse' or that complaints have been passed onto the whips without any discernible action. Abuse aside, it is possible that the Corbyn Project will be destroyed by *Labour* MPs who refuse to back a future Corbyn government. This raises the issue of the selection and deselection of parliamentary candidates which are the responsibility of local parties. *Momentum* have campaigned for members to choose Corbyn supporters to contest marginal *Tory*-held seats at the next General Election. But this leaves in place the current PLP many of whom oppose socialist policies, like nationalisation and international relations based on peace and human rights. Do we trust MPs to fall into line? Do we support a few local parties to deselect Corbyn's most virulent opponents? Or do we attempt

mass deselections in the hope of creating a fit-for-purpose PLP but risking bitter and divisive battles that may split the party and ruin our electoral prospects?

These questions apply - albeit less urgently - to local government. In Haringey council, 'zombie Blairites' were attempting 'to shove family homes, school buildings and libraries into a giant private fund worth £2bn' and to hand over control of this Development Vehicle to a private company with a terrible track record on public housing projects. Local *Labour Party* members organised through *Momentum* to replace councillors who supported this policy ignoring whether they had backed Corbyn. Initially a big media story about 'hard left' attacks on 'moderates', the new councillors are now in place and are no longer in the spotlight. Haringey's targeted and policy-focused approach to deselection may work at a national level.

The party structures

The PLP are highly visible. *Labour*'s paid staff, committees and rules are not. At least until you bang up against them. But *Labour* staff were as disturbed by Corbyn's win as MPs. As Alex Nunns describes in his book tracing Corbyn's 'improbable path to power', at the special conference announcing the 2015 leadership winner: 'Party staff wear sullen, sad faces to match the black attire they are sporting, symbolising the

death of the party they have known'. Although *Labour* has an extensive Rule Book, it requires interpretation and staff often control how it is applied. In 2016, then General Secretary Iain McNicoll obtained legal advice allowing him to argue that an incumbent leader is not automatically on the ballot if challenged, so Corbyn would need to secure MPs' backing to stand again - something they were unlikely to grant now they knew he could win! When overruled by the *National Executive*, McNicoll successfully advised them to restrict the electorate, took some Party members to court to stop them voting, and presided over a purge of left wingers by trawling their social media accounts, suspending them en masse and removing their votes in the leadership election.

Few of us who joined or rejoined *Labour* to support Corbyn's leadership had anticipated facing a vast bureaucratic apparatus of officers, meetings, conferences, rules, committees and delegates. Nor had we imagined the extent of the resistance we would face within our own party. Winning the leadership and piling in members initially had little effect as the party's unchanged infrastructure persisted in working against us. At a local level, people encountered dull report-filled meetings where they were treated with suspicion. Local *Momentum* groups sprang up around the UK, creating

spaces for people on the left to meet each and organise ways into the labyrinthine *Labour Party*. In many local parties, there are now contested elections for unglamorous administrative voluntary roles which previously nobody had wanted to do. There are competing slates of candidates at every level from local to national and competing agendas for regional and national conferences.

When the left gains control of local parties, we can give our own meanings to the Rule Book, but we are still constrained by it. Policymaking illustrates this. We inherited a system created under New Labour in which the policy motions that members submitted to National Conference had to be ‚contemporary‘, meaning they related to events occurring in a short window between early August and early September each year. Further, contemporary motions on only eight topics could be debated each year. This left most policymaking in the hands of the National Policy Forum, an opaque and inaccessible body, and severely restricted members‘ input.

To address such democratic deficits and look at 'how our hugely expanded membership becomes a mass movement which can transform society', *Labour* launched a *Democracy Review* in 2017. Although parliamentary selections were deemed too controversial to be included, it was far reaching covering

local government, policymaking, mobilising members, making our party more representative and all of the party's internal structures. However, many of the *Review*'s key recommendations were rejected by the *National Executive* (which even after three years lacks a reliable pro-Corbyn majority) and/or subject to further reviews. This includes nearly all of those on policymaking. The *National Policy Forum* remains unchanged but in a small concession to members the contemporary criteria for Conference motions has been dropped and more issues will be debated. We will see what members can do with these and other changes in the coming years.

The trade unions

In contrast to the PLP and staff, trade unionists gave pivotal support to the Corbyn Project. They backed left candidates in winnable seats for the 2015 General Election giving Corbyn some of his original MP nominations (Nunns 2016). The labour movement's shift left along with grassroots pressure led to nine unions including the two largest endorsing Corbyn for leader. The leader of the *Communication Workers Union* said: 'There is a virus within the *Labour* party, and Jeremy Corbyn is the antidote'. Other leaders were less forthright, but they added credibility, votes, money, staff, office space, even fire engines for rallies. Most union leaders backed him again in 2016 and are highly critical of

PLP rebels. The *Fire Brigades Union* has re-affiliated to *Labour* and other trade unions support Corbyn from the outside.

In 2016, a rare junior doctors strike had broad public support. *Labour*'s Health spokesperson Heidi Alexander triangulated saying that *Labour* had sympathy for the strike but would not endorse it. She instructed *Labour*'s top team not to join picket lines. Corbyn ally and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell ignored this, standing with strikers as did Momentum activists. Alexander was following mainstream *Labour* MPs' practice of distancing themselves from the unions

a picket line in your constituency it is your responsibility to join it"'.

This shift mirrors one at the grassroots. At my first local party meeting after rejoining *Labour* in September 2015, I was one of several 'new' members. We were repeatedly told by longstanding members that they were a successful local party focused on campaigning, aka going door to door to identify *Labour* voters with the aim of winning elections. There is a tension at the heart of *Labour*'s current internal struggle between seeing electoral politics as the only relevant locus of action and seeing our goal as being to create a social

Corbyn Vote Labour rally
© Jenny Goodfellow ()

that founded and finance the party. Gradually this has shifted and in 2018, the Economist's political correspondent tweeted: 'John McDonnell says a memo has gone round *Labour* MPs: "If there's

movement that can both win elections and sustain a transformative legislative programme. Unions are central to the latter vision. As left members have taken on local roles, we have

rejected a narrow idea of campaigning, backing strikes with solidarity action, publicity and fundraising.

However, the influx of nearly half a million members, many wanting direct democratic input into *Labour* policies and practices has created conflict with the party establishment including the unions. In 2018, Christine Shawcroft, then members' representative on *Labour's National Executive* and *Momentum* vice chair, posted on *Facebook* before deleting it, that the major trade unions "stick it to the rank and file members time after time after time. It's also time to support disaffiliation of the unions from the *Labour* party. The party belongs to us, the members". It is likely union representatives on the *National Executive* voted down the more radical *Democracy Review* recommendations. At the Party's 2018 National Conference, most votes were backed overwhelmingly by member and union delegates alike, but there were some divisions. Union delegates who have half the votes blocked debate on whether or not all incumbent MPs should face a contested selection process prior to a General Election, something 92 per cent of the delegates representing members wanted on the agenda. So while links between *Labour* and the trade unions are stronger than ever with the Corbyn Project's commitment to the labour movement and to workers' rights, there is an unresolved cultural gap between the two that is also reflected in differences between the larger more cautious established unions and the newer more radical ones organising precarious workers.

Conclusions

The Corbyn Project has much in common with other anti-austerity electoral projects across Europe. In this article, I focused on a distinctive feature, its actualisation via an insurgency in the UK's main social democratic party. Change is slow and huge energy is expended in internal battles. The existential tension in the *Labour Party* between top-down gradualism led by parliamentarians and bottom-up radicalism led by social movement activists has always favoured the former. We must change this. Michael Foot, a past *Labour* leader also on the left, said, 'A left Labour MP is only as good as the movement behind them'. This applies a hundredfold to a left *Labour* government. If a Corbyn-led government is going to enact a socialist programme it needs a large, active and democratic movement behind it.

To win power we need to maintain *Labour*'s 'broad church', its wide electoral alliance, while moving the party left on both policy and practice and building outwards into communities to create a participatory political culture across society. Interviewed in 2015 soon after first winning the

leadership, Jeremy Corbyn explained:

> I want a party structure and a union structure that allows your intelligence to come forward and be part of our policy-making. … So the need is to reach, to widen our organisation to make us a community-based party.

This has been slow to realise. Only in summer 2018 did *Labour* finally appoint community organisers. Even now their work is shaped by our electoral system as they are concentrated in the marginal constituencies that *Labour* must win to form a government.

Momentum originally set out to 'organise in every town, city and village to secure the election of a progressive left *Labour Party* at every level, and to create a mass movement for real transformative change'. This expansive vision was possible because *Momentum* was less constrained by electoral politics than *Labour*. But *Momentum* has moved away from this ambition, narrowing its reach to focus on organising nationally in *Labour*, creating social media content and campaigning in marginal constituencies. It is *Labour* that now offers the best hope of enacting its original vision of building a mass social movement. *Labour* has always been, as Simon Hannah puts it, "a party with socialists in it'". It remains an open question whether we can prove Ralph Miliband wrong and transform it into a socialist party.

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The State of the Irish Left: Half-Full and Half-Empty

David Landy
(Dublin)

Pessoptimism is the best approach. During the recession years the Irish left moved from a position of near complete irrelevance into being a powerful force in Irish politics.[1] Huge victories were won on the economic and social front and electoral gains were made both locally and nationally. But now the highwater of these years of militancy is over, the question is how substantial these gains were and whether the left-wing parties simply occupied the comfortable subaltern place in Irish politics temporarily vacated by the collapse of the old centre-left.

The recession changed everything, at least for a while. It hit Ireland harder than almost any other European country. The economy, based around a housing bubble and financial speculation, collapsed. Unemployment rose and emigration soared. During these years, Ireland was governed by centre right governments that included the *Greens* and the *Labour Party* as minor partners. They were in turn destroyed by the electorate after imposing brutal austerity policies. Yet the Irish electorate, unlike other European countries didn't turn to the far-right, but towards left and republican groups.[2]

Now the recession is over, unemployment is negligible and people are no longer emigrating. Yet, most austerity measures remain and Ireland's government remains committed to running down public services and to neoliberal governance. At the same time, Ireland (especially Dublin) is facing a devastating and unprecedented housing crisis. The question for Ireland's fractious left is whether it can respond to all this as well as combat the early stages of far-right mobilisation.

The siren song of electoralism

Grouping	2009	2014	2019
Centre Left (Labour, Greens, Social Democrats)	135	63	125
Sinn Fein	54	159	81
Trotskyist (People before Profit/Socialist Party)	9	28	11

Two sets of figures can be used to chart the state of the left. The first is seats won in local elections (c950 in total) in 2009 during the height of the recession, in 2014 during the high tide of militancy and protest, and 2019 when the status quo seems secure. On the right of the left, the *Labour Party* was decimated in 2014. Their traditional role has always been to act as the subaltern partner in right wing coalitions. This time around, they were punished for their enthusiastic participation in austerity government. While they haven't recovered, similar political groupings such as the small centrist Irish *Green Party* and the *Social Democrats* (a breakaway from *Labour* who can be fully expected to recombine with them when the numbers add up) have taken up the slack.

On the left, *Sinn Fein* stormed it in 2014 in the midst of anti-austerity campaigning and was then knocked back. Equally, Ireland's two competing and pretty much similar Trotskyist parties established a presence, especially in Dublin working class areas, but are also back to 2009 figures. In addition, there were scores of Left Independents elected in 2014, a fair few of whom have lost their seats. While the left also did well in parliamentary elections in 2016, it's doubtful they'll do so well next time out. There are many reasons for this – amnesia over *Green* and *Labour Party* austerity politics combined with people's concern with environmental issues which the Irish Left (perhaps unfairly) is not associated with. But most important, the left's failure to deliver meaningful change at the local level where it was possible fed into declining militancy. Thus there was poor turnout in working class areas, the left simply didn't give people enough reasons to vote for them.

Another reason to highlight these electoral stats is because the left is far more electoralist than it was two decades ago. Then, Ireland had a strong platformist anarchist party, the *Workers Solidarity Movement*. It is now a shadow of its former self, having been

largely consumed by the battles around identity politics and with its members suffering from burnout.[3] Sinn Fein has long abandoned its revolutionary republican past and its strategy has been to become a catch-all nationalist party rather than a radical socialist one. However, now it understands that this perceived lack of radicalism was one reason it performed so badly at the last elections and its trajectory may change.

In like manner, Trotskyists still refer to themselves as revolutionaries, but winning and keeping local and parliamentary seats (and the income from these seats) has become far more central in their practices. Recently, in a perhaps unprecedented move for Trotskyist groups, the *Socialist Workers Party* in Ireland was swallowed up by its electoralist front, *People before Profit*.

The result of this electoralism isn't all baleful. On the plus side the left is more grounded, more embedded in local communities and real world concerns than ever before – at least in the cities (though as we can see from the stats, not that embedded). Without doubt it's healthy for Left parties to engage in something more substantial than theoretical parsing or internal purity tests. But there's always a minus side, in this case it's the slide towards NIMBYism and a clientelism pervasive in Irish politics. That is, a style of politics which involves cosying up to government structures to get local amenities and perform favours for constituents. In this style of politics, it is important not to frighten the horses; if socialism is mentioned, it is in sotto voice to one's membership.

Winning victories

This is perhaps unfair. The left has also challenged these structures and won significant victories in the last decade. In fact, the largest political mobilisation in the history of the Irish state was in 2014-15 over the issue of water charges. It was an inspiring campaign that demonstrated mass self-organisation and solidarity, political nous and tactical innovation. Although earlier attempts to challenge austerity measures were unsuccessful, a militant mass movement sprang up over the government's attempt to introduce water charges in 2014. People had been squeezed enough by austerity taxes, and also understood that this was the first step in privatising water. Or as the chants went: "Can't Pay Won't Pay", "Water is a Human Right".[4]

The active involvement of some trade unions – *Unite* and *Mandate* in particular – and the fact the campaign avoided being captured by any one political grouping were key in ensuring its success. It was a genuine grassroots and community-based movement, involving over half a dozen large scale demonstrations of between 50-200,000 people over the course of 2014-15. More

significant than these protests was the depth of local campaigning against water charges. People mobilised locally to prevent the installation of water meters especially in urban working class areas, blockading roads and stopping private security guards and meter installers from entering their neighbourhoods. This was combined with electoral pressure on government parties and a successful non-payment campaign in which most Irish people refused to pay their water bills. This ended the attempts to charge for water or introduce fresh austerity taxes – at least for now.

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On the social front, the left won two referendums, the first on marriage equality, and the second near-unbelievably, on abortion. These transformative votes demonstrated how Ireland has moved from being a socially conservative Catholic country to a liberal Northern European one.

Twenty-five years before the 2015 referendum, homosexuality was illegal in Ireland, yet in that referendum the electorate voted by an overwhelming majority in favour of same-sex marriage.

This victory wasn't magicked into being simply because of changing social trends; it was the result of years of campaigning by left wing groups. This depth of campaigning was even more evident in the historic 2018 referendum to legalise abortion. Abortion has been the battleground on which Irish culture wars have been fought for decades, an ongoing source of suffering and humiliation for women in Ireland. There have been no less than four referendum votes on the issue since 1983, when a constitutional ban on abortion was introduced by a two-thirds majority. The left played a decisive role in reversing this vote; The *Abortion Rights Campaign* was established out of the Dublin-based RAG (*Revolutionary Anarcha-feminist Group*) and used an anarchist model of organising and coalition-building to establish a nationwide grassroots campaign. The

2018 referendum victory - also by a two-thirds majority is a shining example of what can happen when the left manages to organise, act strategically and convince people of its principles until they are seen as being simple common-sense decency.

A weak presence in weak unions

While these campaigns have left an important collective memory of winning victories, there has been no permanent shift of power. Free-market liberals have benefitted from these victories, possibly more than the left.[5] The underlying reason for this is the growing weakness of the organised working class.

A second set of stats to chart the state of the left: strike days and union membership. Union militancy and density have not simply declined; they have collapsed over the past twenty years. During the 2010s there were only 26,291 strike days per year. This compares to over 100,000 per year in the 1990s, not exactly a decade known for industrial turbulence. Union density has also collapsed: 46 per cent of the workforce in 1994, 32 per cent in 2010 and only 24 per cent in 2018. This is barely half the coverage of twenty-five years before, with the numbers inevitably worse in the private sector.

The largest union, SIPTU has maintained its adherence to a service model, increasingly for older workers in the public sector. Official partnership between government and unions – an arrangement which precipitated the decline of Irish trade unionism - ended a decade ago. However, the *Irish Congress of Trade Unions* remains tied to a zombie *Labour Party*, having maintaining their loyalty even when the *Labour Party* was administering austerity.

It's not all bad. Some unions, notably *Mandate* in the private sector, have shown an interest in the organising model of unions (on the basis of 'organise or die'). They were of crucial importance in the fight against water charges, getting involved precisely because these charges would impact their mainly-low income members. However, relations between even these unions and the left are often fraught, partly because the Trotskyist position of "One Solution. STRIKE!" hasn't been helpful in forming trust. Nevertheless, there have been efforts to form a political front – during the 2016 elections, the anti-water charges unions tried to establish a broad left electoral slate. While this wasn't particularly successful at the time due to the usual mix of sectarianism, egos and bad timing, this may be repeated at the next election.

The left, the far-right and the future

The situation is far from dire. During the recession, the left offered a credible challenge to austerity politics and prevented any shift to the right. It

saw off the attempt to privatise water and made Ireland a more open and socially liberal country. Its presence in local government may be diminished but it is still relevant and grounded in concrete local issues. Nor will the memories of successful struggle be forgotten, either by the government or the people.

But has the Irish left been tamed? The left has always suffered a justified credibility problem in working class areas; the smash-and-grab-members tactic beloved of Trotskyist groups isn't quickly forgotten. But added to this tactical imbecility is the larger ideological question of whether left-wing groups have been assimilated by the electoral system they are so eagerly participating in.

This is particularly problematic when it comes to combatting the far-right. The Irish left has been very successful at preventing far-right organising. A cheering example of this was the display of tactical coherence among wildly different groups when the Islamophobic group PEGIDA tried to organise a rally in Dublin in February 2016. Thousands of mainstream anti-racist demonstrators filled the centre of town, preventing PEGIDA from assembling there. Outside this central area, militant anti-fascists from anarchist, socialist and republican backgrounds physically attacked PEGIDA supporters spotted around town. That was the end of PEGIDA in Ireland.

Such spectacles of success aside, the main reason the far-right was not able to mobilise was because *Sinn Fein*'s left-wing republicanism was the dominant strain in populist nationalism. *Sinn Fein*, to their immense credit still take a pro-immigrant line, but their dominance over populist nationalism is waning, now they are increasingly seen as a semi-establishment party.

Thus for the first time in recent times, the far-right have managed to mobilise and organise. They have been fuelled by online anti-immigration conspiracies, funded by rich foreign donors, and are feeding off and into a growing domestic racism. It's important not to exaggerate their numbers: away from the computer screens their presence remains miniscule and electorally they're still a joke. But assuming they manage to find leaders marginally less creepy, paranoid and chaotic than their current offering, they may prove a threat.

More central is the question of what the left can do to bring in a socialist, or at least a less neoliberal Ireland. This is especially hard now that the Brexit psychodrama has served to legitimise most elements of the status quo in Ireland – both the current government and the position of the EU. Currently the left is in abeyance, with a lack of direction and diminished activity. An example: once the water charges were won, many activists threw

themselves into a housing campaign. However, this hasn't gained much traction or public support, partly because of the complexity of the problems and difficulties of achieving anything, partly because of the multiplicity of possible solutions offered. The campaign, while ongoing, remains small.[6]

Left unity has been a constant catch-call solution to the lack of focus. Inevitably it was voiced after the disappointments of the last election. However the centre-left far prefers to work with the right than with *Sinn Fein*, let alone with those further to the left,[7] who are all electoral competitors with each other. There is precious little Left-Green common purpose, beyond a still undirected awareness of oncoming climate catastrophe. So left unity among whom? And more importantly, left activism in what direction? Cast into a pragmatically oppositional stance and competing more with each other than ever before, the Irish left once again needs to answer this question.

Endnotes

1   I'm just talking here about the Republic of Ireland (RoI), not about the North of Ireland. Politics, with few exceptions are radically different in the two jurisdictions. One hopeful exception was the abortion referendum victory in the RoI fuelling the campaign for abortion provision in the north, where it's still illegal.

2   In Ireland, Republican is shorthand for militant nationalism, supporting a united Ireland, and broadly points to a dissident, usually leftwing attitude. The splits in Irish republicanism are legendry, but by far the largest group is Sinn Fein.

3   The idpol wars have hit the Irish left with the same vicious ferocity as elsewhere; leading to widespread disillusion over the quarrels between the dressed up idiocies of hipster Stalinism and the mean-girl one-upmanship of woke liberalism. Even the Trotskyist parties have been touched: it appears that the Socialist Party may split from its parent organisation, the CWI ostensibly over concessions to identity politics and electoralism, although in reality for even more trivial reasons.

4   "You can stick your water meter up your arse" was another popular chant. The government tried to install water meters outside people's homes to charge them for their water. Stopping these meters from being installed was a major feature of the campaign.

5   For instance the neoliberal Fine Gael Party benefitted in the recent European elections from the sheen of social progressiveness currently attached to it.

6   It's not all bad news; the housing campaign has tried to move away from a servicing-clients model of organising. Also the participation of ethnic minorities in the campaign has been very positive, not as clients of left-wing parties but as an integral part of campaign groups.

7   As demonstrated in carve-ups in local authority councils around the country.

The Abyss…and the Leap: Expanding Canada's 'Shrivelled' Political Horizons

Lee-Anne Broadhead

(Halifax)

We live in an age of multiple and overlapping crises – environmental deterioration, social exclusion, economic inequality, and political alienation – each sufficient to provoke widespread resistance but now combining to reveal the devastating consequences of unbridled capitalism. How those on the *democratic socialist* left – not the so-called 'centre left' of neoliberal-lite mainstream parties – respond to widespread disenchantment with the post-Crash 'status quo' is a subject of intense debate, both creative and divisive, in Canada as elsewhere in the world.

Are we at a moment of productive linkage between popular resistance and political reformation? Can we, this time, build a socialist reality from the grassroots and prevent the absorption of radical critique by establishment elites? Although Bernie Sanders deserves the label of a social democrat rather than

his preferred moniker of democratic socialist, the success of his candidacy in so very nearly securing the *Democratic* nomination by drawing on the street heat protests born of widespread disenchantment with the dysfunctional and morally bankrupt economic system revealed by the 2008 crash gave many a giddy sense of possibility. Similarly, the stunning success of the UK *Momentum* movement in restoring the *Labour Party* (under the improbable leadership of Jeremy Corbyn) to its socialist senses, suggests a new dynamic between street protest and electoral struggle.   But grave disappointments must also be acknowledged, primary among them *Syriza*'s tragic failure to withstand intense neoliberal pressures in Greece.

In Canada the question of 'what's left?' has been most acutely posed, if not fully answered, in the time-honoured form of a manifesto – *the Leap Manifesto* (2015) – which centers its call for change

Page 17

Hard Times 103 (1/2019)

on the need to confront the urgent environmental crisis facing us all by linking it to working class politics, the menace of militarism and, importantly, Indigenous rights in this Settler State. Remarkably enough this clarion call to confront the costs and consequences of the capitalist ethos governing (or, more accurately, mismanaging) all aspects of our lives nowhere features the word 'socialism', though its core project – a "transformation" to a new economy – clearly places the needs of *society* (and the environment) above the appetites of capital.

crisis – "a crime against humanity's future" – can serve as the spark igniting such a transformation, as there is no other way *to* deal with the crisis than by redefining basic socio-economic and state structures. In turn, the Manifesto's repeated defence of the inherent rights and title of the Indigenous peoples of Canada shines an unavoidably harsh light on both the resource-extracting capitalist project that Canada *is*, and the need to 'indigenize' and decolonize Canadian left-wing 'alternatives' traditionally rooted in extractive industrialism.

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Drafted by representatives of a diverse group of movements – labour, environmental, Indigenous rights and social justice – convened by best-selling author/activist Naomi Klein and documentary film maker Avi Lewis, the *Leap Manifesto* is grounded in a belief that, for all its horror, the climate

In place of an economy based on oil and gas megaprojects the Manifesto advocates a 'leap' to 100 per cent renewable electricity sources within 20 years. In place of "profit-gouging" private companies, or even state-run ones, it advocates "energy democracy": innovative ownership structures

designed along egalitarian, redistributive lines. Declaring that "public scarcity in times of unprecedented private wealth is a manufactured crisis, designed to extinguish our dreams before they have a chance to be born", it demands an end to: austerity; trade deals negotiated in the interests of corporations; fossil fuel subsidies; and excessive military spending. The Manifesto also backs a guaranteed annual income, proposes the imposition of financial transaction taxes, and advocates a massive "universal program" to build energy-efficient homes and retrofit old ones. These proposals are, crucially, coupled with the provision of "training and other resources for workers in carbon-intensive jobs, ensuring they are fully able to take part in the clean energy economy," the details of which should be worked out with the participation of the workers themselves.

The *Leap Manifesto* was launched at a public event in September 2015 against the backdrop of a federal election in which the putatively left-wing *New Democratic Party* (NDP) shimmied so far to the right in the hopes of winning power that it was outflanked on the left by the mainstream *Liberal Party* of Justin Trudeau, happy to embrace budget deficits to increase public spending. The following year, the NDP – relegated from official opposition status to distant third behind the *Liberals* and *Conservatives* – met in a sombre mood,

withdrawing support from leader Tom Mulcair, a former *Liberal* Cabinet member in Quebec and 'mastermind' of the disastrously centrist campaign. The more profound issue for discussion, though, was the direction the chastened party would now take. Would it move back to the traditional centre left or into more radical, uncharted territory? Though not an official party faction, the '*Leapers*' came to the 2016 convention in the hope of having the party adopt the Manifesto. Failing in that effort, a resolution passed which recognized and supported it as "a high-level statement of principles that speaks to the aspirations, history, and values of the party" and committed riding associations across the country to debating it. Although not adopted as policy '*Leap*' had arrived as a major source of both inspiration and dissension, fundamentally altering internal party dynamics and the parameters of policy debate.

Since that breakthrough the *Leap* agenda has been fervently defended and as rigorously contested nationwide in NDP riding associations as well as unions, activist groups, student-led organizations and faith-based organizations. The *Canadian Labour Congress* (CLC) established *Labour for Leap*, linkages were made with the Sanders and Momentum campaigns, and early in 2018 Manifesto supporters organized *Courage to Leap*, an unofficial

gathering held alongside the annual NDP Convention but where, as was noted in media reports, barely 100 of the 500 activists in attendance were actually delegates to the Convention. Clearly there is no consensus about the wisdom of merging the movement with the party, a party that now has a young, charismatic leader, Jagmeet Singh, who has thus far been careful to neither reject nor accept the basic tenets of the Manifesto. Hard choices for both leadership and membership are at hand.

Unsurprisingly, the Manifesto has been pummelled from opposite directions. According to prominent mainstream journalist Lawrence Martin (2016), it "advocates that all oil be left in the ground and we bounce along happily on moonbeams and other rays"; another veteran columnist, Jeffrey Simpson (2016), declared the "anti-American" *Leapers* have "absolutely no idea of how to run a modern economy", are "hostile to free markets except of the organic-market variety on Saturday mornings", and are "committed to saving the environment at the expense of crucifying the economy." For disgraced right-wing media mogul Conrad Black (2015) the Leapers are merely the latest last gasp of "the shattered Old Left" and constitute "the detritus of organized labor," accompanied this time by "heavily buffeted eco-zealots" and "imperishable agitators for the native people". An

editorial in the weekly newsmagazine *Macleans* defined the Manifesto as "the answer to a question no one is asking," and asserted that in "a country born out of compromise and accommodation, extreme views of any sort are (thankfully) seen as un-Canadian." This complacently nationalist stance was also adopted by NDP strategist-turned-pundit Robin Sears (2016), who warned of a "suicidal leap to the left" by "loony leapers" emulating "earlier Trotskyite and Marxist entryists". Sears was, though, hopeful this laughable "Birkenstock Left" would soon be unceremoniously "returned to their more traditional perch outside the mainstream party."

For those at the *International Communist League* (2016) the Manifesto is, in its refusal to "look to the proletariat as the motor force for human progress" a "reactionary" document resorting to "bourgeois economic policy". Deriding the Manifesto's focus on the global climate crisis, the ICL insists "modern infrastructure, including pipelines as well as hydroelectric projects and the like, is essential to the function of an advanced industrial economy," in other words an extractive capitalism generating sufficient class contradictions to "win the working class to the perspective of a socialist revolution which will rip the mines, factories and other means of production from the grip of the exploiters, paving the way

for a rationally planned, collectivized economy." Massive resource extraction will not, apparently, have negative environmental consequences when owned by the government. Perhaps this is how the Trudeau government can claim to be the green government Canadians have been waiting for while at the same time spending C$4.5 billion dollars to purchase the failed *Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain Pipeline* in order to save a project widely condemned by environmental and Indigenous rights movements.

Leap Manifesto, arguing instead that the vague document fails to tackle the crucial issue of inequality and instead focuses on resource extraction. Laxer poses a number of questions: How do we build the new green economy? How do we create the new green industries that will be at the heart of the economy? How do we ensure that large corporations no longer set the economic agenda and that the rich pay their share of taxes? Unfairly, in my view, he argues that these questions "are given very short shift in Leap" and derides what he sees

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But what of those voices who have tried in the past to move the *New Democratic Party* toward a socialist vision? As one of the founders of the short-lived (1969-1974) but intellectually influential *Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada* – the so-called *Waffle* – James Laxer's critique deserves special attention. Laxer (2016) fails to see the socialism claimed by advocates of the

as an argument in favour of creating jobs in "a host of caregiving sectors" coupled with a dubious commitment to a shift to local agriculture. Sympathizing with those who suggest that *Leap* "is a document for elites and not the majority of Canadians", Laxer concludes: "I don't see the Leap as a manifesto of the left." His ideological measuring stick is clearly that of his earlier attempt to utilize a

political party for radical ends. With all due respect to Laxer it is important to note that we stand on very different ground today, ground that we must acknowledge – as the *Leap Manifesto* does, but the Waffle movement did not – is the territory of Indigenous people under existential threat from the industrial policies of both left- and right-wing strategies determined to extend industrial development and economic growth.

The *Waffle Manifesto* of 1969 was laser-focused on the lack of independence of the Canadian economy which had become nothing more than a "resource base and consumer market within the American Empire", an "economic colony of the United States". Asking Canadians to consider the nature of the American Empire – its militarism, its racism and its corporate capitalism – Laxer and his colleagues asked Canadians to recognize that there can be no economic independence in the absence of socialism, a society based on "democratic control of all institutions, which have a major effect on men's lives and where there is equal opportunity for creative non-exploitative self-development… A socialist transformation of society will return to man his sense of humanity, to replace his sense of being a commodity." The *Waffle Manifesto* insisted on democracy at all levels (neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, cooperatives),

recognized socialism as both a "process and a program", and concluded that the crucial goal was the "extensive public control over investment and nationalization of the commanding heights of the economy, such as the essential resources industries, finance and credit, and industries strategic to planning our economy." The *Waffle* activists believed that, if radicalized from within, the *New Democratic Party*, could affect the "fundamental change" necessary to build this new society.

With different definitions of 'new' and 'fundamental' this is also the hope of the *Leapers* and one ironic effect of their movement has been to spur numerous journalists (and interested citizens) to revisit the 'Waffle Moment'. The fact the initial impulse was to compare *Leap* with its more explicitly (that is, more "orthodox") socialist predecessor backs Albo's (1990) claim that the Waffle's legacy "is surely *cultural*, in the fullest sense of that word, influencing intellectual debate and political visions long after its dissolution."

The contrast between the two Manifestos is stark indeed. Setting aside the gender-specific nature of the *Waffle Manifesto* (surely retrograde even by 1969 standards), its argument that socialism would help unite English and French Canada ignored the plight and rights of Indigenous peoples, the discrimination faced by many non-white

settlers, and environmental despoliation on an already-epic scale. For the *Leapers*, the notion of nationalized control of resource extraction as a solution to economic inequality not only ignores the ongoing assault on Indigenous peoples but is a literally self-defeating proposition: there are, to borrow the pithy phrase of those trade unionists intent on building a climate justice movement, "no jobs on a dead planet." (cited by Egan, 2015)

a giant, self-destructive machine. Laxer, stating the colonially obvious in noting the Canadian economy has been centred on "primary sector industries since Europeans first settled on Indigenous land," suggests the *Leapers* offer "little common ground for dialogue," lauding instead the efforts of Alberta's pro-pipeline, pro-Tar Sands NDP Premier Rachel Notley to "push both a green and an egalitarian agenda." To the *Leap* Left, though, there is *nothing* redeemable,

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In sum, different assumptions about basic threats (American ownership vs. environmental collapse) necessarily lead in different directions. Left wing critics of the *Leap Manifesto*, however, are wrong to argue it shows no concern for those many Canadians working in resource extraction. Indeed, *Leap's* entire *modus operendi* is to *transition* to a new economy expressly benefiting those currently hired merely as cogs in

green or egalitarian, about evidently unsustainable, colonially presumptive 'pipeline Progressivism'. In the words of Crystal Lameman (2018), an Indigenous woman from the *Beaver Lake Cree Nation* in Alberta and one of the Manifesto's drafters: "From where I stand, the *Leap Manifesto* isn't an attack on Albertans or its workers. It's a gift, offering us a pathway to a more human, healthy and liveable province, one that honours the

treaty rights of indigenous peoples and meets the needs of all its inhabitants."

At its worst, Canadian Marxism still continues to peddle Eurocentric notions of evolutionary stages of history (thereby considering Indigenous communities to be a less developed version of 'us'), thus failing, as Deborah Simmons (2013) has argued, to "recognize the ways in which radical indigenous resurgence can pose significant obstacles to capitalist expansion in renewing traditional modes of taking care of the land." *The Leap Manifesto* makes no such mistake: but how widely will its cri de cœur – not just for the rejection of capitalism, but the thoroughgoing decolonization of *socialism* – be heeded?

It is certainly the case that the recent profusion (and intersection) of protest against the manifest, manifold injustice of our time has opened new strategic possibilities for not just taking but *changing* power. While the mainstream media (and their status quo backers) happily mock *Occupy Wall Street*, *Idle No More*, *Black Lives Matter*, *Leap* and other movements for their supposed naivety and 'leaderlessness', something profound is going on, a decisive, creative, often irreverent rejection of 'business-as-usual,' of the hollowness of tried-and-failed 'solutions' across the so-called political 'spectrum' .

There is no guarantee of success or shortage of cautionary tales of division and defeat in Canada and elsewhere. In the case of the *Leap Manifesto*, the list of organizational endorsements is lengthy, impressive, and demonstrates the exciting linkages being made across myriad movements and campaigns. The question remains: is the NDP the right vehicle to maintain such momentum? The party has shifted dramatically to the right since the days of the *Waffle Movement* – even 'cleansing' its constitution, in Blairite fashion, of all language construable as socialist – and if it was not sufficiently radical to take seriously the demands of 1969, it is far less ready to embrace radical change now. But the mention of Blair is deliberate, as his Orwellian project to make the *Labour Party* 'New' – safe, that is, for capitalism (and prone to war) – ended not just in electoral defeat but the recapture of the party by people (in the hundreds of thousands) who understand the capacity and *point* of the party to transform their society and lives.

A clear-eyed realization of the pitfalls is necessary, but cynicism is not warranted. It is true that *Leap* is short on specifics, but Manifestos rarely offer detailed blueprints. In it we see a profound spirit of radicalism, recognizing the necessity of constructing alliances with all those engaged in the struggle for human – and natural – justice. This is, as Avi

Lewis (in Apostolov, 2018) has argued, "a time when everything is at play," a "moment" that demands our creative attention if we are to "connect the dots among the different crises and different solutions and crises." The task is made difficult not least, he argues, because "we have dealt with the shrivelling of the political imagination in Canada for decades." Can those who support the *Leap Manifesto* offer the kind of unifying social, political and economic vision necessary to frame a counter-hegemonic challenge sufficiently broad to encourage wide-spread acceptance of its "common sense" articulation of the problems we collectively face? Changing our idea of what politics and power are and can be is a necessary starting point and, to that extent, the *Leap Manifesto* – with its dedication to a dramatically different economy, based on a transformed Settler-Indigenous relationship, egalitarian principles, a green economy, and social justice for all – provides the momentum to start the journey.

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Interview with Alia Amir Ali of the Pakistan Awami Workers Party

Dirk Wiemann

(Potsdam)

Hard Times (HT): *Could you explain to our readers what the Awami Workers Party is? What is specific and new about it?*

Alia Amir Ali (AAA): To begin with, the AWP is far from a monolith — not unlike most entities I suppose, but perhaps more so than most. In 'representing' the AWP here, I would like to be explicit about the fact that I am speaking *about* but not *for* the organisation in this particular instance. I say this because I believe that many of the conflicts that arise in the Party – but also in the world at large – derive from attempts to unilaterally define what 'is', rather than accepting that what 'is', is contested. So I'd like to begin by acknowledging the multiplicity of views that exist within the Party, but admittedly- and to some extent inevitably- the views presented here will be my own.

The Awami Workers Party (AWP) is a left-wing political party in Pakistan formed in 2012 as the result of a merger of three older Left parties: the Awami Party, the Workers Party, and the Labour Party. Each of these parties were themselves mergers of smaller parties and groups that came together a few years prior to the AWP merger, and effectively an amalgamation of their respective ideological allies. In this sense, the formation of the AWP could be seen as an outcome of the Pakistani Left's overall regeneration after the 1990s. The initiative for the creation of the Awami Workers Party came from the young Left embedded within each of the merging parties. Being few in number and scattered across multiple organisations, this young Left (including myself) began connecting with each other and eventually took it upon themselves to mobilise their respective cadres and leaders to come together. It is important to recognise here that this young Left pushed for the merger despite having important differences with the "old (and male, I may add) guard" which was – and in certain

respects, still is – at the helm of Left parties here. Yet, it came through because this initiative was based fundamentally on the adherence to two core principles by all involved (even if to varying degrees) - *acceptance and the courage to take risks.*

To contextualise how these principles were at work, I suggest that the AWP was born out of:

1.   An acceptance that the Left has been all but decimated from Pakistan's political landscape, and the courage to 'begin again';

2.   An acceptance of differences within the Left – which was unthinkable from the perspective of entrenched Cold War factionalism – and subsequently, a willingness from the 'old guard' to unite with those they had fought bitterly in the past – and, in doing so, (courageously) agreeing to dissolve the identities that they had carried and embodied for long.

3.   An acceptance of the Left's heritage by the young Left; a willingness to not selectively pick and choose which of the Left's history it owns or disowns, but rather to claim it, with all its flaws and strengths, and take it forward (an act of courage);

4.   An acceptance by the 'old guard' that they must cede space to the young, and the courage to follow their lead in important (if not all) respects.

5.   An acceptance of the collective as primary, and the courage (of young comrades in particular) to give up individual "activism" in favour of a wider, more disciplined, collective "politics" where you can't just "do your own thing"!

The extent to which these principles continue to inform, and be actively cultivated in, the Party's political culture will, in my view, be crucial to the longevity and success of this political experiment.

The AWP is jokingly – and often patronisingly – referred to in Left circles as an *ajooba* party, i.e. a 'strange' or 'peculiar' party. This quip is itself evidence of our distinctiveness from other Left parties in Pakistan, which lies partly in the dynamics of its genesis (described above) but also in the following features:

1.   Ideological hybridity:

Ideologically, as indicated above, the AWP is a broadly Left party. We have struggled hard to overcome the Cold-War identities of Stalinist, Trotskyist, Maoist, etc. Indeed, the merging entities were themselves of different Left 'tendencies'. (The Labour Party was 'Trotskyist', the Workers Party was a combination of 'Marxist-Leninist' and 'Maoist' cadres and the Awami Party 'social-democratic' in orientation). One of the impetuses for the merger was the recognition that these divisions were the product of a particular world-historical context and that we

have nothing left to fight over any more; moreover, that the Left has been so successfully decimated that those who still agree on the common project of the Left as a systemic anti-capitalist anti-status-quo alternative must find a minimum common denominator upon which to recollect and rebuild the Left in Pakistan.

2. Loose-federalist organisational structure

Unlike most of its more centralised predecessors, the Awami Workers Party is federal in structure, with largely autonomous "national units" in each of Pakistan's ethnic-regions (which are not always congruous with the administrative demarcations called 'provinces') and affiliated organisations (bearing the same name) in the constitutionally 'disputed' and 'special' regions such as Gilgit-Baltistan and Kashmir. The AWP's national units are in turn comprised of units at the district and further down at the union council, neighbourhood, village, or community level.

The loose, federalist Party structure is indicative of its political/ideological orientation; in particular, of the Party's adherence to the "national question"- i.e. its commitment to upholding the principles of national autonomy (including their right to self-determination and secession), and the right of ethnic-nations to participate in the Pakistani federation (if they so

choose) as equal economic, political and social entities, rather than as mere administrative units governed by the Centre (which in Pakistan's context refers to central Punjab).

3. Engagement with feminism

While the "national question" has been a part of the Pakistani Left's lexicon virtually since its inception (even though this too has been a matter of intense debate, particularly in the 60s and 70s), the "woman question" is much newer to the Pakistani Left. Indeed, most Left parties in Pakistan continue to be oblivious - and some hostile - to feminism. The words "patriarchy" or "gender" do not appear in their manifestos or party positions. The AWP on the other hand – the younger cadres in particular – have slowly but consistently pushed (within the party and outside it) for greater engagement with feminism, both on the level of theory and practice. The feminists within the AWP - both women and men - have not had it easy, but to their credit, and to the credit of party members generally, there is now certainly a greater acceptance for feminism within the AWP than there was in 2012. For example:

The latest AWP manifesto recognises gender as amongst its principal contradictions (the manifesto does not distinguish between primary and secondary contradictions anyway), and unambiguously states its intention

to participate in the dismantling of patriarchy. Going further than equating feminism with women's liberation alone, AWP's election candidates from Islamabad last year presented a detailed plan to support the struggles of transgender, queer, and non-binary people. The AWP has instituted a quota of minimum 33% representation of women in its Federal Committee (which applies in principle to party units at all levels) — that it struggles to meet this figure in practice is a different (but important) matter. A sexual harassment policy is being tabled in the Party; this has met with resistance, but that is hardly surprising, given the heavily patriarchal social context from which the Pakistani Left originates. While there is certainly a long way to go before the Party (and the Left in general) imbibes a feminist consciousness, the gains made so far should not be under-stated; if anything, they are even more significant because of the (difficult) social context in which they have been made.

4.   Popularising Left discourse

The AWP seeks to become popular (not popul*ist* of course), and to (re)introduce Left discourse into the Pakistani mainstream political sphere. Historically, the Pakistani Left engaged in underground politics that involved making secretive 'cells' and being extremely cautious about who to let into their ranks. The AWP is an 'open' party, seeking to both build its cadres and also expand its membership into social segments that may not necessarily agree with all of the party's socialist principles and goals.

The AWP believes that the need of these times is (among others) visibility in the public eye — and we understand the complex and compromised routes that must be charted out to become visible (as well as the dangers inherent within the same). The party's strategies for meeting its objectives are being formulated, tried, tested, and revised. Our most recent 'experiment' has been contesting elections, and using the electoral process as a means to gain visibility, to deepen and widen our work with various communities, and to improve our understanding of the electoral field. (It was in the 1970s last that the Left – in alliance with progressive ethnic-nationalists – had an electoral presence on the national level; which we are nowhere close to as yet!)

HT: *How does the AWP relate to other left parties and to the numerous social movements in Pakistan?*

AAA: As discussed above, the AWP itself was an attempt to bring together what's left of the Left in Pakistan – which it continues to try and do even now. Much of our time is spent engaging with current social movements. Though they use different idioms and political imagery to present themselves, these

movements can be characterised broadly as movements against ongoing dispossession. The spectrum of current social movements comprises:

a) movements of the urban poor – such as *katchi abadi* (slum) dwellers' movements against forced evictions, workers' movements against privatisation, downsizing, pay cuts, job precarity etc.;

b) (rural) landless tenants' movements against summary evictions (such as the Okara peasants' movement, which at its peak involved many tens of thousands of tenant-farmers in Punjab, the country's economic and political heartland;

c) ethnic-national and regional movements, most recently the *Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement* (PTM), which literally means "a Movement for the Security of the Pashtun people", demanding accountability for opaque military operations and state violence (in the form of forced migrations/displacement, enforced disappearances of dissenters, etc.) perpetuated in the peripheries in the name of the "War on Terror".

The one significant exception to the above is the feminist movement – which I call an exception due to its decidedly young urban middle-class character and its harbingers being bearers of social mobility rather than of material dispossession. In my view, the feminist movement in Pakistan (as an organic *movement*) is only just beginning to emerge (though some Pakistani feminists would disagree with me on this). The unprecedented scale and intensity of the backlash from mainstream/religious quarters to the *Aurat March* (*Aurat* means 'woman') that took place in multiple cities and towns on International Women's Day this year suggests that this is perhaps the first time that Pakistani feminist voices were strong, coherent, and organised enough to make themselves heard in the mainstream (in addition to the backlash being a grim reminder of growing religious/right-wing radicalism). Though largely liberal in orientation, there is growing receptivity to socialist-feminist slogans, analysis and demands in the movement at this stage.

The AWP's aim is to create solidarities with and between these movements and to bring them closer to the Party's socialist ideals as well to as the Party organisation. We seek to unify action in the initial instance through the formation of working groups and alliances which maintain the diversity of organisational (and more broadly, social) identities that individuals and movements come with to the struggle. It is essential to build trust – which relies heavily on good communication – with these various and disparate movements if we are to create a shared Left politics. Towards this end, the AWP has created women's and students' 'fronts' (with greater autonomy than the fronts of previous Communist

parties perhaps) so as to find (and create) common cause and platforms for action with progressive but 'non-aligned' political actors within these movements.

HT: *How would you describe the situation and the prospects of the left in Pakistan?*

AAA: It must be acknowledged that the analysis – and the practice – of the Pakistani Left (the AWP included) are seriously outdated. Even though the AWP is beginning to take seriously questions of ecology, feminism, digital technology, and financialisation and working to familiarise its cadres with these debates, the Pakistani Left in general is yet to come to terms with the need to revamp its theoretical tools, concepts (and hence language), to rethink its constituencies, its political programme, its slogans, and to be creative in its strategies moving forward. Much of the Left spends an inordinate amount of time lamenting the 'corrupting' role of NGOs and looking for enemies to blame for its current predicament, rather than coming to terms with the real (material and ideological) shifts that have occurred in Pakistan and the world over since the heydays of Left revolutions in the 20th century.

As an entity on the political landscape, the Left in Pakistan still has a long way to go. Electorally, we are at a very nascent stage. The question of how to engage with religion continues to be a vexed one. Resisting state/corporate surveillance and renewed military hegemony is increasingly difficult. Space for dissent has shrunk considerably, and organisational survival itself is a struggle even for 'open' parties like the AWP. Take for instance the fact that the AWP's website was blocked during our election campaign last year—and ten months later, it remains blocked still!

In 'objective' terms, however, the space for the left has grown, as it does everywhere where the fallouts of neoliberalism start to hit people. In Pakistan too, class, ethnic-regional, and gendered divisions – and violence – are on the rise; urbanisation, unemployment, inflation, gentrification, and privatisation are accelerating at breathtaking speed; access to housing, health, education, water, and other utilities is diminishing, and political repression and media censorship are at an all time high. Yet the subjectivities of these classed, ethnicised, and gendered 'subjects' are far from transformative – certainly (but not only) in the 'centre' (which I use here both in a spatial and demographic sense). Indeed, the 'common sense' that is prevalent is that of how to fit into the system rather than change it – discourses that operate from top to bottom and morph into different versions at every rung of the social ladder.

Being a Party that seeks to popularise/ mainstream socialist discourse but

recognises that the system's 'losers' are far from inhabiting a socialist consciousness is reflected in the Party's decision to state in its manifesto the ultimate goal of building socialism but drafting its immediate political programme in light of prevailing material and subjective conditions which call for supporting people's entitlements to basic goods and services and productive assets, rather than calling for the abolishment of private property as we are told all "true" Communists should.

HT: *This issue of* **Hard Times** *is focusing on the state of the left worldwide. From your perspective, in what ways is the situation in Pakistan similar, in what ways different from that in other countries?*

AAA: I came into the world in an era where all "grand narratives" including Communism were supposedly dead and those who held those beliefs were dying. Resistance had become limited to a "calling out" of each other or those who are in relatively close proximity to our selves, 'exposing' them and the everyday violence that characterises these systems, rather than imagining - and creating - with others, the means of *dismantling* and *transforming systems*, and challenging political power through organised politics.

Now the tide has turned. The world over – and in Pakistan – there has been a resurgence of the organised Left. And a (stronger) resurgence of the Right. Even though we have far from won the battle in most places (let alone the war), these are exciting times. Over the last decade in particular, we have seen the challenge is no longer to disprove the mantra that "socialism is dead" - people have already disproved this orthodoxy through popular movements like Occupy and the Arab Spring, the rise (and in some cases, fall) of left-wing electoral forces in Europe, Latin America, South Asia and not least the emergence of Corbyn in the UK and Sanders in the US as serious contenders for political office.

The challenge is now to answer the question of what organised socialist politics that challenges and wrests political power from its adversaries can deliver in the present time. Critiquing capitalism and its destructiveness is no longer sufficient in any sense, whether in presenting a real alternative to the destruction of the planet and all living beings on it (including human beings), or in winning over the multitudes whose will, intellect, consciousness and action are required to make a Left alternative 'real'. What alternatives do we present; what is our plan for the people, for the planet, and for the intelligent machines we have ourselves created? What are our strategies for dealing with the defenders of the status quo, who may not just outdo us in money, weapons, and technological

sophistication, but also in numbers, by controlling to an unprecedented extent what the rest of us know, think, and feel?

HT: *On a more personal note, you don't like to be called an 'activist'. Why?*

AAA: 'Activism' has become an acceptable, even trendy word, while 'politics' has been vilified. The former is considered 'clean', laudable, and sincere, while the latter is accused of replicating and even promoting hierarchies, dominance, and sectional interests. (I recognise that the antipathy to organised politics has been significantly overturned in recent years in places, which is heartening). I find "activism" to be a de-politicisation of politics itself.

I see the rise of "activism" as a term as embedded in a historical context which has seen the rise of "anti-politics politics" - a kind of politics championed by right-wing leaders across the world - from Imran Khan in Pakistan, to Modi in India, and Trump in the US. Anti-corruption discourses championed by Khan and Modi have been targeted squarely at politicians and the public sector - not at corporations, not at militaries. Pakistan's self-professed religious reformer Tahir-ul-Qadri's motto was "Siasat nahin, Riasat Bachao" (Save the State, not Politics) which garnered significant popular support.

Moreover, 'activism' connotes individual action, which no matter how principled or noble, nevertheless lacks something I consider fundamental to the process of social transformation: the collective. Being an 'activist' allows you to act solely at your own discretion and convenience; everything from deciding which problems are worthy of action and why they are problematic, to chalking out a strategy for countering the problem, identifying potential allies, and devising a mode of action (including how, where, and when to 'act') is done individually. Individual liberty as the fountain for action seems to me to mirror the very (neoliberal) problem that many of these (surely well-meaning!) activists claim to be fighting. In my view, it is not just the content of political action but also its form that is of fundamental importance in shaping the course that politics takes. As I see it, the essence of politics is collective, and hence to be found in collectives.

La France Insoumise: How New is the French New Left?

John Mullen

(Rouen)

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As the *Yellow Vest* movement in France continued to hit the headlines week after week at the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, one organisation in particular praised it as the beginnings of a new "citizens' revolution". This was the *France Insoumise*.[1] A radical Left movement (deliberately not a party), the FI was founded in 2016 and is led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who was previously (from 1976 to 2008) a left leader within the Socialist Party. It received 7 million votes at the 2017 presidential elections. Can it be considered a new political phenomenon with a novel strategy, a populist grouping similar to others in Italy or elsewhere, or fundamentally a revival of left-wing mass reformism after a long hibernation? Much of the debate about the organisation in France has been desperately superficial and partisan, based on vague alleged personality defects of Mélenchon, so a cool-headed view is worth an attempt.

Not so new?

First, let us note what is not new. This is a movement which aims at capturing government through

parliamentary elections and using that position to bring about decisive change in ecological, social, constitutional and foreign policy domains. It is a movement which considers parliamentary activity alone to be insufficient: vigorously supporting the building of trade unions, strike action, community campaigns to save or improve public services and so on are an integral part of its priorities. It is a movement which considers alliances with all those forces hostile to the dictatorship of profit to be necessary, but which desires to affirm itself as a distinct actor in the progressive movement.

All of this might lead one to think that we are in the presence of the resurgence of an old Left, marginalised since the fall of the Eastern Bloc and the establishment of the elite neoliberal consensus - a resurgence which is occurring in parallel with influential anti-austerity organisations in other Western countries, whether it be around Corbyn's *Labour Party* in Britain, Bernie Sanders in the USA, the *Left Bloc* in Portugal, *Podemos* in Spain, or elsewhere.

From this point of view, the rise of the *France Insoumise* calls for the discussion of old questions: in particular, how far can government in the present forms of democracy act against the dictatorship of profit and get away with it, in the face of the classic weapons of pro-capitalist forces - from possession of the media and capital flight, to the more

vicious interventions which laid waste to left experiments in Chile in 1973? Does the FI government-in-waiting give us reason to believe that the U-turns of *Labour* in Britain in the 1970s[2], of Mitterrand in France in the 1980s[3], or of Tsipras a few years ago in Greece, to name but a few, will not occur in a future FI France?

Proposals

The movement's programme, *The Future in Common* includes the following proposals, to name but a few points: nationalisation of energy companies, some banks and other services, the end of nuclear power and a move to 100 per cent renewable energy, the establishment of a maximum salary, a shorter working week, a million low-rent houses, retirement at sixty, leaving NATO, free school canteens and a free health service. On the European Union, the plan is to renegotiate the treaties to allow for anti-austerity politics, and if faced with a refusal, consider leaving the EU. In many ways, then, this resembles a social-democratic programme of 50 years ago. It has brought 'planning' back into political discourse, after decades where pleasing 'the market' was generally presented as the only option. It has also integrated the urgency of dealing with climate deterioration.

The discourse of the FI often attacks "financial capitalism" which, it maintains, has excessive influence over

the rest of the economy and calls for "a severing of the links" between industry and agriculture on the one hand, and the financial world of speculation on the other. This is an old Communist Party view of the economy and depends on the idea that finance capital is separate from other sorts (whereas often industrial investors have a speculative financial operation on the go at the same time).
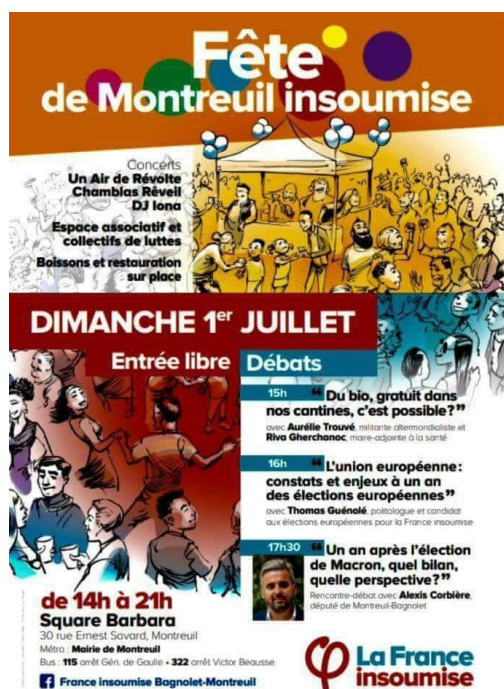
Advertising leaflet for public day of debate and entertainment

A government in waiting

The slogan put forward at the FI summer school in August 2018 was "We are ready to govern" (just as *Podemos* in Spain has declared its objective "to capture and transform state power"). With only 17 FI MPs and a vote of 19.5 per cent at the presidentials, this might seem ambitious, yet the continuing

economic crisis and the collapse of the traditional Right and Left parties make political upheaval the new normal, and Macron himself became president after obtaining only 24 per cent in the first round of the election. The "ready to govern" tone, along with the insistence that the proposed programme has been correctly budgeted by radical economists, underlines the fact that despite the term "citizens' revolution" the project is to be carried out within the framework of capitalist institutions. This is logical, since the difference between a "citizens' revolution" and a "workers' revolution" (however far-off either might seem) is that workers produce the profit which allows the ruling class to exist, whereas citizens as citizens have far fewer powerful levers to oblige the powerful to agree to their demands. (This despite the creative tactics of *Yellow Vest* and other citizens' movements.)

One of the FI's radical demands responds to the question of how the state can be controlled by the people: the programme calls for the replacement of the present 'Fifth Republic' with its excessive presidentialism and many other defects, with a 'Sixth Republic' which would be characterised by a much bigger share of popular democracy, including the possibility of calling referenda by popular demand (now a key Yellow Vest priority), and of revoking the mandate of MPs between elections under certain

circumstances. The new Republic's precise rules would be drawn up by a constituent assembly. Indeed, if he were to be elected president, Mélenchon has declared that he would organise the constituent assembly and then resign, allowing the new constitution to redefine the role of president and assemblies in political life. This priority placed on constitutional reform has often been a strong strand in the French radical Left, and is generally popular, though how far the central dynamic of 21st century neoliberal capitalism can be affected by such measures is unclear, and a certain scepticism is justified.

The programme contains a commitment to fighting against racism and all other oppressions, and the 2018 summer school underlined the need for more non-white candidates at elections. The commitment included combating prejudices against Muslims. In practice however the FI are generally no better at fighting islamophobia than most of the French radical left (that is, they are pretty poor), and there are several extreme secularists among leading activists. This situation however is in flux. There are strong activists against Islamophobia in the FI who Mélenchon respects, and it was notable that he began a public meeting in November 2018 by denouncing the anti-Muslim racism of (ex-Prime minister) Manuel Valls.

New options

What then can we put down as definitely new? FI aims to be "a movement, not a party". This involves avoiding traditional party structures of delegated democracy and factional struggle (this last has at times taken up inordinate amounts of energy on the French far left, far beyond what might be deemed the necessities of democratic debate). This turn has led to the FI programme being written by a series of thematic networks and validated by a movement conference made up of delegates drawn by lottery from among the willing – a novel option. In addition, just like in such organisations as *Momentum* in the UK, the FI *YouTube* channel and grassroots use of social networks have been central to FI campaigning.

The demand to "do politics in a new way" is, of course,[4] a very old one. In the case of the FI, the emphasis seems to be particularly on not allowing electoral alliances to drastically water down demands for social change. Implicitly, the criticism is of the *French Communist Party*, which has some radical demands in its programme, but has often been accused of abandoning most of them in order to maintain seats on regional or local councils in alliance with a Socialist Party which has been moving rightwards for decades, leading to its present collapse (6 per cent of the first round vote in the 2017

presidentials, 3 per cent of the first round vote in the following legislatives, surely a record for an outgoing government).

Successes

The FI has some successes to its name. In the 2017 presidential election, Mélenchon received 7 million votes, the largest number ever obtained by a radical Left candidate, even during the heyday of the French Communist Party. His public meetings were and are huge, spectacular, and marked by stunning oratory and impressive pedagogy about the workings of capitalist society and the need for radical humanism. FI has been able to organise very large mass demonstrations against Macron. In opinion polls, the movement is consistently rated as the most effective opposition to right-wing president Emmanuel Macron. Its 17 members of parliament form a dynamic and diverse team, a people's tribune both inside parliament (proposing more amendments than any other group) and outside, on a wide range of issues.

Many of the activities of local FI supporters' groups are traditionally left in character: organising support for the mass strikes last year, organising debates on political issues chosen locally.

The leadership encourages popular mobilisations on local issues – "Know your Rights" caravans tour the poorer parts of some cities; a long-neglected local school was (illegally) repainted by a local network supported by the FI; these examples are relayed by the leadership and the social networks, though have not flourished as quickly as had been hoped. The FI held a summer school and a youth summer school as most French parties do. The youth summer school included lectures by well-known Marxists as well as representatives of the non-Marxist Left. Feminism, eco-socialism, self-

Advertising leaflet with the programme of the Youth Summer School

organisation and Left republicanism were the main highlights on the programme. They also organised in November 2018 the "Rencontres nationales des quartiers populaires", which translates literally as "national meeting for the poorer parts of town", and is understood in

French politics as an attempt to listen to and implicate the sections of the population who do not have a stable, reasonably paid job, in particular the non-white sections of the working class.

Organisation

If the FI leadership has preferred to form a movement rather than a party, it is also because it is a way of sidestepping some questions of relationships with other parties (since one can, for example, be a member of the *Communist Party* and an active supporter of FI), and of partly avoiding a tradition of political horse-trading which has plagued the French Left for decades. Critics of the movement method point out, with some reason, that a lack of structures for decision-making often leaves an inordinate amount of influence in the hands of the national leadership. It has also been noted that it can reduce much-needed debate on difficult issues. *Podemos* seems to have suffered considerable damage through not having a clearly defined position on the national question in Catalonia, to take one example.

French traditions

One or two elements of the FI approach are clearly rooted in distinctive aspects of the French Left. One is a sort of Left patriotism, a feeling that France has a progressive role to play in world politics (often in opposition

to the USA). This vision often includes the idea that symbols going back to the French Revolution, such as the *Tricolour* and the *Marseillaise* anthem, can mobilise a sense of a specifically French radical humanism. So, tricolours have sometimes been distributed at rallies, and both the *Marseillaise* and the *International* sung. Though these are striking symbols, it is not clear that this patriotic element is key to the FI support. In addition, since the tricolour has also flown for centuries over vicious French colonial and imperialist endeavours, the non-white working class in France may not find it so attractive. The vision of France playing a positive role in the international arena leads Mélenchon to hold some positions considerably to the right of his counterparts in other countries. For example, he is not opposed to France having nuclear weapons in the present international situation.

The other "very French" aspect of FI is Left secularism and anticlericalism, which can sometimes be a cover for Islamophobia. This has seen the broad Left express indifference or even support faced with Islamophobic laws. Muslim public servants and high school students are banned from wearing headscarves, Muslim mothers wearing them have often been hounded out of any participation in school trips, and the Niqab face veil was banned in the streets by a law in 2010. Attempts by mayors of various

towns to ban the wearing of full body swimsuits by Muslim women on the beaches of their towns saw practically no outrage from the Left, and Mélenchon disappointingly condemned both the racist mayors and the people who sell full-body swimsuits (they do it for political reasons, he claimed, without evidence).[5] Although Mélenchon has more often recently condemned discrimination against Muslims, the FI is no better than most of the Left on the issue.

A recent row on the French Left concerning attitudes to immigration has been carried out at a high temperature, without it being completely clear what the political content is. FI leaders have repeated that they are not simply in favour of opening the borders, though they campaign for immediate legalisation of all immigrant workers, and welcoming refugees in danger in the Mediterranean. Mélenchon has declared that much immigration is not freely chosen and working with countries of origin to stop the problems which drive people to leave should be part of Left policy. This, in the context of the campaigns of Sahra Wagenknecht in Germany, has led to some currents suspecting that FI could conceivably move in a similar direction to *Aufstehen*. One of the reactions in France was an open letter denouncing those who suggest that the far right is asking the right questions about immigration, signed by 150 radical Left

personalities (and one FI MP). The FI leadership saw the document as a masked attempt at attacking the FI, which it no doubt was for some, and did not sign it.

Under attack

As an electorally credible radical Left movement, the FI, like Corbyn in Britain, is under continuous attack. The right-wing media like to paint Mélenchon as similar in appeal to the fascist Marine Le Pen, or as a supporter of Putin. A series of unprecedented (and probably illegal) police raids on FI offices and leaders' houses in autumn 2018 took away the organisation's computers, but mostly aimed at putting out an image of the FI as gangsters or as corrupt. Rather than defend free political organisation, one of the mainstream left-wing newspapers reacted by headlining on speculations about Mélenchon's love life!

The FI is also under attack from sections of the Left, even if most organisations declared their disapproval of the police raids. The *Communist Party* (which still has 12 MPs and 1600 local councillors) is anxious about the danger of being replaced as the institutional reformist Left, as its alliances with the austerity-wielding *Socialist Party* have discredited it in many towns, and it has reacted with a series of sectarian diatribes against FI. Its brand new general secretary, elected in November 2018, seems keen to continue allying with the *Partis Socialiste*.

Sections of the revolutionary Left (a current far more visible in France than in many countries) have been given generous space in TV chat shows, since they will denounce Mélenchon. The attitude of this far Left contrasts sharply with that of the British far left's attitude to Corbyn, generally one of critical support. This sectarianism can be explained mostly by the analysis defended by a part of French revolutionaries (that left-wing reformism is no longer possible in late capitalism and therefore that Mélenchon is simply planning to betray), but also by the fact that standing in elections and getting a fair number of votes (over 1 per cent in each of 50 constituencies) provides significant government funding for the French far left.

More measured Left critics underline the dangers of a situation such as happened in Greece when a Left *Syriza* government, brought in with mass popular and worker's mobilisation, decided to organise yet more austerity rather than stand up to international capital. FI leaders tend to say "we will do what we promise, we are not like Tsipras". Nevertheless, this suggests that the *Syriza* catastrophe was due to the individual weakness of Tsipras or other leaders. The question of the amount of pressure a panicked ruling class could put on the FI movement both before a hypothetical electoral success (with media campaigns etc) and after (with capital flight, investment strikes and so on) is little discussed and can be considered, from the point of view of the anti-capitalist, as the real "elephant in the room".

Many commentators have labelled the FI as populist. It is true that leaders are interested in dialogue with such thinkers as Chantal Mouffe,[6] and that the FI poses "uniting the people against the elite" as a central slogan, rather than "unite the Left". But rejecting the "Unite the Left" approach is mainly connected with rejecting political party horse-trading and rotten compromises with austerity socialists. Jean-Luc Mélenchon is a thousand times closer politically to Jeremy Corbyn than he is to Beppe Grillo, the Italian leader now in government with the far right.

Many millions of people, squeezed or crushed by the juggernaut of maximising profit, desperately hope that some government will make a real difference for the better in their lives, and can put excessive trust in Left leaders. Nothing is more understandable. Whether FI's future will be to produce an Alexis Tsipras, imposing ever more austerity on the people, a Jacinda Arden, delivering far fewer reforms than hoped, or an effective challenge to the dictatorship of profit, depends on multiple unknowns, but in the French political landscape today, it represents a new kind of challenge to elite business as usual.

2019

The nature of the *Yellow Vest* movement, which designates its enemies as elite politicians and multinational companies,[7] rather than the employing class as such, means that organisations such as the FI, for which elections are central, are well-placed to benefit from the expressed anger. The European elections, which Mélenchon has announced to be "an anti-Macron referendum" will constitute an interesting test. For these elections, due in May 2019, the FI have joined a grouping of six Left parties from around Europe (counting a total of 9 Euro MPs and 143 members of national parties). These parties left the established *Party of the European Left*, since the latter supported the Tsipras government in Greece and its imposition of heavy EU-inspired austerity after the crisis of 2015.

Endnotes

1   Many translations have been proposed: France in Revolt, France Unbowed, Rebel France...

2   The stated intentions of the Labour government in the early 1970S to decisively move the balance of power away from capital (intentions symbolised by Denis Healey's 1973 promise to draw "howls of anguish from the rich" were thoroughly abandoned, and 1977 and 1978 saw the first big drop in workers' real wages since the war.

3   After an ambitious nationalisation and social reform programme in 1981, the Mitterrand government announced "a turn to rigour" which revealed itself to be another word for austerity.

4   See Isaac Deutscher's thoughts in 1967 on "Marxism and the New Left", available online at https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1967/marxism-newleft.htm

5   See John Mullen "'Beach secularism' fuels racism in France" in: Red Flag, 28 August 2016. http://redflag.org.au/node/5453

6   Mélénchon and Mouffe organised together a meeting/ public conversation, which can be found online in French here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtriFMxsOWw& It tended to show that the two were not really so close in politics.

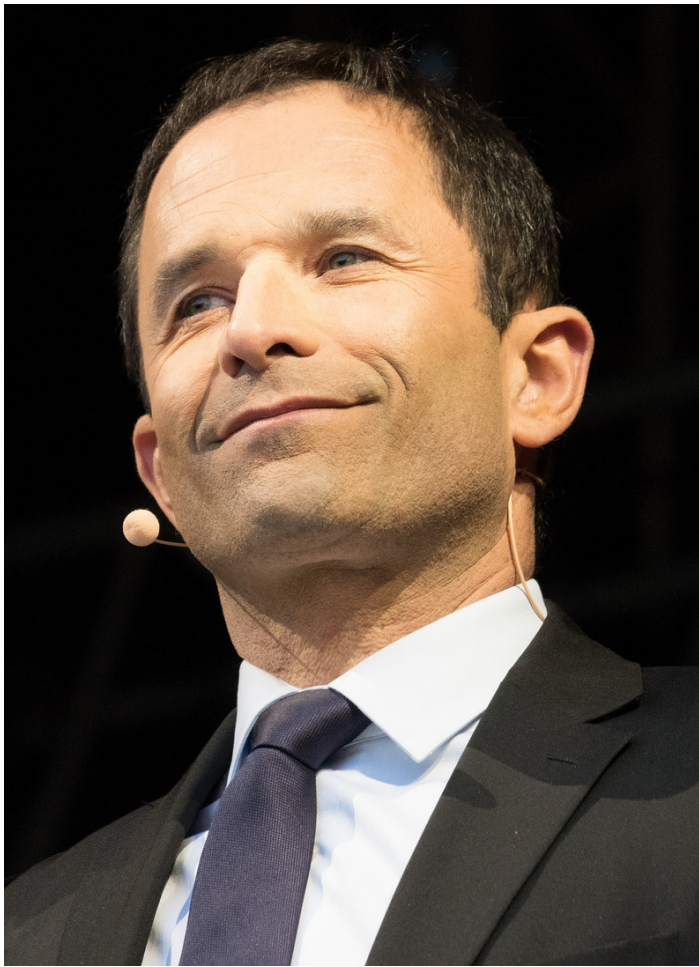7   Since its core is an alliance of low-paid workers, self-employed and small business owners.

French Left-Libertarianism and Benoit Hamon's Socialist Vision

Charles Masquelier

(Exeter)

The *Parti Socialiste* (PS) lost the French presidential election of 2017 with the lowest score (6.36 per cent of votes) in the party's history under the fifth republic. Its candidate, Benoit Hamon, had made the decision to propose a campaign manifesto firmly anchored on the Left, putting an end to years (if not decades) of proposals that were socialist in name only, and prompting the departure of various prominent figures within the party, such as Manuel Valls (ex-prime minister) and Jean-Yves Le Drian (ex-foreign office minister). Despite winning the party members' vote at the primary, many party officials did indeed regard his turn to the Left as a problematic move, recalling elements of the rift between UK *Labour Party* members and that of the Parliamentary Labour Party regarding Jeremy Corbyn. But, although Hamon sought to reach an agreement with the charismatic left-wing leader of the increasingly popular movement *La France Insoumise* (FI), his programme, as

well as the movement (Generation.s) he launched following his electoral defeat, mark more than a mere (re-)turn to the Left. They are, too, elements of a revival of a left-libertarianism, whose expression within the French party-political apparatus had so far been confined to parties associated with political ecology (Kitschelt, 1990; Gombin, 2003).

In order to fully appreciate the nature of Hamon's strand of socialism, then, it is essential to situate it within a (libertarian) socialist mode of thought, wherein the ideal of individual emancipation holds a place as important as the values of equality and solidarity. For, left-libertarianism not only aims to liberate individuals from various conditions of domination engendered by capitalism, it is also distrustful of forms of central planning and sets out to strike a compromise between collectivism and individualism. While it would be unreasonable to suggest that Hamon's political vision

French left-libertarianism in perspective

French left-libertarian thinking could be traced back to the work of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (2007), whose defence of workers' self-management significantly influenced later proponents of *autogestion* in the 1960s and 1970s. As the 'father of autogestion' (Guerin, 1978), he advocated a radical re-organisation of economic life capable of striking a balance between individual emancipation and collective responsibility expected to pave the way for the co-existence of freedom, equality and solidarity. Partly drawn up in opposition to Louis Blanc's 1848 call for a state responsible for financing and supervising the creation of cooperatives, Proudhon's de-centralised federalism effectively sought to safeguard workers' freedom against the encroachments of an omnicompetent and omnipresent form of centralised command. The central site of emancipation for this form of *autogestion*, then, is the democratically organised workplace.

But, left-libertarian thinking in France would, especially from the 1960s onwards, eventually become internally diversified. Two main strands could be observed: one, the economistic strand, influenced by the work of Proudhon, and another, the culturalist strand, influenced by the work of Henri Lefèbvre (1988; 2002). The latter was an influential figure of the May 1968

Benoît Hamon at a public open-air meeting at the Place de République
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constitutes a fully-fledged libertarian socialism, a discussion of his interest in worker cooperatives, his political ecology and a core measure he advocates, known in the English-speaking world as the universal basic income (UBI), reveal a fairly pronounced affinity with left-libertarian thinking. In this piece I aim to discuss this affinity, while situating Hamon's socialism within a particular tradition of French left-libertarianism. This is followed by reflections on the 2017 electoral defeat and some of the lessons to be learned from it.

protests in France, who anticipated a central role for the workplace in the operationalisation of *autogestion*, but understood the concept as one capturing a more general change. According to him, the concept ought to be regarded as a principle of life, guiding practices within and beyond the workplace (Lefèbvre, 1988). Under such a reading, then, *autogestion* is best understood as a principle according to which individuals choose to live, i.e. as a cultural principle. It follows that a socialist alternative based on this version of *autogestion*, entails the emergence of new economic, political and cultural modes of life articulated around self-management.

While André Gorz followed a similar line of reasoning, his diagnosis that 'individuals no longer identify with their work' (Gorz, 2012: 88) led him to propose a revision of left-libertarianism. Like Lefèbvre, he insisted on realising the 'possibilities of self-determined activity' (Gorz, 2012: 42) in all spheres of life, but for Gorz, this would be achieved through the implementation of concrete measures, such as the reduction of working time (Gorz, 2012) and, as advocated later in his life, the introduction of a UBI (2012b). His own strand of libertarianism also includes a pronounced concern for ecological matters. In fact, the above measures are thought to be central for re-organising society around the 'less is better' logic

of 'ecological rationality,' in virtue of their role in minimising the operations of an 'economic rationality' that imposes repressive imperatives of productivity on society at large. By increasing the scope of choices made independently of the 'quest for maximum economic productivity' (Gorz, 2012: 32), those measures are thought to be particularly appropriate for facilitating the emergence of a free and ecologically sustainable mode of life. In this sense, his eco-socialism, which could also be regarded as a post-work left-libertarianism, marks a decisive break away from the Proudhonian economistic strand discussed above.

In fact, despite the existence of other economistic left-libertarianisms such as Daniel Guerin's 'libertarian communism,' it was Gorz's own strand that eventually succeeded in making inroads into party politics. This could be explained by three key factors. Firstly, the presence of counter-cultural movements contesting the rather *dirigiste* character of the French political-economic order in the 1960s provided a fruitful basis for the revival of a left-libertarianism that located emancipation beyond the workplace. Secondly, the increasing preponderance of environmentalist concerns within public and political discourse gave actors of May 1968, disillusioned with party politics, such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Brice Lalonde, opportunities for cultivating their

political engagement outside traditional party structures. Finally, the advocacy of an economistic understanding of *autogestion*, alongside socialist forms of planning by a French socialist party keen to unite forces with the *Parti Communiste Francais* (PCF), contributed to making political ecology the most auspicious political terrain for left-libertarian concerns à la Gorz. It was not until the 2017 presidential election campaign of Benoit Hamon that left-libertarianism began to enter party politics through the socialist door. But what kind of left-libertarianism can be observable here?

Hamon and left-libertarianism

Keen to re-align the *PS* with a genuine but modernised form of socialism, the socialist candidate drew the contours of his political programme on the basis of a clearly defined diagnosis of contemporary French society and its future developments. Central to it are the following observations, most relevant to the discussion of left-libertarianism offered in this article: increasing poverty and socio-economic inequalities, various forms of precarity and domination articulated around racial, gender and sexuality lines, the increasing automation of work and manifold socio-economic consequences of the digital revolution and, last but not least, the ecological consequences of pre-existing economic practices and lifestyles. In order to address those issues, Hamon proposes a range of measures ranging from investment in public services and urban renewal, the expansion of the cooperative sector, the UBI, the reduction of working time, anti-discriminatory controls, forms of green taxation and the constitutional protection of public goods such as water and air (Hamon, 2017).

Given the presence of a range of measures relying on taxation, regulation and public expenditure, it is possible to observe an inclination towards collectivism, typical of social democratic models. However, Hamon made his preference for de-centralised and participatory forms of democratic governance plain to see. In fact, now freed from the constraints of the PS political machine, Hamon wrote in the charter of his movement entitled *Generation.s*:

> In the economic and social field, we align ourselves with the kind of socialist struggle and promise, according to which no emancipation can be possible without democracy in the workshop. Democracy is not an oasis limited to the intermittent right to vote for one's representatives.[1] (Generation.s, 2017)

With such an explicit support for industrial democracy and a clear ideological alignment with forms of socialism grounding emancipation in the democratic organisation of the workplace, Hamon makes his debt to left-libertarianism explicit. But, while this passage seems to suggest an alignment with economistic left-libertarianism,

other measures he defended during the presidential campaign and continues to promote within his movement, indicate a closer alignment with the post-work and eco-socialist left-libertarianism of Gorz.

In fact, Hamon's debt to Gorz has, too, been made rather explicit on several occasions. A few months before the presidential election, for example,

Generation.s promotes for addressing environmental problems. In fact, the call for large-scale social change through a re-organisation of social, economic, political and cultural life appears more pronounced in his movement manifesto than his campaign manifesto. Freed from the *PS* party machine's constraints, Hamon is now in a better position to express his political radicalism.

Benoît Hamon, painted portrait
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he published an article on the UBI in a special issue of *Politis* marking the tenth anniversary of Gorz's death (Hamon, 2017b). More recently, his movement's draft manifesto, to be debated on 30th June 2018, directly referenced Gorz's own call for 'communal means of production for communal needs' (Generation.s, 2018) under a section devoted to political ecology and the kind of economic changes

But, Hamon's debt to Gorz goes beyond the occasional references to his work. It is indeed possible to observe a more fundamental influence by Gorz on the kind of social change and the measures to attain it promoted by Hamon and his movement. In the draft manifesto, for example, the movement calls for a 'profound rethinking of work and its role in our lives,' while claiming

to 'engage in a cultural struggle against consumerism and individualism, responsible for the fragmentation of societies' (Generation.s, 2018). The overall aim of such orientations consists in paving the way for an ecologically sustainable society in which individuals can finally achieve a 'real and complete emancipation' (Generation.s, 2018) both within but, also and crucially, outside work. It is as facilitator of this change and as basis of a 'new social contract' that Hamon envisions the UBI to perform its key functions.

As indicated above, Hamon, like Gorz, proposed to introduce an unconditional basic income for all citizens. Construed as a 'pillar of social security of the 21st century,' the UBI has a socio-economic function, insofar as it is expected to alleviate precarity and poverty (Generation.s, 2018). As such, it is expected to facilitate the emergence of a more egalitarian society. But Hamon identified another function for this measure: as 'instrument of emancipation and progress' (Generation.s, 2018). While its existence is made possible through institutionalised collective responsibility, i.e. the state, it is also aimed at facilitating the emancipation of each individual. Alongside the 'reduction of working time,' the UBI will alleviate the pressures exerted by market imperatives and, in turn, empower individuals to choose how they want to live, that is,

to increase their freedom to choose the kind of job that will satisfy them, while also obtaining the means for seeking emancipation outside work. Given the two aforementioned core functions, then, the new social contract underpinned by the UBI is one founded on 'principles of autonomy, solidarity and redistribution' (Generation.s, 2018) and, as Gorz himself would put it, partly aims to liberate individuals from economic rationality.

Hamon's proposal to operationalise, at once, what Horvat (1980) regarded as the core values of self-government, namely freedom, equality and solidarity, anticipates an essential role for the state. Left-libertarian forms of thinking, however, warn us against the potential excesses of a state-centred socialist alternative. How could Hamon overcome the tension between such a strong emphasis on a 'providential state,' alongside overtly libertarian ideals? Unlike his left-wing rival Jean Luc Mélenchon, Hamon aims to strike a balance between individualism and collectivism. According to the latter, collectivism aims to facilitate rather than subjugate individual emancipation. One does indeed find in both his campaign and movement manifesto, a pronounced tendency to use such terms as 'facilitate,' 'encourage' and 'incentivise' while referring to functions of the state (Hamon, 2017; Generation.s, 2018). Combined with

his proposals to decentralise governance and enhance industrial democracy, those discursive components do point towards a concern for minimising potential state encroachments on freedom.

Contrasted with the proposals of *FI*, the singularity of Hamon's stance becomes even clearer. In its campaign manifesto, for example, one finds an eco-socialist vision formulated with a much more punitive tone than Hamon's. The state is expected to 'prohibit', 'tax' and 'punish' when deemed necessary (Mélenchon, 2017). The state, here, appears to constitute an end in itself. For, despite favouring a 'people's uprising,' calling for a 'constituent assembly' and insisting on the horizontalism of movement-led political action, the anticipated role for the state recalls the Jacobinist tendency to centralise power. The state, as institutionalised universalism, can and will act in the name of the 'peuple' (the 'people'). Rather than a state-as-facilitator, Mélenchon tends to promote forms of intervention tilting the balance of collectivism and individualism towards the former. For, no distinction appears to be made between individual emancipation and the actions of the state, undertaken in the name of the people.

Mélenchon and his movement did nevertheless end the 2017 presidential campaign with a score (19.58 per cent of the votes) more than twice higher than Hamon's. In the final section of this piece, I reflect on some possible reasons for such an outcome, as well as on the prospects for a left-libertarian future in France.

Lessons from the 2017 election and the future of left-libertarianism in France

Although Mélenchon and Hamon discussed possible avenues for uniting their campaign efforts during the presidential election, no agreement could be reached. Had they been able to agree on a collective way forward, however, the outcome of the election could have been significantly different, with a score likely to supersede Marcon's 24.01 per cent of votes and Marine Le Pen's 21.30 per cent. The Left in France, then, continues to be a political force to be reckoned with. However, given Hamon's election score and the predominantly Jacobinist outlook of most of left-wing parties in France, including the *Nouveau Parti Anti-Capitaliste*, *Force Ouvriere* and the *PCF*, one is justified in doubting that the future of the French Left is libertarian. Below I explain why such doubts are not entirely justified.

The claim that Hamon's low score is attributable to a far too pronounced move to the left could be heard among deserting *PS* officials prior to, and following, the party's historical defeat. However, despite a manifesto firmly anchored on the Left, *FI* obtained

almost as high a score as Francois Fillon (20.01 per cent of votes), the candidate for the mainstream right-wing party *Les Republicains*. Because a very large section of the French electorate continues to value genuinely left-wing politics, the claim that Hamon's turn to the left is responsible for such a remarkable defeat appears unreasonable.

I would instead argue that, in order to understand the historically low score of a Hamon-led *PS*, one ought to take into account the constraints emanating from the party's own ideological trajectory and political history, on which Mélenchon himself based his ideological positioning and political strategy. Since the 1983 monetarist turn of the *PS* under the leadership of Francois Mitterand, the party has struggled to reconnect with its core electoral base, paving the way for the electoral successes of not only Mélenchon, but also of a *Front National* which seized the opportunity to revise its rhetoric in order to attract left-wing voters (Amable, 2017). Although Hamon sought to re-unite the *PS* with the electorate in question, his affiliation to a party responsible for implementing some of the most neoliberal measures in France (Baccaro and Howell, 2011; Amable, 2017) prevented him from gaining sufficient credibility among disaffected voters. If Mélenchon's electoral success can be explained by successfully positioning his party and

movement ideologically against the *PS* – as the 'real' or 'genuine' Left – Hamon's defeat partly stems from an attempt to achieve the same goal from within a party, whose genuinely left-wing credentials have become questionable.

In the footsteps of Mélenchon and Emmanuel Macron, Hamon eventually chose to create a movement in which he can freely express, cultivate and communicate his radicalism with like-minded political activists. With a green party – *Europe Ecologie les Verts* – often found vascillating between the centre and the Left of the political spectrum, and *more recently choosing to unite forces with Hamon during the presidential election, the leader of Generation.s* has, today, become the main bearer of libertarian ideals firmly anchored on the Left. Despite a clear and consistent advocacy of a 'providential state' watching over society, Hamon insists that its interventions ought to limit themselves to guiding the cultural and economic transformations appropriate for an egalitarian ecological transition and individual emancipation. He is today confronted with a choice: either to seek a closer ideological alignment with Mélenchon's statist strand of socialism or assert the distinctively left-libertarian elements of his own movement. Should he choose the latter, political success will partly rest on his capacity to offer a self-confident and credible left-libertarian

alternative to the dominant Jacobinism of the French Left, along with a left-libertarian critique of Macronist politics capable of opposing the distinctively (neo)liberal individualisation of risk, responsibility and freedom with the message that individual emancipation can co-exist with collective responsibility.

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Endnotes

1   All passages extracted from the Generation.s website are my own English translation of the original French.

Portuguese Left Tests the Limits of European Social Democracy

Eunice Goes

(London)

Across Europe, social-democrats look to Portugal with a mix of hope and envy. The reasons are simple. Since 2015 the *Portuguese Socialist Party* (PS) has led a minority government which relies on the support of the *Portuguese Communist Party* (and its satellite partner, the Greens) and of the radical left party *Left Bloc*, and which has managed to achieve several miracles, namely to 'turn the page on austerity', to reduce the public deficit to historic levels and to convince the *European Union* (EU) to support its economic approach. If that was not already short of miraculous in a Europe where social-democratic parties are in retreat (Hix and Benedetto, 2017), the PS is also well-positioned to lead the next government following this year's parliamentary elections.

At first glance, the story of Portugal's anti-austerity success resembles the adventures of Astérix, the tiny but gutsy Gaul hero who always managed to win against the all-mighty Roman Empire. Like Astérix, the Portuguese government has been able to defy the expectations of more powerful actors at home and in Brussels. When the 'quasi-coalition government' (Fernandes, 2016) led by the socialists was formed in November of 2015 few commentators and European leaders believed it would survive more than six months. In Portuguese right-wing circles, this government was derogatorily described as a 'Contraption' which would collapse at the first sudden right turn.

It turns out that the 'Contraption' defied these expectations. In less than four years, it approved four budgets and has won important economic battles with the EU. So far, so Astérix. But a closer look suggests that the story of the 'Contraption' is less heroic though not less interesting because of that. Evidence suggests that austerity was only contained, and not reversed. Above all, the ability of the socialist minority government

to completely reverse austerity and implement a social democratic agenda remains heavily constrained by membership of the *European Monetary Union* (EMU).

Despite these constraints, the socialist minority government has not given up hope on social democracy. Its commitment to social democratic values is the main driver behind the Prime Minister's recently announced proposals to reform the *Eurozone* which he has been promoting in different European forums. If those proposals are endorsed across Europe the Portuguese socialists may have, as suggested by the former architect of Third Way politics, Peter Mandelson, discovered a 'fourth way' for social democracy in Europe (Meireles, 2018). On the other hand, if those proposals are ignored, Portugal's governance experience of the plural left may merely show the limits of European social democracy.

The following pages will map this potential 'Fourth Way' to social democracy by first contextualising the emergence of the 'Contraption' and assessing its term in office. Next, it will

António Costa
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show how the realisation that austerity could not be fully reversed led the socialist minority government to become one of the most ardent defenders of *Eurozone* reform. The article will conclude with an analysis of Costa's proposals for *Eurozone* reform and what do they mean for the renewal of European social democracy.

A Contraption That Works

The PS's return to power was far from straightforward. Following inconclusive legislative elections in October of 2015, the leader of the PS António Costa snatched victory from the jaws of defeat by inviting the parties of the left to support his government (the four parties hold a majority in Parliament). After 35 days of negotiations, the PCP-*Greens* and the *Left Bloc* agreed to support a minority socialist government

provided it delivered the list of 70 policies that had been agreed in three separate written documents. These agreements were comprehensive in scope, but they fell short of a coalition government. In theory, the socialist leads a minority government supported by the parties of the radical left, but, in practice, the relationships between the parties have become so highly institutionalised (Fernandes, et al, 2018) that the government can be defined as quasi-coalitional (Fernandes, 2016).

A number of factors made this historic agreement possible. Firstly, the severity of the austerity measures demanded in 2011 by the *Memorandum of Understanding* agreed with the EU and the *International Monetary Fund* and implemented with gusto by the centre-right government led to a *rapprochement* between the four parties of the left. In the period of the 2011-15, the thus far historical rival parties of the left – PS, PCP-*Greens* and *Left Bloc* – were often united in their opposition to the austerity agenda of the centre-right government.

Secondly, the new ideological orientations of the different political parties facilitated this agreement. While the PS shifted to the left under the leadership of Costa, the radical left parties adopted more pragmatic stances. It was certainly the case of the *Left Bloc*, who under the stewardship of Catarina Martins became less interested in debates about doctrine and more focused on the effects of austerity (Freire 2017).

Thirdly, the inconclusive electoral results meant that the Left was tantalisingly close to power; to miss this opportunity would mean another four years in opposition watching the right consolidate its austerity agenda. The combination of these factors were sufficiently powerful to persuade the three parties to set aside their profound and long-standing disagreements about NATO, membership of EMU or the restructuring of the public debt, and to agree on a bread-and-butter anti-austerity agenda.

From an electoral perspective, the results of this experiment have been encouraging. The Portuguese experiment shows that dialogues between the different families of the left can bring electoral benefits to all. The PS is on course to win a comfortable plurality at this year's elections, and both the PCP and the *Left Bloc* have so far escaped the black widow's curse that normally affects the parties of the radical left that join coalition governments. If anything, the 'Contraption' has enabled these parties to make the most of the quasi-coalitional arrangement: they can claim responsibility when things go right and blame the socialists when things go wrong.

Placating Brussels

The news that a socialist minority government supported by the radical left had been formed in Portugal in November of 2015 were not welcomed in Europe. The promises to turn the page on austerity made by Costa during the electoral campaign were seen as heretic by Brussels and several Northern European governments. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel let it be known that the prospect of an anti-austerity government in Lisbon was 'very negative' (Tooze, 2018: 537). For all intents and purposes Portugal was still a 'naughty' country that should do, to use the expression used by the former German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, 'what it had been told to do' by the EU.

Having watched from the sidelines how the EU institutions and the *Eurogroup* (the informal but powerful group of Finance Ministers of the *Eurozone*) had outmaneuvered and humiliated the *Syriza*-led Greek government, Costa knew he could not be confrontational in his dealings with Brussels. In particular, he knew he had to convince the EU institutions and the German government that his economic agenda would not undermine the governance rules of the *Eurozone*.

To help him in this task he appointed to key cabinet positions individuals who knew Brussels inside-out but who also had relevant expertise and a patine of Establishment credibility. That reasoning led to the appointment of Mário Centeno, a Harvard-trained economist who had served on a board of the *European Commission* (EC), as Finance Minister. This appointment proved to be crucial for the success of Portugal's strategy. Centeno had the expertise to deliver budgets that met Brussels' approval but he also had the credibility and the diplomatic nous to resist pressure from the *Eurogroup* or from Berlin when needed.

Despite the careful preparations, the dealings with Brussels were not always easy. For instance, the socialist government's first budget, presented in Brussels in January of 2016, and which included proposals to raise the minimum wage and reverse the cuts to pensions, was fiercely attacked by the EC on the grounds that it was fiscally unsound. In the end, Costa was forced to cave in to Brussels demands and added to his budget extra taxes on financial transactions, fuel and tobacco.

In the spring of 2016 a new crisis emerged. The EC threatened to issue fines against Portugal because its deficit reached 4.4% of GDP. Once again, the government fiercely resisted the EC ruling. The Minister of the Economy Caldeira Cabral told the media that it was counterproductive for the EU to sanction Portugal for 'applying the exact formula

it was told to by the EC' (Politico, 2016).

In the end Portugal was saved by the political calculations of Berlin. At the time, Wolfgang Schäuble, wanted to help the then struggling Spanish centre-right government led by Mariano Rajoy who also faced the threat of fines for failing to meet the *Eurozone* public deficit targets. As the EC could not be seen to give preferential treatment to one member-state over another, it decided to not to issue fines against both countries.

In the meantime, Portugal's economic outlook improved significantly. In the spring of 2017, official data showed that Portugal's public deficit was set at 2.1 per cent of the GDP, the lowest in 40 years; economic growth reached 2.7 per cent (at the time the highest in the *Eurozone*) and unemployment had fallen to below 7 per cent (it had reached 16 per cent at the height of the crisis). As a result of these good news Portugal withdrew from the *Excessive Deficit Procedure* in the summer of 2017.

The transformation of the Portuguese economy was so unexpected that Wolfgang Schäuble started to refer to the Portuguese Finance Minister as the 'Cristiano Ronaldo' of European finances. The restoration of Portugal's credibility in the EU was concluded with the appointment of Mário Centeno as chair of the *Eurogroup* in December of 2017.

Containing Austerity

But Costa's and Centeno's success in Brussels turned out to be the sign that austerity was not over yet. Surely, the most severe austerity measures had been reversed. Since 2016, the socialist minority government rose the minimum wage to 600 euros, widened the scope of the minimum income guarantee scheme, reversed the cuts on pensions, reintroduced the 35-hour week for public sector workers, and introduced tax cuts to low-income earners. The government also stopped some privatisations, introduced legislation that sought to protect the self-employed, and introduced popular policies like free textbooks for schoolchildren.

However, these measures did not reverse all the austerity measures that have been introduced in Portugal since 2009. More worryingly, the reversal of some austerity measures was done at the expense of much needed investment in public services and infra-structure. According to official figures, in the period 2015-2017 public investment in the healthcare system, education and other public services dropped from 2.2 per cent to 1.8 per cent of the GDP.

The reality is that, as it was argued by Cardoso, Costa's government 'merely worked to limit austerity's worst effects by manoeuvering within the *Eurozone*'s strict budgetary limitations' (2018). In

short, Costa's government prioritised the reversal of austerity measures that directly affected the pockets of the most vulnerable, over investments in public services, in infra-structure and in the scientific fabric of the country. For these reasons, the effects of the Portuguese government's economic policies have been remedial rather than transformative.

Portuguese anti-austerity graffiti
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Costa is fully aware that under the current rules of the *Eurozone* it is not possible to respond to popular demands for more public investments in the economy or for progressive measures that would deliver social-democratic outcomes. Membership of the EU imposes other constraints to other social democratic parties, especially in the areas of state-aid and liberalisation of public services, however most EU member states have learnt to navigate these impediments to interventionist

policies. For that reason, the strongest constraint to social democratic politics is membership of the monetary union. As Moschonas put it, the institutional design of EMU effectively 'limits social democratic freedom of manoeuvre' (2014: 253; see also Sloam and Hertner, 2012: 36) as governments privilege fiscal discipline over social justice.

The convergence criteria established in the *Maastricht Treaty* signed in 1992 and the *Stability and Growth Pact* of 1997, limits government deficits to 3 per cent of the GDP and public debt levels to 60 per cent of the GDP. Complying with these rules leaves very little room for public investment or for the development of more equitable welfare provision. To make matters worse, since the *Eurozone* crisis, the changes to the governance rules of the euro have made social democratic politics even more difficult to achieve.

To save the *Euro*, the EU decided to tighten the ordoliberal screws of the EU. In 2012, the Fiscal Stability required member states to introduce in domestic legislation a fiscal rule which requires budgets to be balanced or on surplus, a new rule which, as

Matthijs and Blyth argued, challenges 'the nature and legitimacy of national constitutions' (2015: 259). The EU has also strengthened the *Excessive Deficit Procedure* and gave the *European Commission* more power to monitor the enforcement of the *Eurozone* rules to the point that it can veto budgets that have been approved by national parliaments.

The adoption of these measures, together with a vast programme of quantitative easing, was the price to pay to 'save' the euro, however this rescue operation was achieved at the cost of growing social and economic divergence between *Eurozone* member states.

These reforms had other collateral damage. In the *Eurozone* most social democratic parties have been condemned to the opposition for having caused so much social and economic pain to their voters. However, the main problem is one of intellectual imagination. Most social democratic parties still do not know how to make their commitment to European integration, and in particular to the monetary union, compatible with their ideological goals.

Reforming the *Eurozone*

The proposals to reform the *Eurozone* made by the Portuguese Prime Minister are an attempt to stop the intellectual paralysis of the European social democratic left, but in a way that go with the grain of European integration. In other words, Costa's proposals are incremental in scope though they have the potential to have a transformational impact.

At the heart of his proposals is the recognition that in its current shape the monetary union is detrimental to European social democracy given that the current rules reflect the ideology of the minimal state. They also reflect Costa's concern with the growing economic and social divergence between the different economies of the *Eurozone*. According to him, without greater economic convergence in the EMU, poor and small countries like Portugal will be forever condemned to be peripheral and low-waged economies.

These concerns could have a led to a big-bang approach to *Eurozone* reform. However, Costa is a pragmatic leader who is acutely aware that neither Germany nor the Northern European countries that have recently formed the *New Hanseatic League* will support changes to the *Eurozone* governance rules (Schmidt, 2015: 108). Instead, he defends a layering approach to reform that builds on the existing governance structure as well as on the proposals recently made by both the president of the *European Commission* Jean-Claude Juncker, by the French President Emmanuel Macron, and by the 2017 *Monti Report*.

As such, his proposals require *Eurozone* member states to comply with the convergence criteria set-up in the Maastricht Treaty, with the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact and of the Fiscal Treaty, and which require strict budgetary discipline by the national governments. Thus, to promote economic and social convergence, he defends the development of a budget for the *Eurozone* (funded by a *European Monetary Fund*) tasked with the role of awarding investment funds to the member states that seek to develop high-productivity and high wage economies. Acutely aware that no German government will ever sign blank cheques to less competitive European economies, Costa's proposals avoid the language of transfers and instead emphasise the rights and obligations that normally bind the signatories of a contract.

Under this scheme, the EU and each member state would negotiate a *National Programme of Reform* (NPR) whereby *Eurozone* funds would be awarded with the sole purpose of helping a member state to achieve its *Country Specific Recommendations*. These would consist of a list concrete targets that would be met within a specific timetable set out in the jointly agreed NPR (Costa, 2017).

This form of layering, which can be summarised in the formula 'ordoliberalism at home and Keynesianism at the European scale', is not the most effective way of reforming the *Eurozone*, but it may prove to be the most politically feasible. Because they represent just an incremental step that will add a new layer of policies to the existing *Eurozone* architecture they are more likely to be accepted by Berlin and Brussels. But these reforms have the potential to have a transformational effect. As Streeck and Thelen (2010: 33) reminded us, the neoliberalisation of Europe and North America occurred as a result of a drip feed of incremental measures. But Costa's proposals can have the reverse effects. Over time, the European cash injections can neutralise the effects of ordoliberalism in the *Eurozone*.

To promote his reform agenda, the Portuguese prime minister has tried to form alliances across Europe with like-minded governments, but it hasn't been easy. Most European social-democratic are in opposition. Nonetheless, he has coordinated the promotion of a *Eurozone* convergence agenda with the French President Emmanuel Macron, with the Greek Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, with the Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and in the regular meetings of the group of the seven Southern European countries.

However, this small group of reformists can achieve very little, especially because the Northern European countries grouped in the recently formed *New Hanseatic League* have already

made clear that they disagree with the proposals. However, there are signs that the mood is changing in Brussels. Following this year's elections to the *European Parliament*, several voices in the Commission started to talk about the need to focus on the social dimension of the EU. In addition, the highly political way the *European Commission* and the *European Council* have policed how member states comply with the rules of the *Eurozone* has eroded solidarity and trust amongst member states.

These factors combined have the potential to unleash a new dynamic in Europe that prioritises economic convergence, solidarity and social justice. But until social democratic parties rediscover their agency to unleash that new political dynamic in the EU, the future of European social democracy will remain on hold.

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What Is Left of the (Italian) Left?

Roberto Pedretti

(Milan)

Today the left finds itself in the dangerous but extraordinary condition of being called to reinvent and rethink its role, to open, and experiment with, new spaces of possibilities. As Slavoj Zizek writes in the long introduction to a selection of Lenin's writings, this means working through past historical events – in particular failures – to re/produce the coordinates of the left's project of emancipation.[1] This should recover from the past and adapt to the present the historical purpose of the left with the aim of breaking with forms of subaltern thinking that have hindered the redefinition of the political space in the context of the global economic and social transformations.

In his last book "La lunga eclissi. Passato e presente del dramma della sinistra",[2] Achille Occhetto - the last PCI[3] secretary and first secretary of PDS[4], a national party born after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 - writes that we are facing an unrecognisable political landscape, similar to a tidal wave that has submerged almost all the political forces of the 20th century, in particular the left, both in its multifarious forms, from the most reformist to the most radical one.[5] The outcome of the last general elections in Italy (4 March 2018) produced a political landscape that confirms a process that – apart from a few exceptions – seems to be global and systemic.

The crisis of the Italian and European left[6] is partly the outcome of the intellectual and political difficulty of confronting the historical changes and social transformations of the last decades. It has produced a subordinate position towards the hegemony of the neoliberal consensus, which has prevented the left from evaluating the social and cultural effects this consensus has on its traditional constituency and the emerging new social subjects. According to Paolo Flores d'Arcais, the hegemony of neoliberal thought and practices has been realised to some extent because the left betrayed

its mandate by accepting as inevitable the economic-financial paradigm imposed by the forces of capitalism. Thus, the European left has become complicit in a system that tolerated reformist political activism only as long as it was willing to stay within a well-defined ideological horizon with the goal of co-opting the left's constituencies.[7] If we interpret the crisis of the left within this framework, it must be read as the product of a process of social and economic transformation starting in the 1970s. As stated by the philosopher Massimo Cacciari, we are facing an epochal transition, which requires re-thinking and re-reading key words such as left, democracy, people, and values.[8] Calling things by their real name and remodelling their meaning is the indispensable precondition for articulating a new project for the left.

Back to the Future

Since the birth of fascism, Italy has often been labelled a political test case, a laboratory anticipating political tendencies and transformations elsewhere. In this perspective, we have to consider the birth of *Forza Italia* and 'Berlusconism' at the beginning of the 1990s, a successful political project rhetorically based on redeeming the power of the self-made man and taunting professional politicians. Today this anomaly reappears in the form of what the philosopher Mario Tronti, a leading protagonist of the political debate of the

last 50 years, defines as the rise of the self-declared common man in power.

According to Tronti, in the first years after the end of the Second World War, the democratic political system, based on great mass parties like the PCI (Italian Communist Party) and the DC (Christian Democracy), was able to get rid of the *Uomo Qualunque*[9] movement within a short time thanks to the ability to represent, despite strong ideological differences, the needs of the subaltern classes and to shape the processes of a general modernisation of Italian society.[10] It was only after the fall of fascism and the adoption of the new institutional system based on the 1948 Constitution, that a pluralist approach was adopted; this provided forms of decentralised participation through the formation of democratic political institutions at the regional, provincial, and municipal level, based on a stable party system and a strictly proportional electoral system.[11]

After the great workers' struggles cycle of the 1960s and 1970s, the emancipatory and modernising function of the left seemed to decline due to its inability to understand the profound processes of social reorganisation brought on by the transformation of capitalism As Hardt and Negri underline, in the last fifty years the primary site of production has shifted from the factory to society. Automation, information technology and financialisation conjured

to create new social relations and new subjectivities.[12] The political cultures inspired by the communist and socialist tradition – as well as the popular Catholic one – played a diminishing role as centres of ideological aggregation and identity building, giving way to accentuated forms of individualism linked to the new forms of consumption and the transformation of the labour market.[13]

Until then, the strongest communist party of the western world had been the main driving force of the social and civil transformation of the country, a force which ruled in several regions of the nation and most of the main metropolitan areas, imposing a specific form of cultural and ideological hegemony that distinguished it profoundly from its brotherly parties. The *Communist Party* and its allies usually gained around 40 to 45 per cent of the votes and managed to build a consensus that transcended class boundaries and integrated vast sectors of the middle classes and the entrepreneurial class. The electoral peak of the Italian left coincided with the general elections of June 1976, when the whole of the Italian left gathered about 46 to 47 per cent of the votes with the *Communist Party* at about 35 per cent.

It is one of the paradoxes of history that the difficulties of the Italian left began at that very moment. The left failed to understand the structural economic transformation driven by the crisis of the Fordist mode of production, the gradual financialisation of capital and the globalisation of the markets. This transformation changed the social structure of the country and led to a gradual weakening of the cultural and social fabric on which the left had built its success.

The inability to fully understand the structural changes was evident in strategic choices made by the main party of the left, the PCI: between 1973 and 1979 it passed from the so-called 'historical compromise' (an agreement of government with the DC) to the proposal of a 'democratic alternative' (re-proposing an alliance with the socialist area). Moreover, the attempt to imagine a 'third way', a nebulous proposal that aimed to overcome both the European model of social democracy and Soviet socialism, was an additional supplement to this political deadlock.[14] Some historical events are still indicative of this difficulty in grasping the depth of these structural changes.

In the midst of a long and fierce labour dispute in FIAT, the success of the so-called 'march of the forty thousand', a public protest organised by white-collar workers and managerial cadres of the automotive industry in Turin in October 1980, symbolically marked the end of an era and the beginning of a process of marginalisation of the workers unions. At the time, few observers understood

the historical range of this defeat and the fact that it was the harbinger of the profound restructuring process of industrial and trade union relations as well as the start of restructuring programmes of the production apparatus that would eventually lead to the end of the traditional Fordist factory.[15]

A few years later, in 1985, a referendum initiated by the PCI and the CGIL, the largest workers union, against cutting the so-called 'scala mobile' (a state controlled mechanism to automatically update the salaries to the inflation rate), was clearly defeated, which further signalled both the fracture within the left on this and other issues related to economic and industrial policies and the unexpected change of feeling in a large part of public opinion on industrial relations and development.[16] The decline of the Italian left and its main protagonist, the PCI, was also symbolically represented in the dramatic death in 1984 of the party's secretary general, Enrico Berlinguer. Suffering from a stroke at a rally in Padua during the election campaign for the European Parliament, he died a few days later. More than one million activists attended his public funeral in Rome, an event of historical significance that seemed to close an era and perhaps brought together for the last time what had been the communist people. Radical social, political and

cultural transformations determined largely by the new models of labour market organisation were imposing their effects on the part of society traditionally linked to the left. The appearance and spread of new models of industrial production and organisation of work, defined as 'molecular capitalism', 'family capitalism' or the 'people of the VAT ID numbers'[17], led to the emergence of new social subjectivities that the left failed to understand and then to intercept.[18]

The incubation of the crisis of the left exploded in all its virulence in 2008 and caused what Tronti defines as the mutation of the left political élite, a mutation that is retrospectively understood and explained by Massimo D'Alema[19] in a long critical reflection. He claims that

> [...] the liberal-socialist vision has proved to be largely illusory and that reformism has been crushed between the weight of the global economy and the markets and the limited possibility of action of political institutions that have remained largely national.[20]

Again Tronti's reflection recalls how the failure to grasp the oppressive and predatory character of financial and neoliberal capitalism made it impossible to find

> [...] the [...] way that went beyond the great history of the labour movement, without repeating it and without forgetting it: assuming the inheritance to invest it in a new, always alternative

enterprise. [...] It was legitimate to think of a temporary middle way between capitalism and socialism but not only to manage the first one, rather ruling it, to use it for other purposes that gradually should overcome it.[21]

In this sense the fall of the Berlin Wall not only represented the traumatic closure of the communist experience, it has also meant the acceleration of the end of the social-democratic and reformist experiment, of the thirty-year period of the welfare state project (at least in most of Western Europe).

From that moment on, from the PCI's traumatic congress of dissolution of 1991, that led to a split with the party's far-left wing and the name change to PDS, the Italian anomaly began to give birth to movements and political parties constructed around nationalist, xenophobic and populist contents. In this context, the Italian left pursued a strategy that prioritised governability with the illusion of being able to somehow control these developments. In essence, the Italian left limited itself to following the processes of globalisation and financialisation of the economy from a position of complicity and failed to develop a political and cultural alternative. The underestimation of the contradictions and social costs imposed by economic-financial globalisation produced a response both insufficient and suicidal in pursuing a technocratic management model as the

only possibility of political action.[22]

The Roots of the Defeat

Since the mid-nineties the figures for the electoral losses of both the European and Italian left seem indicative of a relentless decline in every election. Throughout the previous period, most Western European left-wing parties in all their ideological articulations (from centre-left reformism to far-left radicalism) settled steadily at least around
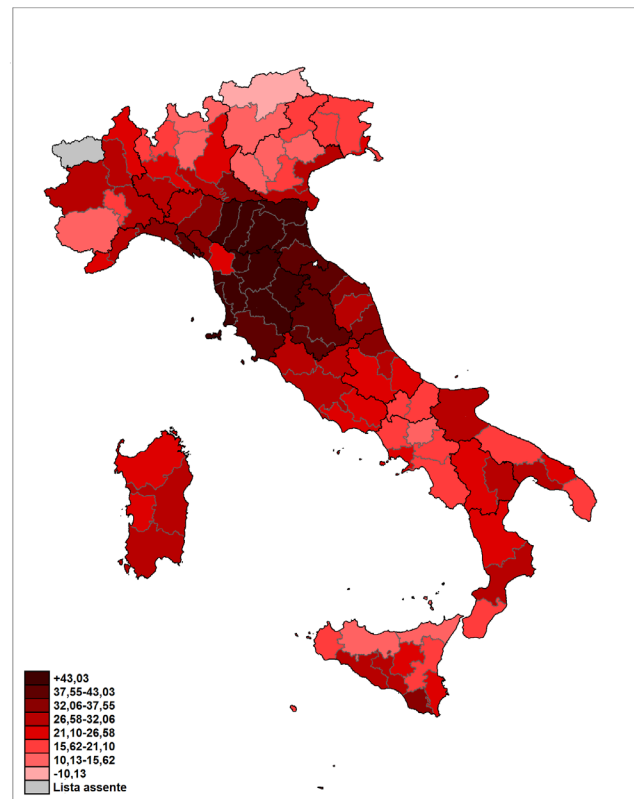
Distribution of the vote to the PCI in the 1987 political elections
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40 per cent of the votes, in some cases even exceeding this figure by 6 to 7 points.[23] In the Italian case, this peak was reached in the general elections of 1976 when the sum of the left-wing parties, with the overwhelming prevalence of the PCI,

reached about 46 per cent of the votes and then settled steadily at around 40 per cent until the beginning of the Nineties.

Since the first general elections of 1948 the *Italian Communist Party* has always scored above 20 per cent, reaching its highest level of votes in the 1976 general elections (34.4 per cent). After the dramatic turn determined by the events of 1989/91, the new political subject born from the ashes of the PCI (in all its declinations and acronyms, that is: PDS, DS and PD) never succeeded in repeating these results and indeed showed a trend towards a steady decrease in the percentage of votes it gathered at the ballot boxes. Despite the noteworthy exception of the 2014 European elections, when the PD received 40 per cent of the votes (but in the context of a very low turnout), the heir of the *Communist Party* mustered only 18.8 per cent of the votes in the 2018 general elections – a decrease of around 8 per cent compared to those of 2013. Further, the crisis of the Italian left is confirmed by the disappointing results of other smaller radical left-wing parties such as *Potere al Popolo* (Power to the People), LEU *Liberi e Uguali* (Free and Equal), SEL *Sinistra e Libertà* (Left and Freedom), RC *Rifondazione Comunista* (Party of the Communist Refoundation). From approximately 32.3 million valid votes, the sum of those cast for the Italian left-wing parties reached a

disappointing 7.3 million.[24] According to analysis of the electoral flows of the 2018 elections, the voters abandoning the PD were mainly channelled towards the 5-Star Movement and to a lesser extent to the League or abstained, while only a residual part moved towards the other leftist parties.[25] These surveys show that a conspicuous part of the traditionally left-wing Italian electorate chose to support those movements and parties labelled as „populist" as a way to punish the left-wing parties for their inability or unwillingness to address the electorate's social needs and discomfort. In this respect, it is evident that we are facing a problem of representation of both the traditional working classes and those social groups (temporary workers, the underemployed, youngsters and unemployed intellectuals), that are the products of the transformation of the social relations according to the needs of the globalised markets. The *Democratic Party* lost approximately 50 per cent of its share of votes between 2008 and 2018, decreasing from a maximum of 12 million to a minimum of 6 million votes. As a consequence, the *Democratic Party* and the other left-wing subjects risk confining themselves to those cosmopolitan middle- and upper-class metropolitan urban enclaves which showed greater dynamism and resilience in response to the economic crisis.[26] Again the analysis of electoral flows underline this transformation, pointing

out how the propensity to vote for the left increases in accordance with the growth of personal income.[27] The difficulty of intercepting and representing those social groups suffering from deep social insecurity is a consequence of the lack of commitment to the traditional themes of the left such as unemployment, job shortages, minimum wages, or welfare. For these groups, the political approach of the M5S appears more credible and less prone to the technocratic recipes and the politics of sacrifice that are perceived as unfair and imposed by a distant European bureaucracy. In addition, the impact of the issues of globalisation and immigration, which appear key factors in mobilising the Italian public opinion and feeding public discourses, has been underestimated by the left, which has failed to offer a credible narrative in order to grasp the anxieties and concerns many citizens share.

The Wings of Hope – What Is to Be Done?

The contemporary conjuncture, characterised by the powerful resurfacing of aggressive reactionary thinking and spreading of isolationist and nationalist politics, opens spaces of resistance and opposition toward the proliferation of such new forms of cultural and ideological conservatism.

In a long editorial, published in the daily newspaper *la Repubblica*, the former editor and writer, Ezio Mauro, observes the failure to understand and interpret the metamorphosis and transformation

of the social body as the main reason leading to the catastrophe of the March 2018 general elections. He writes:

> The lack of a strong commitment to change and of a visionary political project hinders the transformation of the political and cultural identity of the left. The left appears unable to find the words to speak to a dispersed and disappointed people who are waiting for a political project and a leadership ready to propose an alternative to the ferocious, selfish and amateurish image of Italy the government in charge proposes every day with its actions and decisions.[28]

Showing similar disenchanted and worried feelings, Achille Occhetto reflects upon the narrow horizons in which this debate is confined, indicating the short temporal perspective as one of its limitations. He underlines that we should insist on a radical reflection beginning with the collapse of the great narratives of the 20th century and their failure if we want to identify the reasons for the disillusionment and distancing of a part of society that manifests itself in confused and disoriented ways. Occhetto insists on the need to recover the abandoned and disappointed people and to accept the challenge to build a new idea of political involvement inviting, and experimenting with, different forms of activism, militancy and participation.[29] The lack of vision of the left, a political subject stubbornly obsessed with good governance principles and bureaucratic technicalities, has allowed

the spread of what Fabio Vighi defines as

> [t]he metastatic growth of populism [...], a metastasis functional to the maintenance of the domination of capital in its financial form which, through the various forms of 'populism', depoliticises the social struggles by creating and nurturing the invention of an external enemy, be it the immigrant, multiculturalism, technocracies.[30]

According to Vighi's radical interpretation, the crisis of the left can be solved only by rearticulating the proper political dimension to the wide spectrum of social struggles, which are symptomatic of the inherent contradictions of the current form of capitalism. This means the radical transformation of the left's mentality to achieve a break with the relationship of subordination to neoliberalism and the policies of austerity and sacrifices, and to accept the challenge posed by populism and the 'populist' political platforms. It means addressing issues that once again should become part of the identity of the left, such as basic income (or whatever you might call it), labour rights, defence and improvement of civil and social rights, and a renewed relationship with the European Union. Ernesto Laclau's thesis that all political discourse has a populist dimension implies that the left has to abandon a narrow vision of populism and cease to consider populism as a symptom of a disease to be morally condemned rather

than a political subject with its own political dimension to be fought on the political level. The 'trap of populism', in which the left seems imprisoned, makes it difficult to bring back politics in its antagonistic dimension, reconstructing a politics of representation of the interests of collectivities as well as a different meaning of the word 'people'. Among other things, it means rejecting the illusory creation of the people as a phantasmal figure opposed to an 'other' equally ghostly and elusive (the élite, finance, bureaucratic technocracies, immigrants), and a radically diverse definition of people, one constructed inside the concrete social relations and affiliations. In this regard, the philosopher and communist Mario Tronti states, referring to the history of the mass parties of the second half of the 20th century, that "[s]ince there were people, there was no populism. If anything, today we have populism because there are no people."[31] This disappearance coincides with the abandonment of the traditional concept of social classes and the lack of understanding of the emergence of new subjectivities whose social composition has dramatically changed and escaped the usual patterns of interpretation. These subjectivities are the product of the new form the capitalist relations assumed outside the traditional factory system. This mistake has been exacerbated by embracing the neoliberal and individualist ideology, determining the closure of each antagonistic space and all possibility of social transformation, instead of imagining an 'other' beyond the logic of capitalism. Together with the ability to imagine possible futures, heating the hearts and minds of its people, above all the left has lost its memory, symbols and myths.

Criticism of the grand ideological narratives of the 20th century has fuelled the perception that left and right have disappeared. In reality this is the result of an ideological operation leading to acceptance of the neoliberal code as the only legitimate source of construction of the present. There is no doubt that the crisis of the left also derives from this catastrophic cultural subordination that paved the way to the hegemony of the right-wing ideology in forms which gave new meanings to old narratives and successfully reintroduced in the popular the debate on nation, sovereignty, national identity and belonging. Today, the term 'left' has lost its vocation to convey the idea of a possible beyond, a vision of a world with more equal and just social and political structures. It is worth remembering the dramatic rupture that occurred between the left and the world of labour in a phase of profound and radical transformation. Maurizio Landini, the Secretary-General of the CGIL[32] (the largest Italian trade union representing over 6 million members), recognises in the rupture the effects of the

political and cultural isolation of the left and underlines the necessity to respond – thinking of new forms of representation – to the need for participation that emerges from the forms of labour created by neoliberal capitalism, producing new subjectivities among people who are often deprived of guarantees and rights.[33] The political void opened by the lack of a radical transformative project has been filled by political forces that have imposed narratives which reject mediation and delegitimise the function of intermediate bodies, offering instead forms of authoritarian management supported by the search for a direct relationship with the masses, recreating that irrational relationship which paved the way to fascism.

If, following Nicholas DeGenova's argument, populism pretends to be the true expression and voice of the people as opposed to an imagined other, then the left is called to counter such a project of redefining social antagonism because it tries to hide the real forms and sources of inequalities and injustice constitutive of the social order.[34] An ambitious left-wing political programme would start with the reconstruction of a collective horizon based on new forms of agency, participation and organisation of public life. In one of his most recent essays, Lawrence Grossberg suggests that in these hard times, characterised by anger, fear and desperation and by the shifting

of the balance of forces in favour of a conservative and reactionary hegemony undermining the "[...] progressive desires for a more human, just and equitable world"[35] we are asked to articulate different maps of knowledge in order to oppose the present conjuncture. The word 'left' sounds hollow and feeble: while the right imposes its political agenda based on a set of strong issues, the left appears voiceless and unable to give new form to its values and tradition. If we want to understand what has happened in the last decades, and renew the tools to transform the present and stop the spread of the right, it is necessary to begin with a semantic shift, ceasing to call 'left' what is not 'left'. It means to invent a new vocabulary in order to fill this cultural and ideological void and to reopen the space of utopian possibilities, that is to construct and give form to the possibility of radical change.

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2   Occhetto, Achille, *La lunga eclissi. Passato e presente del dramma della sinistra*, 2018, Sellerio Editore, Palermo.

3   PCI (Parito Comunista Italiano – Italian Communist Party) 1921-1991.

4   PDS (Partito Democratico della Sinistra – Democratic Party of the Left) 1991-1998.

5   Occhetto, Achille, cit., pp.13-15

6   Although problematic, the term "left" will be used as a metonym including all those subjects (parties, movements, etc.) occupying a vast and unstable ideological spectrum, from the reformist right-wing social democrats to the far-left communist traditions. Moreover, it will be used as a way to describe a cultural tradition rooted in a myriad of historical experiences.

7   Flores d'Arcais, Paolo, http://temi.repubblica.it/micromega-online/ragionamenti-fuori-luogo-%e2%80%93-2-la-sinistra-che-si-e-fatta-destra/printpage=undefined. Last access 25/2/2019.

8   Cacciari, Massimo, http://espresso.repubblica.it/plus/articoli/2018/06/22/news/nell-indifferenza-al-male-finisce-l-europa-muore-la-politica-1.324102 Last access 26/2/2019.

9   The Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque (Front of the Common Man) was founded by the journalist and writer Guglielmo Giannini in 1946. It won a big success in the 1946 election before it disappeared after two years. The Front sentt 30 representatives to the Assemblea Costituente (Constituent Assembly), the first democratic political body elected after the end of fascism.

10   Tronti, Mario, *Il popolo perduto. Per una critica della sinistra*, 2019, Nutrimenti, Roma, p. 12.

11   On the Risorgimento as a missed opportunity for the development of a real democracy in Italy see Gramsci, Antonio, *Il Risorgimento*, 1996, editori Riuniti, Roma

12   Hardt, Michael, and Negri, Antonio, *Assembly*, 2017, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 111-115.

13   Ginsborg, Paul, *L'Italia del tempo presente*, 1998, Einaudi, Torino, pp. 197-201.

14   Ginsborg, Paul, cit., pp. 293-297.

15   Revelli, Marco, *Lavorare in FIAT. Da Valletta ad Agnelli a Romiti. Operai, sindacati, robot*, 1989, Garzanti, Torino.

16   Benvenuto, Giorgio and Maglie, Antonio, *Il divorzio di San Valentino. Così la scala mobile divise l'Italia*, 2016, Bibliotheka Edizioni, Roma.

17   The last 30 years witnessed a huge increase in the number of the work force made up of professionals and self-employed. These workers partly substitute the traditional forms of workforce and escape the national collective agreements. This results in the growth of job insecurity and the loss of labour and welfare rights.

18   Bonomi, Aldo, *Il capitalismo molecolare*, 1997, Einaudi, Torino.

19   An outstanding protagonist of the post-war history of the left, he was part of the leadership of the PCI and the PDS. He was the first post-communist to serve in the office of Italian Prime Minister in 1998.

20   D'Alema, Massimo, La critica (autocritica) di D'Alema, in L'Huffington Post, https://www.huffingtonpost.it/2018/10/20/la-critica-autocritica-di-dalema_a_23566643/. Last access 13/03/2019 (my translation)

21   Tronti, Mario, cit., pp. 82-83. (my translation)

22   See D'Alema Massimo, All'origine della crisi della sinistra, scelte che vengono da lontano, in Italianieuropei, 2/2018. https://italianieuropei.it/it/italianieuropei-2-2018/item/4004-

editoriale-2/2018.html. Last access 18/3/2019.

23   See http://www.parlgov.org/explore/ita/
election/. Last access 18/3/2019

24   See: http://www.cattaneo.org/wp-content/
uploads/2018/03/Analisi-Istituto-Cattaneo-
Elezioni-Politiche-2018-Chi-ha-vinto-chi-ha-
perso-5-marzo-2018-2.pdf. Last access 18/3/2019

25   See: http://www.cattaneo.org/wp-content/
uploads/2018/03/Analisi-Istituto-Cattaneo-
Elezioni-Politiche-2018-Flussi-elettorali-5-
marzo-2018.pdf. Last access 18/3/2019

26   For these reasons the PD has been labelled
"partito dei centri storici" (party of the urban
historic centres) by researchers and the media.
The most affluent, dynamic urban areas (homes
of the metropolitan élite) of the country seem less
preoccupied with the effect of the economic crisis,
while showing more concerns over the issue of civil
rights (gender policies, ius soli, gay marriage, etc.).

27   See: http://open.luiss.it/2018/09/17/la-
crisi-della-sinistra-italiana-spiegata-con-10-grafici/.
Last access 19/3/2019.

28   Mauro, Ezio, La sinistra tentata dal
balcone, in la Repubblica, 19/12/2018, p.1 and
p.35.

29   Occhetto, Achille, cit., pp. 207-210.

30   Vighi, Fabio, Populist Symptoms and the
Curse of the Capitalist Fetish, in *Third Text*, 2019,
http://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2018.1558652

31   Tronti, Mario, cit., pag.98. (my translation)

32   CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana
del Lavoro). The strongest left-wing Italian union.

33   Landini, Maurizio, cit. in, *La mia CGIL
ritornerà alle origini*, interview by Munafò, Mauro,
in L'Espresso, 10/3/2019, pp. 20-28.

34   De Genova, Nicholas, Rebordering "the
People": Notes on Theorizing Populism, in *South
Atlantic Quarterly*, vol.117, April, 2018, pp.362-
365.

35   Grossberg, Lawrence, Pessimism of the
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What's Left in Hellas? On the Transformation of Social Movements in Greece

Gregor Kritidis

(Magdeburg)

While ancient Greece is seen as the cradle of modern democracy, contemporary Greece is considered a backward political and economic problem case, a mixture of Mediterranean inefficiency and Balkan-style nepotism. However, the opposite claim is at least as adequate: it is in fact increasing societal 'modernisation' (rather than degeneration) that has produced social contradictions and political conflicts in a very acute form. Since 2008, Greece has become a laboratory of crisis, a paradigmatic showcase of contemporary struggles over social and political participation. To put it bluntly: in hardly any other European country do authoritarian and democratic concepts for solving the current structural crisis of society clash as heavily. In this situation, the different strands of the political left and the social movements they decisively shaped can look back over a long tradition of political struggle against authoritarian and dictatorial forms of social domination.

The collapse of Eastern European socialist systems between 1989 and 1991 plunged the political left in Greece into a serious crisis of orientation, because since 1917 different varieties of Leninism had served as main influence on the theory and practice of the anticapitalist left. Additionally, the bloody restructuring of Yugoslavia caused also in Greece a wave of nationalist mobilisation. The different strands of the political left and the social movements influenced by them found themselves on the defensive. For the first time after a long period of PASOK (*Panhellenic Socialist Movement*) dominance, ND (*New Democracy*), a right-liberal party, was able to form a government and to start an aggressive neoliberal offensive against the social and democratic achievements of the *Metapolitevsi* – as the political order established after the overthrow of the military junta is called.

Controversy focused on two sectors of public service provision: the education system and local public transport. Both became paradigmatic for the class struggles of the 1990s and 2000s: the education system started advertising the neoliberal promise of economic and social success for individuals. The privatisation of the public sector was sold as the prospect of better and cheaper services for the citizens.

The popularity of this programme rested on the role of the state in Greece. The development of welfare state provision had remained extremely limited for most of the 20th century. It was only after the election victory of PASOK in 1981 that the universal education and health service systems were introduced. To some extent, the new government liberalised employment and industrial relations regulations. Before, social service provision had relied primarily on clientelist relationships of dependency, in other words, on political despotism. Those social groups not integrated into clientelist networks, shaped around persons in leading political positions, often found themselves at the receiving end of state repression. Above all, this applied to the political left which, after defeat in the civil war (1946-49), was practically excluded from access to the public sector.[1] The majority of the population experienced the state primarily as a policing and taxing power.

Neither qualification nor professional expertise but subordination and personal relationships opened the doors to economic success. Emigration to Western Europe, North America or Australia provided the way out of the Greek misery but simultaneously stabilised the system of clientelism, which in modified form has lived on until today.

For the first time in the recent past, the rise of PASOK provided the prospect of social advance for the lower classes. Traditionally, the Greek state integrates large parts of the working class through its role as public sector employer. Although public sector jobs were never particularly well paid, they provided basic existential security. With the rise of PASOK, traditional clientelism changed into party clientelism: PASOK membership or membership of the trade union affiliated to it (the PASKE) paved the way to a job in a state enterprise. Until the 2000s, PASKE in exchange guaranteed PASOK's dominance in union confederations such as GSEE (*Confederation of the Workers of Greece, Industrial Sector*) and ADEDY (*Supreme Leadership of the Organisations of Public Sector Employees*). In other words: a large part of unionised employees was either indirectly or directly exposed to the government's political influence. [2]To some extent this still also applied to ND, at the time the liberal-conservative opposition party. Loyalty to the nation

state of the political right and their representatives was substituted by loyalty to one of the major parties or the organisations close to them. The labour movement's split into unions that are tied to political parties is characteristic for this social power relationship. As a consequence, the two communist parties – the orthodox KKE and the Eurocommunist KKE *esoteriko* – remained excluded from state power for decades.

This clientelist socio-economic political system, however, was permanently challenged. When in the mid-1980s the minister of economics and later prime minister, Kostas Simitis, implemented a programme of social cuts, a huge strike movement emerged, culminating in a break within PASKE into an 'official' and an 'unofficial' wing. When the 'unofficial' strand together with communist left achieved a majority in the union confederation and was about to elect a new leadership, this process was blocked by direct government intervention. Such government interference into workers' freedom of organisation is rather typical for the history of labour relations in Greece and has become the usual practice in times of crisis.

This experience left many people disillusioned with the PASOK leadership's party-political clientelism – hence the prospect of the liberalisation of public life and of the state's retreat from public services began to look attractive to many in the early 1990s. However, quite soon it became obvious that the consequences were extremely mixed. The reforms in the education system did not so much create new routes of upward mobility – a change that would have considered the altered composition of the Greek working class resulting from immigration. Quite to the contrary, the introduction of more rigorous exam procedures narrowed the bottleneck of upward mobility and increased competition. For public sector employees, denationalisation, as privatisation is called in Greece, meant poorer working conditions or the loss of a social position that until then was relatively secure.

Hence, in no other European country did people fight against the neoliberal agenda from early on as radically as in Greece. Therefore, the project of a thorough neoliberal restructuring of society lost most of its dynamics, albeit without a fundamental reorientation among society's elites. For social movement activists, however, the lessons of the fights of the early 1990s became central: social progress requires autonomously organised struggle.

When PASOK regained power in 1993, it returned a couple of companies to state ownership but Kostas Simitis, who had been elected party leader after Andreas Papandreou's death, continued, as prime minister,

the neoliberal reforms, as did the succeeding governments.[3] These efforts were motivated by the prospect of access to the *European Monetary Union*, promoted by the EU's central powers, Germany and France, which committed Greece to the Maastricht convergence criteria of 2001. In two decisive fields the Greek state handed over decision making powers: namely fiscal and central bank policies. Wage and tax policies remained as the only tools to adapt to those economic imbalances that became worse over subsequent years.

Since the two small parties following communist traditions were incapable of opposing this agenda, initiative increasingly fell to political forces, which hitherto had been marginal: to the extra-parliamentary Marxist left and to several anarchist groups. They worked with new forms of organisation and political action that did not prioritise the taking over of state power. Due to continuing resistance by these social movements, the state enterprises – among them *Hellas Telecom*, refineries, the railways, the electricity sector and *Olympic Airways* – could only be privatised incrementally. Consequently, the first to be affected by deregulation were non- or weakly unionised segments of the private sector and especially young people. The neoliberal policies rested on two central economic preconditions: on the one hand, after the collapse of

the *Eastern Bloc*, Greece became an immigration country. In an overall population of about 10 million people, the number of immigrants rose to one million, of whom half did not have a legal status. State repression directed against illegalised immigrants facilitated the large-scale introduction of precarious jobs. Migrants found work above all in the building sector, agriculture, and tourism. Only in the second half of the 1990s did it become possible for some immigrants to apply for a legal status. Nevertheless, immigrants continued to face a religious-ethnocentric state racism. Those who were caught crossing the border illegally especially became objects of the bureaucracy's brutality and arbitrariness. On the other hand, EU funding for infrastructural development and farming contributed to economic growth in Greece. However, it did not solve the crisis of small-scale farming: monopolisation in both the food processing industries and food trade made the agrarian crisis a permanent topic in Greek domestic policy – since 1995 farmers protested almost annually with road blockades. Nevertheless, the food industry, an important sector in Greece, became stronger. Money from the structural fund was also used for extended investment into infrastructure, for example, for the motorway from Igoumenitsa on the Western coast to the Turkish border, for the *Rio-Antirio Bridge* linking the Western Peleponnes with the

mainland, the *Attican Ringroad*, Athens airport and the Athens metro. It is worth mentioning that these 'Megala Erga' (oversized projects) were built, mostly, by big German and French corporations. Offsetting the costs of these projects, but also the exorbitant military budget – from which, once more, the German and French weapons sector profited – against EU funding, it is obvious that the growing Greek budgetary crisis of the 2000s was the flipside of the export surplus of the Central European states.

Legitimisation and Crisis of the Neoliberal Model

It is obvious that such an economic growth model – even if one ignores its disastrous ecological consequences – cannot last very long. Nevertheless, it was possible to organise political majorities for this neoliberal programme several times while radical opposition against it remained marginal. An important reason for the prolonged hegemony of the neoliberal block lies in the integration of the middle class and parts of the working class into this model of development. The middle class especially profited from economic growth. A symptom of this is the uncontrolled northward expansion of the suburbs of Athens: the forest fires occurring almost annually were and are side effects of this very growth strategy and symbols of its ecological destructiveness.[4] It was migrants who were employed to build for upper middle class families these homes, which devoured more and more of the landscape, and it was migrants who took jobs as domestic helps in these homes.

Structural corruption amongst the upper and middle classes in Greece reached kleptocratic dimensions in the 2000s. The state had always been seen as a cash cow for individual and collective enrichment. With the right-liberal government under Kostas Karamanlis, in power from 2004 to 2009, this enrichment took forms that totally undermined the legitimacy of state policy. The pillaging of the social insurance system, organised in cooperation with international financial actors, the appropriation of public goods, and collusion with the interests of foreign capital – in the case of Siemens generously rewarded – destroyed any rational conception of state action and provoked a general social revolt in 2008.

A New Social Movement

Since the 1990s, especially in the universities an anarchist new social movement developed, which deliberately distanced itself from those traditional Marxist organisational forms and action repertoires the labour movement had used over the previous 100 years. The reasons were obvious: on the one hand, the established trade unions failed to integrate both economically precarious, often highly qualified workers as well

as migrants. On the other hand, as already mentioned, with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Marxism had lost much of its power of persuasion. More importantly, traditional forms of industrial action turned out to be rather ineffective in a service sector organised along neoliberal lines. Being extremely heterogeneous, the anarchist movement thus became a magnet for young militants seeking new forms of resistance. Above all, two ideas were important: to practice grassroots self-organisation without formal hierarchies and to pursue direct action, i.e. a form of social (class) struggle without institutional regulation.

The new strength of anarchist ideas became obvious in the revolt of December 2008. While traditionally political parties and their organisations had played a central role in all sociopolitical struggles, this time no decisive influence of parties could be observed. The occupations of universities, schools, and public buildings occurred mostly without party political involvement while the influence of the anarchist groups was apparent. Furthermore, movement-oriented organisations of the extra-parliamentary Marxist left, which had increasingly appropriated grassroots democratic strategies themselves, also played a key role. The traditional leftwing parties – apart from the orthodox-communist KKE, especially SYRIZA (which had

Eurocommunist roots) – exerted only limited influence. Neglecting the traditional means of communication used by the labour movement, the anarchist groups primarily employed various electronic media. *Indymedia Athens* as well as a number of websites set up during the December revolt were of critical importance for the emergence of a counter-public.

Shocked by the strength of the December revolt, shortly after, in the wake of the financial and economic crisis 2008/09, the political class decided to take the bull by the horns and call for international support. Under circumstances resembling a *coup d'etat* the Greek government signed a loan agreement with the states of the *Eurozone*, the IMF and the ECB, which according to Giorgos Kassimatis, an expert on constitutional law, abolished democracy and handed over sovereign rights.[5] Parliament's decision making powers were de facto abolished and the representatives of the people transformed into an executive organ carrying out the austerity policies prescribed by the loan agreement. Supervision of these crisis policies became the task of the *Troika*, an institution controlled by the creditors and lacking any form of constitutional legitimacy. The turn to authoritarian statism that is observable everywhere, came in Greece without any democratic disguise.

Under this crisis regime, the organisational forms of the social movements, which had first been tested in 2008, proliferated. The occupation of public spaces in early summer 2011, inspired by the *Arab Spring* and the Spanish *Indignados*, linked a Marxist-oriented socioeconomic analysis of the crisis with ideas of grassroots organisation and collective direct action. As in other countries, social media became the crucial means for the formation of a counter-hegemonic public. The movement's growth and the state's increasingly repressive actions caused a crisis of legitimacy of all social and political institutions as well as the rapid erosion of the party system. [6]

However, paradoxically, SYRIZA succeeded in channeling the social energies again towards institutionalism. From 2011 to 2015, SYRIZA rose from a party receiving four per cent of the popular vote to the strongest force in parliament. One explanation for this is the party's strong orientation towards, and links with, the social movements in the 2000s, which for many people testified to its trustworthiness. Another is that the parliamentary-political route appeared to be the most realistic option to get rid of the austerity programme: most realistic, because the social movements had succeeded in destabilising the party system, but not in radically challenging economic relations. While many cooperative forms

General mass of Indignados in Athens Syntagma, Greece (30 June 2011)
Photo by Ggia (CC BY-SA 3.0)

of mutual self-help emerged, for example in the food, education and health sector, the economy's core areas remained by and large untouched. It is telling that, apart from the former building materials factory *Vio.Me* and a small woodworking company, there is no occupied plant in workers' control and, apart from the *Newspaper of Editors*, only the strongly fought-over public broadcasting service was temporarily owned by its employees. With the 'Solidarity for All' initiative, financed partly through MPs' salaries, SYRIZA tried to support the solidaristic economy. However, the integration of these initiatives and the social movements into the party's internal decision-making structures did not go very far. After the 2012 elections, which brought a governing majority within easy reach, the party concentrated on the parliamentary option. Mobilising and organising grassroots supporters receded more to the background. This change of priorities also applies to SYRIZA's left wing, which neither before nor after the party took over government in 2015 developed any serious strategic interventions of its own towards such goals. Even the grassroots initiatives themselves did not thoroughly criticise the narrowing of political focus onto the parliamentary arena. All invested their hope in a general election victory but hardly anyone discussed possible governmental strategies. The concentration of power in a progressively smaller circle of leaders is shown by

the fact that, after taking office, the government did not debate fundamental questions in public anymore, but decided on them by itself. The basic reason for the failure of the *Athens Spring* and the capitulation of the Greek government lies in this reintroduction of top-down decision making structures, which formed the flipside of the weakness of the social and political movements which, to make things worse, could rely on only very limited international support.[7] A further escalation of the confrontation with the capital groups dominant in Greece and with the EU creditor states would have required the broad mobilisation and organisation of the population. The impulses and beginnings, that emerged in early summer 2011 turned out to be too weak and inconsistent to transform the traditional paternalist mentalities on the left.

The fixation on gaining parliamentary majorities within nation states has turned out to be a *cul-de-sac* – not only in Greece. In the face of complex social and economic crises, this model of achieving social emancipation via taking state power has definitely run its course. As consequence of the defeats of the previous decade of crisis, we now have to address the question of how to fight the socio-economic struggle in order to reach the complex goal of taking the means of production into social control. The lesson to be learned is that the

transformation of the capitalist mode of production needs more than just changed political majorities. In Greece as elsewhere the thwarting of collective processes of learning and emancipation has contributed to a strengthening of ethno-nationalist forces. Hence, the question as to how to overcome such blockages is currently of utmost importance. Until now, the social movements have not recovered from the capitulation of summer 2015. However, the search for innovative orientations and practical openings is treated with a new urgency on the left, as is shown by the recent interest in, and debates about, theorists such as Cornelius Castoriadis .[8]

Endnotes

1   Cf. Neni Panourigia: *Dangerous Citizens: the Greek Left and the Terror of the State*. New York 2009.

2   This dependency is all but new: traditionally, the state intervened in industrial relations, occasionally with open terror. This did not fundamentally change under PASOK. See Hubert Heinelt et al.: *Modernisierungsblockaden in Griechenland*. Opladen 1996, pp. 138ff.

3   Cf. Gregor Kritidis "Rise and Crisis of Anarchist and Libertarian Movements in Greece" in: Leendert van Hoogenhuijze et al. (eds.): *The City is Ours. Squatting and Autonomous Action in Europe*. Oakland 2014.

4   Cf. Costis Hadjimichalis: *Schuldenkrise und Landraub in Griechenland*. Münster 2014.

5   Giorgos Kassimatis: *Das inhumane Kreditsystem über Griechenland*. Münster 2018.

6   Cf. Gregor Kritidis: *Griechenland – auf dem Weg in den Maßnahmestaat? Autoritäre Krisenpolitik und demokratischer Widerstand*. Kritische Interventionen Bd. 13. Hannover 2014.

7   Cf. Gregor Kritidis: *Nach Syriza: Wie weiter für die europäische Linke?* http://www.theoriekritik.ch/?p=2543.

8   Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-97), Greek-French philosopher, co-founder of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, reflected on ideas of libertarian socialism and emphasised dimensions such as autonomy, self-institution and creativity as basic elements of such a form of socialism.

The Landscape After a Disaster and Even Two: On the Genealogy of the Polish Left

Leszek Koczanowicz

(Wroczlaw)

2015: At the bottom

The Polish parliamentary elections in October 2015 marked the first time after the fall of communism in 1989 that the Left proved unable to win seats in parliament. The results of the elections showed how deeply the Polish Left was dispersed and disoriented. Of course, the left-wing political parties and organizations had made a lot of foolish tactical errors. The beginning of the catastrophe could be traced back to the presidential elections earlier the same year. The leader of the *Democratic Left Alliance* (SLD) Leszek Miller, himself a very experienced politician who had started his career in Communist Poland and had survived the most ferocious political storms, decided to put forward a very strange presidential candidate. His surprising pick was Dr. Magdalena Ogórek, a 36-year-old historian who had hardly any political experience and was not even a party member. Her political views were an enigma as she kept saying that she would

Old (Leftist?) Boys Network
Marek Belka and Leszek Miller
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reveal her agenda in due time. It is little wonder that she got only 2.38 per cent of the votes, which was the worst result ever for the party. After the elections, she cut off all ties with the Left and embarked on a new career as a right-wing journalist in TV and press.

Following the disaster of the presidential elections, the *Democratic Left Alliance* decided to assemble as many small left-wing parties and organizations as possible to augment the chances of the left in the parliamentary elections. It was never going to be an easy task. Emerging from the Communist period, the *Democratic Left Alliance* had been a hegemon on the left nearly throughout the democratic transition. However, in 2015 the situation changed. New, emerging movements, such as the urban activists, which focus on the local issues, more often than not preferred keeping their distance from the "discredited" party. This was especially true about *Together*, a new party founded in May 2015. Initiated by well-educated young people who were disappointed with the economic policies of Poland's liberal government, the party was supposed to be a response to the inactivity of the official Left and to promote a radical programme of changes not only in culture (which by that time had come to be a traditional field of left-wing action), but also in labour relationships. Together refused any cooperation with

the SLD, but for some small groups such collaboration seemed to offer attractive prospects as the party's well-established structures, wide network of contacts and considerable funds, all promised at least some seats in parliament. Nevertheless, these groupings did not want to be identified too closely with the SLD, so they formed a coalition. According to the Polish law, while the electoral threshold for individual parties is 5 per cent, it is as much as 8 per cent for coalitions. Eventually, the *Unified Left* coalition fell short of the threshold, achieving only 7.55 per cent. This result gave the right-wing party *Law and Justice* (PiS) an independent majority in the Polish Parliament.

Of course, this catastrophic defeat was not only caused by the tactical mistakes and ambitions of various leaders of the left-wing parties and movements. The main reason behind it was the ideological weakness of the Polish Left. The Left, at least its dominant party, has never been able to present a consistent social programme of mitigating the social consequences of the transformation which could tell it apart from the variety of the liberal movements. On the other hand, in order to fulfill the demands of its electorate it had to pay lip service to the progressive agenda claiming their involvement into working for the diminishing the social and cultural inequalities. This situation

made the Left always, even in the heydays of its power, ideologically fragile. This failing has haunted the Left since the beginnings of the transformation and eventually caused its collapse.

As such, the SLD could hardly come across as distinct from the ruling liberal *Civic Platform* (PO). Additionally, the right-wing PiS proposed a very comprehensive welfare programme of reducing poverty in Poland. The SLD was also on the defensive in cultural matters, and, again, its programme, which was admittedly more radical than that of the PO on questions such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and the separation between (the Catholic) church and state, was not radical enough to attract voters from beyond the party's traditional electorate. By the same token, the SLD was very cautious on the issue of migrants, the hottest issue of the 2015 campaign. The PiS rejected any idea of taking migrants and criticized the PO for complying with *European Commission* directives. The SLD tried to find a "moderate" way, which failed to satisfy anybody.

The turning point in the election campaign came with the last public debate of all the parties, which was a success for *Together*'s Adrian Zandberg. He presented a well-balanced economic programme modeled on the Scandinavian welfare-state experience, took a radical stance on cultural issues for Polish standards, especially insisting on a strict separation of church and state, and voiced a very positive attitude to accepting migrants. Although eventually Together did not win any seats in Parliament, it got 3 per cent of the vote, which was a great achievement for a new party and also the required minimum for obtaining public funding. But it was exactly this margin of the vote that caused the defeat of the Unified Left led by the SLD.

1989-2003: The fall and the glory (at a price, though)

The Round Table talks in 1989 and the partly free elections in June 1989 marked the end of the Communist regime in Poland. The *Communist Party* was officially dissolved in 1990, but it found its continuation in a new organization, called the *Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland* (SDRP). The leaders of the new party hailed from the youngest generation of the old-regime apparatchiks who tried to save not so much the ideology of communism, in which they did not believe anyway, as the political influence and financial resources of the organisation.

In the same period, a plethora of various left-wing organisations emerged as well. Some of them seemed quite promising as they were heralded as a continuation of pre-war, non-bolshevist socialism (e.g. the *Polish Socialist Party*), but they proved rather ephemeral and either disappeared or accepted

the hegemonic position of the SDRP, creating a federation. The ideology of the SDRP was rather ambiguous. Of course, the leaders endorsed the inevitable socio-economic changes, but promised to "soften" the burden of the transition and reverse the most onerous consequences of what came to be called the shock therapy, that is, a rapid privatisation of the Polish economy, which saw unemployment soar and standards of living plummet for most people almost overnight.

In fact, the SDRP did not have to work hard on its programme; it was enough that it was simply there. Sociological research suggests that the main political rift in Poland in the 1990s materialised in a "post-communist divide" (Grabowska 2004), i.e., a gulf between people who (somehow at least) identified with the communist regime and people who rejected the old system altogether. As this divide had shaped the Polish political scene for over a decade, the voters almost automatically supported either option. Therefore, the agenda of the SDPR and later the SLD (which was founded in 1999 as the federation transformed into a unified party) was a strange blend of a nostalgic defence of the communist past, neoliberal economic policies, and a staunch pro-American stance combined with an equally determined pro-EU attitude, which was not contradictory back then. The SDRP leadership kept their distance

from the Catholic Church, but accepted the concordat with all its consequences, including special economic privileges for the Church (e.g. preferential taxation), religious instruction in schools, and so on. They also spoke with great caution on matters such as abortion (in 1993, Parliament adopted a restrictive anti-abortion law which allowed only three exceptions) and same-sex marriages.

Capitalising on growing disappointment with the economic results of the transition, the SDRP/ SLD was able to win the parliamentary elections twice: in 1993 and in 2001, and was a senior partner in the coalition which it formed with a peasant party by the name of the *Polish People's Party* (PSL). Probably, the greatest political achievement of the post-communist Left was the victory in the presidential elections of its leader Aleksander Kwaśniewski over Lech Wałęsa, one of the historical founders of *Solidarity*. The triumph of the former *Communist Party* apparatchik, the youngest minister in Poland's last Communist cabinet, was highly symbolic. To some extent, it exonerated the Communist period and it seemed to indicate that reconciliation was possible.

Kwaśniewski's success and the post-communist party's political expansion came as a shock for the former dissidents. Some of them emphasised in the press that although the SDRP gained a majority, it had no moral

legitimisation. However, the leaders of the post-communist Left promptly tried to show that their position on a number of political matters was very close to that of the former dissidents, those at least who had turned into liberals in the 1990s. During its two terms in power, the Left implemented rather neoliberal economic policies, to the point of considering even flat taxation. The Left ushered Poland into the *European Union*, became vigorously engaged in NATO, supported the intervention in Iraq, and sent Polish troops there. It is very likely that the Left-led government collaborated with the US on setting up secret CIA prisons on Polish soil. In the ideological sphere, the liberals and the post-communist Left also had a lot in common. Both orientations tried to tame the nationalist tendencies in Poland, and both envisaged the future of Poland as closely associated with the West not only through economic and military alliances, but also through the adoption of Western values. Both were also aware that because of the specifically Polish 'right slope', i.e., permanent ideological leaning to the right, this 'Westernisation' should be introduced very carefully and without irritating the Catholic Church. But despite this affinity of attitudes and the warm personal relationships that some former dissidents developed with the post-communist party leaders, the first formal coalition of the two groupings was established only in 2006, so strong were the historical divisions and animosities.

Nevertheless, as the agendas and ideologies of former dissidents and post-communists came across as largely overlapping, the two groups gradually came to be identified with each other. This identification had grave consequences, for people started to look around for a non-neoliberal social alternative. Since the Left was unwilling to offer such an alternative, voters slowly started to embrace the right-wing nationalist political orientation. They could not find such an alternative on the left because the post-communist party had nearly monopolised this sector of the political stage. Of course, there were a handful of small and dispersed groups which sought to show that another Left was possible, but they were irrelevant, at least in terms of popular support.

This bipolar division of the Polish political scene produced the situation which David Ost describes in his *The Defeat of Solidarity* (2005). Workers, who were dissatisfied with the effects of the transition and felt abandoned by the leadership of trade unions and parties, started to back nationalistic, rightwing organisations. In this way, the historical Solidarity was taken over by the nationalists, and similar political bodies gradually obtained more and more significant support. According to Ost, this shift was triggered as popular anger was channeled in the

ideological form of nationalism while foreign elements, such as international capitalists, former Communists, and the like, were blamed for the desperate situation in which many losers of the transition had found themselves.

The first warning sign was the election of 1997, when a newly hatched coalition of conservative and religious parties, called *Solidarity Electoral Action*, allied with the liberal *Freedom Union* to form the government, pushing the SLD into opposition. The government launched a batch of radical reforms, which caused a wave of dissatisfaction and eventually hoisted the SLD back into power in 2001. But this episode showed that there was a powerful upsurge of right-wing political sentiments to be reckoned with.

2003-2015: The second fall

The general elections of 2001 were a great success for the SLD, which got 41 per cent of the vote. However, as the election procedure prevented the SLD from forming a cabinet on its own, the party again entered into a coalition with the peasant party PSL. Yet, in the meantime, the political landscape and its ideological background had undergone deep changes. Most importantly, parties had emerged from the debris of the *Solidarity Electoral Action*, among them the *Civic Platform* (PO) and the *Law and Justice* (PiS). Initially, they seemed

to supplement each other, with the PO more centre-right liberal and the PiS rather farther to the right with some nationalistic leanings. Both parties shared a slogan of creating the *Fourth Republic*, a shorthand for radically transforming the political system in place, which they accused of being thoroughly corrupted.

The elections of 2001 also saw an unexpected rise of a populist party. The *Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland*, usually called simply the *Self-Defence* (Samoobrona), was a populist mixture of socialist, nationalist, and religious elements. The party got 10 per cent of the vote and became the third largest political force in Poland. Though technically an opposition party, the *Self-Defence* very often supported the SLD in parliament.

Gradually more and more besieged from both sides of the political stage, the SLD tried to continue its already tested political course of moderate liberalism and moving Poland closer to the EU, which culminated in signing the accession treaty on 1st May 2004. However, the climate had changed, and it was hardly possible to stop the surging demands for fundamental political reforms and a greater transparency of public life. These demands dovetailed with a revisionist vision of the transition, which was increasingly perceived as a plot of the dissidents and the communists rather than a real people's revolt against the communist regime. Therefore, the

slogan of building the *Fourth Republic* was juxtaposed with ever more insistent calls for completing the transition by removing the people linked to the old regime from power and reinforcing the anti-liberal and anti-leftist character of the transformation. The *Fourth Republic* thus was to be a return to the original programme of *Solidarity* which was distorted at the *Round Table Talks.*

Such was the atmosphere when what came to be called the *Rywin affair* burst out in 2002. Lew Rywin, a well-known film producer with strong connections in political circles, approached Adam Michnik, a famous former dissident and then editor-in-chief of Poland's largest daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, to offer a deal. He said that he acted on behalf of a "group in power" which was ready, in exchange for an enormous bribe, to manipulate the legislation so as to enable the *Gazeta Wyborcza* to acquire the TV station *Polsat* (Zarycki 2009). In consequence, a special parliamentary commission was established to investigate the case. The commission (and a parallel court investigation) never determined conclusively whether Rywin was alone in his offer or whether he really represented a powerful group connected to the government, but the public examination revealed that there actually was a network of cronies which held power in Poland.

The compromised SLD suffered a landslide defeat in the 2005

election, winning merely 11 per cent of the vote – less than the *Self-Defence* (12 per cent) and much less that the two the right-wing parties: the PiS (27 per cent) and the PO (24 per cent). Two other left-wing parties made an unsuccessful run in the same election. They were the *Social Democracy of Poland* and the *Democratic Party*, both evolving from the SLD after the Rywin affair, with the latter being a coalition of former SLD members and old anticommunist dissidents, which was a much belated fulfilment of a "historical compromise" between the postcommunist left and the former dissidents united by their common aversion towards right-wing nationalism.

The following years were not a good time for the Left either politically or in terms of the ideological struggle. After the elections in 2005, Lech Kaczyński became the President of Poland and his twin brother Jarosław Kaczyński took the helm of a coalition government of the PiS, the *Self-Defence* and the extreme right-wing *League of Polish Families*. However, the snap election in 2007 changed the political situation again as the PO won decisively and formed the government with the PSL. The Self-Defence and the League of Polish Families remained outside Parliament. The Left took part in the election as a coalition of the SLD, the *Social Democracy of Poland* and the *Democratic Party*, under the label of the Left and Democrats

(LiD). This marked another attempt at creating a political body which would unify the former dissidents and the post-communists. The coalition's programme combined social demands to improve people's living standards and working conditions with vaguely defined liberal demands of plurality and openness in the public sphere. Again, the haphazard and slapdash agenda blew up in the Left's face. The liberal attitude was a signature feature of the PO while even bolder social reforms were proposed by the PiS. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise that the coalition got only 13 per cent of the vote and was soon dissolved.

With that election, the eight years of PO dominance on the Polish political scene commenced. The party had governed under the leadership of Donald Tusk, focusing on 'hot water in the tap', as a popular catchphrase had it, which meant that efficient administration rather than ideological discussion was the top priority. Although for eight years this strategy was quite effective, it probably helped the PiS gradually to win the ideological hegemony under the slogans of national pride and the recovery of social solidarity (Koczanowicz 2016).

The Left was rather passive in this tussle between modernisers and conservatives. The SLD was mainly preoccupied with its intra-party problems, especially with conflicts within the leadership, and enjoyed the support of the shrinking electorate loyal to it only because of its attitude to the communist past. The party did very little to adapt its agenda to the changing circumstances and simply looked back to the past glory, hoping for its return.

The election of 2011 had a new political contestant in the *Palikot Movement* (Ruch Palikota), an organisation founded by an eccentric philosopher turned millionaire who was an MP of the *Civic Platform* (PO) at the time. The programme of the *Movement* was rather vague. While it took a firm position on certain issues, for example embracing a staunch anti-Catholic Church attitude and supporting the LGBT minorities, its economic agenda was a blend of liberalism (even libertarianism) and social democracy. Among the 40 MPs the *Palikot Movement* introduced to Parliament were Anna Grodzka, probably the first transgender MP in Europe, and Robert Biedroń, Poland's first openly gay man to be elected to Parliament, which significantly influenced the perception of LGBT people in Poland. The *Palikot Movement* (re-named as *Your Movement* in 2013) was a colorful organisation, and its founder tended to promote his ideas in non-standard ways, e.g. in quasi-artistic performances. However, as it never had a clear positive programme, it soon started to be plagued by internal tensions and splits, which gradually debilitated the organisation. Eventually, the remnants of

the Your Movement joined the Unified Left coalition and disappeared from the political stage after its electoral defeat.

2018: After the fall. Three possible scenarios of recovery

After the downfall of 2015, it became clear that in order to survive the Left had to rethink its strategy. The

However, this progress towards recovery was somehow derailed by the general political situation in Poland. Having seized power, the PiS launched a series of radical changes in political institutions, clearly devised to establish an authoritarian (or at least illiberal) right-wing regime. Moreover, the PiS also methodically started to

A demonstration by the party Together (Razem) with the visible party slogan "Another Politics is Possible" (Inna polityka jest możliwa) in front of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister
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years when the SLD enjoyed hegemony without giving a serious thought to its programme were evidently a thing of the past. The *Together Party* started to develop an agenda combining economic demands with progressive cultural ideas. The Left also acquired a new asset, namely, urban activism movements which were evolving from strictly local initiatives into a significant, albeit dispersed, political force on the left.

consolidate the right-wing values through changing school curricula, influencing artists to produce 'patriotic' works of art, and similar strategies. The idea of renewing the national community, which had supposedly degenerated under Communism and the post-communist alliance of the Left and the liberals, was coupled with the idea of economic solidarity. Accordingly, the PiS also implemented a package of social programmes aimed at reducing

poverty in Poland. It also reversed the widely criticised pension reform which had raised retirement age from 60 for women and 65 for men to 67 for both sexes. The common popularity of these policies has confronted the Left and the whole of the opposition with the dilemma of how to fight the PiS without destroying the reforms it introduced.

In rough lines, there are three possible solutions to this puzzle, and each of them has some supporters on the left. The first solution is informed by the notion that democracy itself is at stake, and all political forces have to work together to stop the PiS. From this perspective, the profound differences between the Left and the liberals, concerning the economy and some cultural ssues (e.g., abortion and same-sex marriages), are secondary in the face of the threat the PiS poses to the democratic system. Another variant of this solution is to form a bloc of all left-wing organisations, regardless of differences between them, and to cooperate with an analogous liberal bloc in creating a new government. This solution seems now to be most popular on the left side of the political spectrum. It is accepted by both the SLD and the majority of *Together*, which until recently repudiated any dealings with the SLD. Either variant assumes a rather cautious economic agenda and a more decisive standpoint on cultural issues.

Another solution is to develop an original programme of profound economic and cultural reforms and to take the risk of being relatively easily defeated by the PiS, but at the same time to have prospects of entering a possible coalition government as an equal partner. This perspective is endorsed by a faction of *Together*, especially those who feel drawn to Varoufakis' *Diem 25*, and by a new movement founded by Robert Biedroń. After losing his seat in Parliament, Biedroń was elected mayor of the mid-sized town Słupsk. During his tenure Słupsk became the model for many social and cultural enterprises, Biedroń himself garnering considerable popularity across Poland. In 2018, he decided to found a political movement with a view to participating in the European and parliamentary elections in 2019. The movement's programme is still work in progress, but rumour has it that it features some classic welfare-state ideas, bold proposals concerning the state-church relationship, and liberalisation of the law on abortion and same-sex marriages.

The third solution was not conceived by any of the political forces on the Left, but it was outlined in a paper by the left-wing journalist Rafał Woś. Woś proposed that the Left should join the PiS, endorsing its pro-social reforms, and then work from inside to 'civilise' the party on issues of democracy. The paper caused indignation on the Left, and

the journalist was fired from the liberal weekly *Polityka*, but his idea can prove tempting to some left-wing groupings.

It is too early now either to determine which of these solutions (if any) the Left will adopt or to estimate its chances in the elections of 2019. For now, the Left seems to be rather dispersed politically and ideologically while its ventures are confused and inefficacious. This may reflect a general crisis of the Left in the world, but this is another story.

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