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What's Next for Nuit Debout? - "What we need today are fresh experiences of victory for the subaltern classes"

Saturday 21 May 2016, by [BAROT Emmanuel](#), [BERNARD Damien](#), [KOUVELAKIS Stathis](#) (Date first published: 9 May 2016).

Following the footsteps of similar movements elsewhere, Nuit Debout is the most important challenge to French elites in years.

Nuit Debout, France's massive mobilizations against a proposal to dismantle the country's labor code, has drawn comparisons to similar international movements — Occupy, Turkey's Gezi Park, the movement of the squares in Greece. This wealth of experience helps us look at Nuit Debout and its prospects going forward.

Stathis Kouvelakis, a member of Greece's Popular Unity, who was active in the 1980s as a member in France's Communist Party (PCF) and later the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire and Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste, has been following the situation in France closely. Here, he speaks with *Révolution Permanente* editor Emmanuel Barot and columnist Damien Bernard about the "authoritarian statism" of France's government, the competing tactics and ideologies of the movement against the proposed Labor Law, and what lessons can be drawn from the experience of Syriza in Greece.

Emmanuel Barot and Damien Bernard - The preceding period was marked by the government's massive authoritarian offensive, particularly after the November 13 attacks and the introduction of an extended state of emergency.

Today we have entered into a new phase: a fresh episode of class struggle sparked by the bill for the Labor Law, with powerful mobilizations backed by a largely favorable public opinion. How would you characterize this radical change of atmosphere?

Stathis Kouvelakis - In reality, the government's securitarian offensive and the state of emergency in place since last November represent nothing more than the next threshold in a process of hardening authoritarianism that had begun already long prior to this. In that sense the Sarkozy period marked a turning point, even if elements of this had already existed beforehand.

Two different terrains served as Sarkozy's laboratory: on the one hand, what we in France call the "banlieue question," namely the securitarian and authoritarian management of populations that are heavily stigmatized and targeted by state racism. On the other hand, the so-called anti-terrorist laws, which go back at least as far as September 11, 2001 — and in reality, even before that, with the first initiatives dating back to Alain Peyrefitte's late-1970s "anti-troublemaker" laws.

Such laws put in place an expanded repressive surveillance mechanism in all advanced Western capitalist countries. This "authoritarian statism" — as Nicos Poulantzas defined it — thus

corresponds to phenomena with deep roots, and without doubt figures like Nicolas Sarkozy and Manuel Valls — or (past interior ministers) Charles Pasqua and Jean-Pierre Chevènement before them — only incarnate these bigger tendencies which are now at work.

These mechanisms' implementation was facilitated by the relative listlessness of social movements in France since 2010 and the defeat, that same year, of the movement against the pension reform. Evidently, these mechanisms sought to preemptively neutralize popular mobilization.

But what is happening now represents a setback for the logic of this securitarian and authoritarian turn, precisely because this turn is premised on the possibility of preemptively heading off popular resistance and stopping it passing a certain threshold of visibility and condensation.

The very fact that the mobilization against the Labor Law has broken through these thresholds is already a first defeat for these policies, and contributes to driving a political crisis — a crisis of representation that already existed in latent form, but is now accelerating before our very eyes.

At the short-term level, I think the Hollande administration thought that they could get just about anything through, as we saw with the proclamation of the state of emergency after the attacks. This was a real leap forward, translating into not only authoritarian policies but also harsh neoliberal reforms, as symbolized by the Labor Law (also known as the El Khomri bill). In fact, we could speak of a new political form of the neoliberal straitjacket.

On one side is the state of emergency. On the other side we have the boundless individualization of labor power and of the mechanisms of professional relations, with the complete dismantling of some of the guarantees that still existed in terms of collective bargaining. The two go hand-in-hand. An authoritarian neoliberal regime is now emerging, although it is far from certain that it will stabilize itself.

Indeed, this onslaught by the government and the state authorities has also revealed how far they have been weakened — the fact that François Hollande, the government, the Socialist Party (PS), and representative politics in France more broadly are all simultaneously more and more out of step with French society. Today what we see in France is this separation coming to light. So we are seeing an extremely important turning point in the existing power relations, opening up perspectives that effectively didn't exist even three months ago.

In your 2007 book *La France en révolte* you used the term “hegemonic instability” to characterize the political situation and the crisis reflected by Sarkozyism. And the current situation confirms that this also applies in the longer term.

But as instability becomes entrenched, conversely the structures of the republican system and the state itself are being reinforced. How far do you think that the system itself is being weakened? How far would you go in diagnosing a crisis of the state apparatus?

I would say that we're seeing a deepening of the preexisting crisis of political representation, but that this has not yet become a “crisis of the state” — a generalized crisis of a type with the one we've seen in Greece since 2011. In that case, not only has the political system collapsed, but the whole system of class domination has been profoundly shaken, giving rise to what Gramsci called an “organic crisis” or, in Lenin's terms, a “national crisis.”

In France we are still not there yet, but we would need a real assessment of Sarkozyism in order to deepen our analysis on that score. In my book I defined Sarkozyism as an “authoritarian populism,” an expression I took from Stuart Hall. It was a project very clearly inspired by Thatcherism and US

neoconservatism.

Faced with the conjunction of the 2005 vote against the European Constitutional Treaty, the banlieue revolt, and the movement against the Contrat Première Embauche (the CPE, a neoliberal labor law aimed at young workers) which had forced the De Villepin government to bite the dust, Sarkozy's victory expressed a systemic counteroffensive. His victory in the 2007 presidential elections signaled a defeat for the social movements of that period and revealed the political impotence of the Left, and more particularly of the radical left.

However, the assessment of Sarkozyism as a project should also be nuanced. Sarkozy incontestably succeeded in doing part of what he wanted to achieve. That is, he succeeded in remodeling the dominant discourse, both in largely legitimizing the securitarian-authoritarian turn, and above all in pushing back the limits of what can be said in the space of mainstream politics.

He forced a certain number of themes like national identity onto the agenda, and increased the extent of state racism, accentuating its — obviously preexisting — Islamophobic aspect. He banalized themes that had previously been the prerogative of the far right and of the most reactionary wing of his own camp. He thus legitimized something new: a discourse of confrontation, overtly proclaimed as such, even at the highest level of the state. This was without doubt a break even with the Chirac period, for example.

A “friend-enemy” distinction, as Carl Schmitt would have said.

Exactly. Sarkozy said: there's an enemy, and it's an enemy within that we have to confront. Some even went as far as to say that this was a civil-war discourse. Perhaps that was exaggerated, but in Sarkozy there was a symbolic and discursive violence preparing the ground for something resembling a form of low-intensity civil war, reinforcing the fully concrete violence of the repressive apparatuses that were already in operation.

I think that in this regard Sarkozy won a decisive battle, and that in that sense there were elements of hegemonic stabilization, or of resolution of the hegemonic instability that had previously existed. Conversely, he did not succeed in doing something that the French bourgeoisie has not succeeded in doing since at least the end of Gaullism. That is, he did not succeed in constructing a political apparatus that could allow the stabilization of a system of representation solid enough to put the institutional and political system under lock and key.

Sarkozy, or rather Sarkozyism, partly succeeded, but Sarkozy himself was defeated in the 2012 presidential election and his party, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), proved rather fragile as a political machine. The recomposition to which Sarkozy gave impulse showed its limits — and we can clearly see as much today, with the proliferation of primary contests on the Right and the setbacks to Sarkozy's own attempted comeback.

In this context, an old duffer like (mid-1990s prime minister, now possible presidential candidate) Alain Juppé can appear on the scene as the “man of providence” for the Right. At the other pole, the Socialist Party has been profoundly weakened, and of course the National Front is profiting from the very great instability and brokenness of France's two-party system.

So what we have is continual instability, and in principle this opens up possibilities for oppositional forces. But nonetheless we have to take account of the fact that some of the fundamentals have decomposed. And in my view the radical left, the anticapitalist left, is far from having seriously drawn up a balance sheet of Sarkozyism. That weighs down heavily on the current situation.

You have referred to Poulantzas's definition of authoritarian statism. There is another

approach that analyzes the current structural transformation in terms of a reinforcement of Bonapartist tendencies.

If these tendencies are borne by the capitalist state in general, they also have a long history in the specific case of authoritarian French republicanism. Do you think this theoretical definition in terms of Bonapartist elements or tendencies is compatible with the concept of authoritarian statism?

On that point, we have to go back to Gramsci. He spoke of a “Bonapartism without Bonaparte,” in the sense that in a situation of political crisis we see a retreat in the role of representative institutions and a reinforcement of the executive, with the establishment of direct links between segments of the dominant classes and the state personnel who concretely manage the state and implement policies. Traditional — essentially, party-based — mediation functions are thus short-circuited, and we enter into a very deep crisis of political representation.

I think that this notion of Bonapartism without Bonaparte better suits the current situation. Firstly, because there is indeed no Bonaparte. The least we could say of François Hollande is that he is a feeble, pathetic figure. Of course, his actions are extremely harmful and even dangerous, but he himself lacks any of the characteristics of a charismatic figure arriving on the scene to offer a way out of the crisis of political representation.

The concept of authoritarian statism also adds something, here, in that it places emphasis on the material transformations of state apparatuses, and not only the development of superstructures, the crisis of political representation, and the manner of its resolution. The media apparatus in part fulfills not only the role of spreading the dominant discourse, but also the role of reorganizing the political terrain. That is something the classic parties of the dominant classes are no longer able to do, given that they are extremely weakened and discredited.

We clearly see this in Latin American countries where the media are truly the political nerve center of the dominant power bloc — much more so than the greatly weakened bourgeois political parties — and also in Italy with Berlusconi. Yet this is also true of France, with Sarkozyism and with what’s now happening as oligarchs with a multiplicity of ties to the state and political personnel take control of the most important media.

But authoritarian statism also corresponds to what Poulantzas called “the politicization of the top administration”: the fact that there is a very great continuity in state policies, effectively guaranteed in spite of the alternation of different governments, which is of very limited significance and can become increasingly rapid on account of the current instability.

What ensures the perennial continuation of the ruling classes’ policy is the body of top functionaries, which increasingly assumes the role of the “party of the bourgeoisie.” This “party” stands at the summit of the state, and not only there, on account of its proliferation of ties with the dominant fractions of capital, and in particular finance.

Let’s turn to the current mobilization. Do you think that the Labor Law marks a threshold that Sarkozy could not himself reach; that it’s a new phase in challenging many of the conquests of the workers’ movement, even if it was somewhat mishandled? And given all this, what is your view of the mobilizations, Nuit Debout, etc., now that we’re past the first round of mobilization, and have reached a second phase correlating to the beginning of the parliamentary debate?

Managing labor power — “factory legislation,” as Marx described in *Capital* — has always been at the center of neoliberal policies. Sarkozy inflicted defeats upon some of the most advanced centers

of worker resistance: we saw how he imposed a minimum service level on the national rail and on public transport, the combative sector par excellence since the end of the 1980s. He pushed through flexibilization, dismantling or undermining what remained of the Aubry laws (centered on the thirty-five-hour week).

But without doubt the El Khomri bill marks the breaking of a further threshold, because it means the unlimited individualization of work relations, weakening the law in favor of the contract. This is what the famous “inversion of the hierarchy of norms” means: the fact that the company and company agreements now become central, because they are currently the terrain most favorable to capital.

But also because the logic of this law itself bears the will to weaken and recompose the trade union terrain. The idea — perfectly integrated into the bosses’ and government strategy — is to do everything they can to favor the moderate French Democratic Confederation of Labor (CFDT), a force that has made a specialty of managing this type of organization of labor relations as consensually as possible and at the company level. Hence the relative advance of its implantation in the private sector.

The resistance to this extremely brutal offensive has come from two sides, as an extension of the prior 2006 anti-CPE and 2010 anti-pensions reform movements. On the one hand it has come from wage laborers, and particularly in the upsurge of combativity from below, for example in the General Confederation of Labor (CGT). At that confederation’s recent fifty-first congress we saw the combativity of the grassroots, but this upsurge is diffuse and is currently struggling to crystallize in a particular sector in a way that could act as a locomotive able to pull along other sectors.

This is one of the main things at stake in the current period: seeing which sector could play this locomotive role. In many previous cycles of mobilization it was the rail workers who were in the front rank, whereas in 2010 it was mainly chemical plant workers — and particularly those at oil refineries. Indeed, it was the CGT’s chemicals federation that made use of some rather tough means of mobilization.

On the other hand, the reaction has come from the youth, in which sense we have a certain continuity with the movements over the CPE and pensions. The high-school and student youth are already fully conscious of what’s awaiting them, but added to that, the students also have one foot in life as wage earners, and a whole chunk of them is integrated into the workforce in the broad sense. This is now totally established fact, and indeed a banalized one.

This opens up new possibilities for a convergence between workers and youth, potentially in a more advanced way than was the case in the past. Although mass participation is lower than in previous cycles, the convergence between workers is now perhaps more advanced given the forms the movement has taken in high schools, university faculties (with all the limits we know already), and also the Nuit Debout movement, of which youth are the active core, even though the movement also goes beyond that.

There, young workers as well as increasingly precarious high-school and student youth have found a means of experimenting with what are for France new types of practices of collective action.

These last two months were punctuated by eleven days of protests in which the youth were often left isolated on the front line, and suffered repression from the government and its police. How would you evaluate the role of the trade union leaderships’ policies from this perspective, for example their routinist leapfrogging “days of action?”

How would you analyze the fact that the labor movement has not more globally denounced the

repression of the movement in general and the youth in particular? Particularly given that there is a wide openness and receptivity over this question, which could help build precisely this alliance you mention between wage earners, youth, and Nuit Debout?

Since the beginning of the movement the authorities have been following an iron-fist policy targeting not only the youth but also the trade union movement and more particularly its most mobilized sectors. It is no chance thing that the CGT is the most heavily stigmatized union, and the one facing most calls to fall back into line.

Also specifically targeted are the concrete efforts to reach a unity between young people and workers on the ground: we have seen how the students were beaten by police at Saint Lazare station, or at the port of Gennevilliers, when they tried to join together with mobilized groups of workers.

But of course there is also an over-repression of the student and high-school youth, which has the specific intention of driving a wedge between the youth and the trade union movement. And it is important that the trade union movement does not fall into this trap.

Two elements need considering in this regard: on the one hand the trade union movement's traditional reticence to appear to be allied to sectors that are either uncontrollable or judged as such. On the other hand, there is a real problem that we can't just look away from. Given the current state of activist forces among the youth, there is a certain echo for strategies or tactics which, to simplify things, we could call black bloc tactics, and what I consider the totally illusory belief that by heightening this level of confrontation you will produce radicalizing effects.

In reality, with this type of tactics you only legitimize police repression, or serve up a platter of pretexts that justify it before public opinion. This can lead to a minoritarian effect, discouraging wider mass participation in the mobilizations. I think that these tactics are utterly sterile and that the movement would do well to protect itself from them, preventing them from influencing how demonstrations unfold.

As for the trade union movement and its practices, the failure of spaced-out days of action has already been fully demonstrated, as it was in both 2003 and 2010. The 2006 movement against the CPE succeeded despite this attitude on the part of the unions, for there was also a constant and mass mobilization of the youth against a measure that targeted them particularly. But the Labor Law's target is much wider.

Today no one can count on the youth to pull their chestnuts out of the fire on their behalf, as the unions did during the anti-CPE struggle. We have to shift into a higher gear. There is a push in this direction in the unions, as was visible in the CGT for example at its recent congress.

Certainly the appeal published at the end of that congress was not fully satisfactory, reflecting an internal balance notably reflecting some of the major federations' resistance toward renewable strike mandates and the generalization of the movement. The negative thing is that the rail workers' union seems to have accepted this logic, at least up till this point. Nonetheless, this appeal marked a shift: to my knowledge it is the first time that the CGT has explicitly posed the question of renewable strike mandates at this level.

That is not at all something already won or decided, but the possibility does exist, and at the moment we can see sections of the CGT seeking unity with the youth movement, and particularly with Nuit Debout. The fact that CGT general secretary Philippe Martinez came and spoke at the Place de la République — even if his intervention wasn't really up to what the situation demands — is

nonetheless a step in the right direction.

We should also not lose sight of the fact that Martinez is right when he says that the current mood in workplaces and in the big service industries does not favor unlimited strike action. That said, this is indeed the direction that we have to head toward. The most combative sectors urgently have to set themselves this task.

To return to the question of repression and the black-bloc logic, there is a powerful discursive construction happening at a mass level, a media level. Whether or not there are black bloc-ers or something equivalent, this is the way the mobilization is described in the media. And repression is being carried out against the youth and the workers who are with them, even when there is no strategy of confrontation of this type.

The black-bloc logic is thus a limitation of the current mobilization, but it is also symptomatic of a lack of strategy, the youth movement's longer-term loss of bearings and of cadres, and the weakness of the radical and revolutionary organizations therein. Given what the movement is faced with, the cost of these weaknesses is that these currents and their minoritarian strategies will sink roots.

I agree with this analysis. This is both a symptom and the result of a magnifying-glass effect produced by the media in order to justify the repression. That said, this logic does exist — we cannot minimize or hide it, because it has real negative effects.

In the Paris region the activities of the Mouvement Inter Luttes Indépendant (a black-bloc style anarchist student group) ultimately played a very negative role in the high-school students' mobilizations. Over a certain period this current managed to pull a far from negligible section of the mobilized high-school students along with its logic, and the result was that it led to a drop in the high-school students' mobilization.

This latter is now being relaunched, but on a new footing, with the constitution of the National Coordination of High Schools. I think that this is an internal problem of the movement's and, I agree, above all a symptom of something wider. So activist and revolutionary forces have to rebuild among the youth, and it is their responsibility not to leave the field open to this entirely sterile type of logic.

What is your vision for Nuit Debout? It would be good set this phenomenon in perspective with the *indignados* in Spain, Occupy Wall Street, etc., but also with what has happened in Greece.

Indeed, I believe that Nuit Debout belongs to this cycle of mobilizations, through the form that this collective action takes — namely, the occupation of a space, a spatial form of politics. Over the recent period we saw the spatial forms of collective action coming into the foreground in all the cases you mention, to which we must add the Gezi Park movement in Turkey. What we saw in all these mobilizations, including in Nuit Debout, is the educated youth making up the active core, even if in certain cases there was much wider participation.

In the Greek case — the example I know best — the squares movement of spring 2011 was much more mass in character, but also evidently more “plebeian.” The participation of wide social layers also reflected the fact that Greek society had already suffered the massive backlash from the implementation of memorandum policies.

Within one year these policies had already led to enormous setbacks: wage cuts, brutally severe budgets, and the very rapid pauperization of whole sectors of society. Hence the fact that there was a sharpness of anger which does not exist as such in the mobilization in France.

Certainly in the Place de la République there are real grievances and a real will for fightback, but it is still relatively tranquil as compared to the volcanic boiling-over, the truly explosive popular rage that existed in Greece. There was a violence — or more precisely, a counter-violence — in the popular forms of expression, I'm not talking here of black bloc practices but of genuine spontaneous expressions of popular anger — such as we haven't seen in France.

We should remember that in Greece the occupation wasn't just in any old square: Syntagma Square is the central square in Athens, situated right in front of the parliament. There was a mass will — not least in the spatial setting itself — to confront parliament directly. An extremely strong anti-parliamentarism emerged, along with a radical and total rejection of a political representation system long dominated — as we know — by the two-party control established by the Right and Pasok alternating in government.

The slogans picked up by the crowd violently condemned the thieving and corrupt politicians responsible for placing the country under the protectorate of the troika and the memorandum regime. By comparison the French mobilization remains relatively measured.

Conversely, the most advanced element I see in Nuit Debout is an anti-boss or even anticapitalist — or at least, “anti-capital” — discourse. It is clear that what is being challenged in a mass way — in the general assemblies, the discussions and debates — is capital's power in all sectors of social life.

Given the Labor Law this opposition is evidently largely focused on capital's power at the level of the workplace, the arbitrary power of the bosses, the crushing of workers in their daily work, and the suffering that results.

But this also goes further, and touches on a lot of things. For example, the texts from the ecology commission seem to me to be very sharply anticapitalist, pointing to capital, the big companies, and the structures in their service as primarily responsible for the destruction of the environment and of nature. In this sense I think that new elements of radicalism have emerged even compared to the alter-globalization demonstrations of the previous cycle, which this movement has proven to have major points of commonality with.

What the movements also have in common — and this can only pose a great number of problems — is that they carry the temptation, and thus the risk, of getting bogged down in proceduralism and interminable debates on the mechanisms of decision-making, and in the fact of speech and its “liberation” taking on a self-referential dimension, becoming an end in itself. This can thus come to substitute for the search for a properly political activity that sets itself concrete objectives and thus equips itself with the means to achieve them.

This is a very abstract way of posing the question of democracy, disconnecting it from class conflict and its extension.

Exactly. Or simply in seeking a discussion that doesn't lead to decisions directed toward action: only toward elaborating the best procedures, the best frameworks for deliberation, or democracy becoming the synonym of an interminable self-referential discussion cut off from the real world. This temptation also existed in Greece, in the general assemblies that took place on the Syntagma Square and elsewhere.

But there it was effectively overridden by the dynamic of the situation, and what was playing out right in front of it; not only the fact of the vote on the memorandum and the troika establishing its protectorate over the country, but also the frequency of extremely powerful strike movements. This provided a counterweight to these proceduralist temptations and to a “citizen engagement”

disconnected from any genuine political content.

You were one of the first to note — in mid-November — the death of the Front de gauche. Even if now the mobilization is far from over and a second round is underway, all this will also have effects on the recomposition of the “Left of the Left,” meaning the far left. What are prospects for the Left going forward, especially in the 2017 presidential elections?

The landscape of the radical and anticapitalist left in France is very problematic on account of the failure of the two main bets that were made in the recent period. The first was that of the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), the project launched by the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR).

This organization was the political force driving the radical left in the 2000s, particularly thanks to Olivier Besancenot’s two presidential campaigns in 2002 and 2007 and what had crystallized around that moment.

The second failure was that of the Front de gauche, which never managed to be anything other than a cartel of organizations and a top-down electoral alliance. It was never able to construct itself as a real tool for intervening in mobilizations and in struggles, allowing a real political recomposition, and working to rebuild a political space. In my view the Front de gauche was already moribund even before the November attacks — the municipal and regional elections had already proven that the PCF was persevering in its role as an auxiliary to the Socialist Party.

But for me the symbolic *coup de grâce* was when all the PCF members of parliament (MPs) in the National Assembly voted in favor of the state of emergency, participating in the farcical national unity that was then coming into force.

It is too soon to say what turn things will take, but there is one thing that we can be certain of: the social movement that is now underway signals a real turning point, which will have a major impact on the political terrain. That is a lesson we can take from all the comparable movements that have taken place elsewhere.

That was true even in the least favorable case, in the United States, where Occupy appeared rather limited, dominated by a rather anti-political or libertarian logic in a country where there is no autonomous political expression of the workers’ movement, and where there never has been one at any significant level.

Even there it had a certain impact as we see with the Bernie Sanders campaign; it was mediated, indirect, but it was extremely important by US standards. And as we know, in southern Europe the social movements gave rise to extremely important political upheavals. But these latter do not just happen spontaneously. There were actors who took initiatives and who were able to produce results that had not previously been foreseeable, corresponding to possibilities that had not previously existed.

The situation in France at the moment is opening up new possibilities. On the one hand, because the Socialist Party is very much weakened: in my view this movement against the El Khomri bill marks the definitive rupture between the Socialist Party and what remained of its social base and support. We are probably now — and only now — seeing something like a Pasokification of the Socialist Party, or in any case decomposition phenomena that we can’t see it escaping from.

It follows from this that the left-wing forces who want to rival the Socialist Party are today faced with a major challenge. These forces certainly do exist on the far left, on condition that they break out of a logic of groupuscules and sectarianism. Moreover, they also exist in some of the currents or

components of the now defunct Front de gauche, albeit on condition that they break with any logic of sub-alternity toward the Socialist Party and government, and on condition that they understand what is happening in the streets, in the mobilizations, and set themselves to reflecting seriously on an alternative.

I also believe at a more programmatic level that this is the challenge we're confronted with at the current moment: we cannot settle for an anti-neoliberal platform listing a set of immediate demands — in reality, a trade unionist-like program. What we need is a real political alternative, identifying the points knotting together the current situation and the class adversary's own strategy.

That means, for example, that we must absolutely aim at the end of presidentialism and of the Fifth Republic, but also at the dismantling of the European Union, which is capital's genuine war machine at the continent-wide scale. Without a rupture with the EU we will never arrive at any solution, as the disaster of Syriza in Greece definitively confirmed.

This perspective also demands a real vision of social relations, in a logic liberated from the grip of capital. This must simultaneously be a concrete and realistic logic, based on transitional but well-defined targets. By now we are far from the stage where defending public services or proposing their extension would be sufficient.

That wouldn't at all correspond to the significance of what is happening: either in terms of the forms of contestation that have emerged in the most advanced sections of the movement, or in terms of the forms with which capital has spectacularly extended its grip on social relations as a whole.

In terms of the alternative, there are two big experiences in recent years symptomatic of the great dangers in relying on popular mobilizations to produce a political outcome. Namely, Podemos (in all its particularities) and what's become of its political apparatus in the recent period; and of course the experience of Syriza, its capitulation and the failure of its political project, which was as rapid as the initial hopes were intense.

Our goal must be not to reproduce the same type of strategic illusions only once again to crash straight into the wall. In your view, what "antibodies" are worth emphasizing, in this regard?

For my part I draw three lessons from Syriza's failure.

The first the most obvious one — is that any even modestly anti-neoliberal politics (and, even more so, any anticapitalist politics) in the current moment that rejects rupture with the European Union and does not provide itself the means to bring this rupture to its full conclusion is condemned to failure.

This rupture is not at all synonymous with a retreat into national borders as some people stubbornly insist. After all, if there is not a breach opening up somewhere, in one of the links in the chain, that is at the level of a national social formation, there cannot be any expansion of this rupture at an international level.

The second lesson is that purely parliamentary strategies are insufficient and can similarly only lead to defeat. From 2012, even before it reached power, Syriza turned its approach and its practices toward a purely parliamentary perspective, and not one that walked with both feet. It did not have a perspective of simultaneously both driving mobilizations that could raise the intensity of social confrontation, and obtaining electoral victories allowing it to conquer governmental power.

Indeed, entering government is senseless unless it allows us to go further in this confrontation, taking in hand some of the levers essential to deepening the political crisis and opening up new

spaces for this popular mobilization. From this point of view Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his “citizens’ revolution” — working only by way of the ballot box — is completely out of step not only with certain fundamental theoretical lessons of the past, but also with very recent situations.

A really classic reformist fantasy.

Yes, it’s a really classic fantasy, but what the Mélenchon case also reveals is a very superficial approach to the very experiences that he claims to take as his reference points. Namely, his invocation of the citizens’ revolution, particularly in Latin America, where anti-neoliberal or progressive forces have been able to win successive electoral victories.

Certainly there have indeed been victories at the ballot box, but in all these cases even to produce these limited results there also had to be sometimes insurrectionary popular struggles. In Venezuela it was the 1989 caracazo and its hundreds of dead that made possible the Chavista experience, and similarly in Bolivia there had to be a true popular insurrection, with people dying, before Evo Morales arrived in power — with all the limits that experience may have.

The third conclusion I’d draw concerns the party form properly speaking. What I saw in Syriza — and we are seeing something entirely similar with Podemos — is that even before coming to power and taking over ministerial seats, at the moment when the prospect of winning an election or enjoying a strong electoral advance first emerged, these parties underwent a process of preemptive statification.

Once again, Nicos Poulantzas saw this possibility very clearly in his last texts, when he said that this statification was the main risk facing a strategy of war of position and conquering state power precisely through this combination of social movements and electoral majorities.

This statification concretely expresses itself in the fact of these parties becoming more and more centralized, with the leadership becoming autonomous of the base and adopting a “caudillista” outlook and with militants having less and less importance in the concrete process of decision-making.

These parties more and more conceive themselves as apparatuses for managing power, and not apparatuses for producing a mass politics in interaction with social movements and popular mobilizations. We have seen these tendencies at work in Syriza, and particularly since 2012.

That is not to say that they had not existed before then, but they reached an entirely new extent starting from that moment, when Syriza found itself at the gates of government power. And in the Podemos case it’s happening even faster.

Without doubt, that is because Podemos does not come from a process of recomposition in the workers’ movement and is based on much weaker organizational structures, which are thus all the more subject to this tendency toward statification. In order to counteract that we have to experiment with political and organizational forms; forms which would not allow the magic-wand abolition of these tendencies — which in my view are absolutely inherent to the very conditions of the political field such as it exists in our countries — but could contain them and stop them predominating.

There is a question of movements being rooted in the working class, but also of what politics you are standing for therein.

Indeed, for these processes of preemptive statification existed already in the 1970s in those Communist parties that were posed with the question of reaching governmental power by electoral means, namely in France and Italy. These were parties with truly mass roots, and which were

hegemonic in the workers' movement.

But that did not at all stop the PCF from adopting the "common program," sealing its alliance with the Socialist Party, or the Italian Communist Party (PCI) of the "historic compromise" period sinking into the mold of this stratification. Indeed, these were the realities facing Poulantzas when he elaborated his analyses, conscious of the risk that the Communist Parties might largely follow — even in their very organizational structure — the same course of development as the labor and social-democratic parties of the previous period.

I think that we have to conceive the terrain of organizational and party construction as a field of experimentation, but also, of course, as a field of confrontation and struggle allowing new political forms to emerge. I repeat, in my view such forms could not abolish these tendencies, which are entirely structural in nature. Any mass political construction operating in the context of a political terrain remaining structured by the electoral field, the relations of representation, and parliamentary institutions, will find itself confronted with problems and thus tendencies of this type.

But I agree when you speak of antibodies. I think that's what we must work for in terms of strategic approaches, organizational forms, and a deep-rootedness in society, the working class, and subaltern social groups as they are today, and not as they were structured in the past.

Following one of Frédéric Lordon's first interventions at Nuit Debout someone asked him whether he was a revolutionary or a reformist, and his response — in sum — was that the question was not relevant. How would you reply to that question?

I think that the question is certainly a meaningful one, but we also have to make clear what we mean by the word "reformist" in the current context. For not only does the perspective of revolution today seem historically defeated after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of what has been called the "short twentieth century"; the reformist perspective also seems defeated.

Today's social-democratic parties are social-liberal parties that manage neoliberalism, and they do not at all propose a real social pact. If in the three or four decades after World War II social democrats promoted advances or gains favoring the world of labor, even within a capitalist framework, that is no longer true. Today reformism is also in crisis.

But I think that we have to go further: in fact, I would invert the traditional way of formulating the problem. In the capitalist system there will always be reformism; there will always be fractions and even organized currents among subaltern groups who believe in the possibility of improving things within the framework of the existing system. But for that reformism to exist there also has to be a credible revolutionary perspective.

In other words, I think that the reformist perspective is derived from the existence of a revolutionary perspective. The fact that across a whole historical period there was a concrete possibility of a post-capitalist future — a perspective of overthrowing the system, founded on the power relations emerging from the October Revolution and the anti-colonial revolutions — is the reason why there was a reformism saying: while not going that far, we can nonetheless achieve a certain number of things without upsetting the system.

Today, on the contrary, we have a situation where — as Fredric Jameson put it — "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism." This has become the common sense of our era; ultimately, this is what obstructs — or more precisely, renders unthinkable — both the revolutionary perspective and any truly reformist perspective. What we need today are fresh experiences of victory for the subaltern classes, which will allow us to pose in concrete, effective

terms both the revolutionary and reformist hypotheses.

P.S.

* Jacobin. 5.16.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/05/nuit-debout-france-el-khomri-syriza-occupations/>

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