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Something rotten in the kingdom of Spain : Why such a concert of praise after the death of the Communist Santiago Carrillo ?

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Following the recent death of Santiago Carrillo, the institutional media of the Spanish state issued their condolences, evoking the images of consensus of the Spanish Transition. And this at the very moment when movements like that of May 15 have highlighted the decrepitude of the regime it created ; at the moment that neoliberalism has splintered the old social pacts ; at the moment when a young generation in the process of politicising proposes new constitutional, social and economic paths and poses new questions on alternatives to the European Union (EU). The obsequies around the death of Carrillo are a pure symbol of the Spanish political regime.

Is it imaginable that, after the death of Marx or Durruti or Rosa Luxemburg or Che, their political enemies would hail their intellectual, political and moral stature ? No, obviously. During these events the bosses, the military, the politicians and the oligarchs did not shed tears on their tombs but on the contrary spat on them and denigrated them. The antagonism of the class struggle has never left any room, now or in the past, for compassion or lyrical expressions from the bourgeoisie.

But why is it that in this kingdom of Spain nearly all sectors, with the exception of those who are openly and publicly pro-Francoist, have participated in a concert of praise with respect to the Communist Santiago Carrillo after his death ? The eulogies which have filled the airwaves, Internet and newspapers have come from persons such as the monarch — who said he was Carrillo's friend — and the presidents of the Cortes and of the government (both belonging to the Popular Party, which has launched the most significant offensive against the Spanish working class since 1977). The leaders of his majesty's sterile loyal opposition (the Socialists, supporters of the Union Progreso y democracia party - UPyD, created in 2007 - and the Basque Nationalist Party) have joined in, as have even the Catalan Republican Left and supporters of Basque independence.

Are they all agreed then in valuing a "declared" disciple of Marx and Lenin ? I fear not. The praise is not addressed so much to a disturber of the social order (who has moreover ceased to be one for a long time), nor to the combatant for liberties in the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) who played a role in the anti-Francoist struggle, but rather to the man who directed the manoeuvres intended to deactivate the workers' movement in the face of its enemies, to the artisan of the consensus which built the restricted democratic regime which emerged from the Transition.

It is undeniable that Santiago Carrillo occupied a significant role and space in the workers' movement and in Spanish political history. But it is useful to elucidate the result, to evaluate the actions which filled a long and intense militant life of someone who had a great influence on the Spanish left and had so many possibilities of advancing the workers' movement but who, in practice, bore much political responsibility for the defeat of the latter after the death of the dictator in November 1975.

What the bourgeoisie and its parties admire in Carrillo — characterised as a moderate and support

of order, with all that means in their mouths — is precisely that he helped them in the democratic transformation from the old regime. The false myth of a peaceful and exemplary Transition has led to the mythologizing of the role of figures like Carrillo, but also the criminal Francoist minister Fraga Iribarne.

However things are simpler and less glorious. The PCE leader was the inspirer and executor of the “amnesty in exchange for amnesia” which was made concrete in the pardoning and forgetting of the transgressions of the Francoists and the abandonment of the cause of the victims. The loss of memory is the current cause of the loss of roots, origins and references of the old and new social left. It is this loss of memory which allows the right to remodel the historic discourse.

The logic of the process of political thought which replaced the class struggle by national reconciliation has transformed the democratic rupture into a negotiated rupture, the struggle as creator of new relations of force by consensus at any price, by negotiation as sole scenario in the transition between dictatorship and democracy. The final result was a limited and restrictive Constitution which today is revealed as being clearly unpopular. An example of this slide of the “negotiated rupture” of concession without counterpart was the acceptance of the Francoist (monarchical) flag. This was not simply a renunciation of the tricolour : it implied embracing the cause of normalisation under Juan Carols. This in agreeing to some concessions, Carrillo won respectability among the de facto powers, but lost it in the eyes of thousands of militants.

The years of the Transition ended in a setback for working class consciousness, political disorientation, and the electoral rise of social democracy, massive “disenchantment” and the division and marginalisation of the powerful Communist Party. But this policy of consensus at any price was not an isolated fact. On the contrary, it represented the concretisation of the Eurocommunist adventure in the Spanish case. The triad of Santiago Carrillo (PCE), Georges Marchais (PCF) and Enrico Berlinguer (PCI) succeeded, in their respective countries and parties, in a rapprochement with social democratic positions, making it increasingly difficult to identify alternatives to the latter.

That is why opinions on the question of Eurocommunism and by Carrillo among his former comrades of the PCE or in the leadership of Izquierda Unida stretch from uncritical defence to bitterness, but without any capacity of detachment. The current world of the PCE (as well as Carrillo’s successors) is hostage to its vision of the story of the end of Francoism. Communist activists were the active protagonists of it and have ended up believing, in their majority, that the consensus was a historic necessity, as if it was the only road possible. The world of the PCE continues to oscillate between aspirations of social transformation on the one hand and social-democratisation and institutionalisation of its horizons and criteria on the other hand. That forms part of the heritage of Carrillo, like the demobilisation of his party.

Santiago Carrillo was a Stalinist, like thousands of Communists in the 1930s and 1940s. That is where we find the roots of his logic. But even if, after the 20th Congress of the CPSU in February 1956, Carrillo, like so many others, distanced himself from the figure of Stalin and the Stalinist period, he never revised his conceptions of social and political struggle. He never questioned his conception on questions as significant as the assassination of Trotsky or Nin (to mention only the most significant figures among many others in the CPSU or PCE). Nor did he modify his conceptions on internal democracy within workers’ parties, or on the necessity of socialist democracy as an essential vector in the construction of socialism. There was not a word of political self criticism and, more seriously still, no moral reconsideration.

The years of clandestine struggle or Carrillo’s dignified attitude in the face of Tejero during the attempted coup of February 23, 1981 cannot be avoided, but they cannot hide the damage caused by the “Carillist” policy inside the workers’ movement. What rings false in the funeral ritual is the

praise for his role in favour of the working class while he is characterised at the same time as a “statesman”. It is a contradiction in terms, because under capitalism statesmen are men of the state of the exploiters whereas combatants for the working class are the defenders of the exploited and oppressed. No shared space exists between one and the other.

In conclusion, all the praise addressed to Carrillo by his self-styled class enemies and political adversaries recalls the lines of Marcellus in Hamlet, that there is something rotten in the kingdom. That said, at the end of the day and unlike those who have poured so much praise over Carrillo or those who in a sectarian fashion rejoice over his passing, I genuinely regret his death, despite his advanced age, and I sympathise with the sadness that his friends and family members feel at this time. Death, as natural as it is, seems to me the failure of nature.

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