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Democratisation and People's Rights Plenary: Comments

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Written version of the contribution presented by Pierre Rousset as commentator at the AEPF V plenary on "Democratisation and people's Rights."

In the title of this conference's plenary, the word "democratisation" can refer both to the states and their roles in society; and to our own movement and its capacity, on the issue of democracy, to draw lessons from the past, to think about what is new...

The role of a commentator being, I guess, to comment, I'll look at both aspects of "democratisation" while commenting on the three speakers' introduction at the plenary.

I/ I think that Hilary Wainwright was correct to underline the gravity of the crisis that Western democracy is undergoing. It may not be clearly seen from Asia, but it has become an essential issue for us. In countries like France, the traditional (bourgeois) democratic institutions have lost most of their legitimacy, undermined by neo-liberal globalisation and social regression. The unprecedented level of abstentions at the main electoral contests is only one of its many indications. More generally, all the democratic and social rights that people won decades ago are presently under severe and sustained attacks.

It would then be wrong, as many Westerners would do, to oppose a democratic Europe (or a democratic West) to an Asia to be democratised. Democracy has to be fought for in both ends of the Eurasian continent. There is a very real danger to having neo-fascist and xenophobic movements rooting deeper and deeper in European societies, as a result of the loss of legitimacy of state institutions. To reverse the present undemocratic trends, it won't be sufficient to go back to previous forms of (bourgeois) democracy, which anyhow would probably be impossible: their conditions of existence have been put to question by the development of capitalism itself.

We have to fight forward, to give new foundations to a more radical democracy, linked to social equality, allowing creativity from below to express itself, with an extension of the right to vote including in the realm of economics and in the world of companies. To be restored, democracy has to become qualitatively more democratic than it was before.

II/ One peculiarity of the Fifth Asia-Europe People's Forum, compared to previous ones, is that it invites us, at more than one occasion, to reflect on ourselves, to take on a critical look at our own traditions and evolution. It is notably the case at this plenary.

Both Ton Nu Thi Ninh and Hilary Wainwright addressed squarely the issue of pluralism and of evolving relationships between political parties, movements and societies, even if they did it in a quite different way. The need to fully recognise the pluralist character of societies and of people's

movements seems, indeed, of utmost importance, especially nowadays. This is not to minimise the significance of class analysis. Classes do exist. If anyone doubts it, just look how today's capitalism asserts itself as a class dominated society. How the bourgeoisie proclaims its ambition to rule over the whole society, to impose on every sphere of social life the diktat of the law of profit.

1. I am grateful to Ton Nu Thi Ninh for the way she introduced the Vietnamese one-party system into discussion in this plenary. As many other older participants in this forum said earlier, I also belong to a generation of activists who mobilised themselves in solidarity with the Vietnamese people's struggle - and I come, in addition, from the former colonial power. We never felt that the Vietnamese should owe us anything for this solidarity. On the contrary, we felt (and we still think) that it is us who are deeply indebted toward the Vietnamese people, because they had to fight such terrible wars for so long; wars which were focused on Indochina, local in this sense, but which were a key part of a much broader international confrontation, in which we were also involved. The full cost of this confrontation, the heaviest price of the imperialist wars at that time, was paid here, in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. This should certainly not be forgotten; and I wanted it to be stated here once more.

Coming back on the issue of the one-party system, I would tend to privilege a concrete historical approach, rather than sociological or cultural ones. Vietnam has known political plurality, including in the Left. In the 1930s and part of the 1940s, Vietnamese Marxism itself was plural. This was an element of its richness. Then the wars came. The French one, to re-colonise a country which had proclaimed its independence in August 1945. The US one, to "contain and roll back" revolution in Asia and the world. The Vietnamese CP has been the only party which successfully organised the resistance to these wars; wars which shattered the political and social fabrics of the country.

I would then say that the one-party system came as an outcome of the wars and of the struggles, which means out of a very concrete historical pattern. The situation would, for example, have been different if the French labour movement had been willing and able to stop the war of re-conquest, in the 1940s, and to protect the newly gained independence of Vietnam.

The same question deserves to be asked concerning the future. It seems to me very doubtful that, in the long run, a one-party system can allow the inner plurality of any society to fully express itself. I would like to underline that I think here first of all of the plural character of people's movements. Beyond the question of bourgeois democracy, I wish to raise here the issue of people's democracy, of the very nature of socialist democracy.

2. Hilary Wainwright calls for a (very) critical review of the relationships established in the past between political parties and mass/social movements. Her criticism particularly concerns the hierarchical type of relations inherited from the previous century.

I do think that political parties are still needed. The divisions between (true) political parties are about long-term choices (conditions put to governmental participation, reformist-"manager" versus radical-revolutionary...). In the absence of such political parties, social/mass movements would find themselves divided along the same "strategical" lines (in addition to existing divisions, proper to them). I know that this is already the case in countries where there is a strict party-mass organisation organic link. But elsewhere, trade unions and other organisations are opened to members, sympathisers and voters from different political parties. The existence of a plurality of parties can then be (even if not necessarily) a factor that helps to maintain the unity of the mass/social movements, which many of us consider precious.

This said, I surely agree with Hilary Wainwright that a critical review of the party's dominant legacy is necessary. Much more equal relationships have to be built. It has to be recognised that political parties are not the only channel through which programmatic elaboration originates. This has been

the case for a long time. It would be difficult to argue that feminist and ecological programmatic visions came first of all from established parties (even if many party members contributed to these)! Parties do not have the monopoly of politics.

Relationships between political parties and mass/social movements are evolving and have to evolve. Nevertheless, the past legacy should not be oversimplified. I am referring here to the written contribution of Hilary Wainwright, on the “very limited understanding of knowledge” shown then by “Leninism and social democracy alike”. If my memory does not betray me, we did give in the 1960s and 1970s already a very central role to the notion of “praxis” and the criticism of “scientism” and “positivism” was already well alive. On all these matters, there was a diversity of approaches, within the Marxist reference itself, which should not be forgotten today if we are to seriously review the past. [Hilary took in account this remark in the later written version of her talk].

3. It has to be stated clearly that democracy is not for the people to be consulted. Democracy is for the people to decide; and this is not at all the same thing. Political parties are not the only ones to be questioned here. More than ever, the whole system of Western democracy fails to offer even the formal possibility of it. Decisions are nowadays openly taken by bourgeois and social elites, for example within the international trade and financial institutions; with no pretension of accountability.

Within civil society itself, “substitutionism” is not the monopoly of parties. How many NGOs speak in the name of the civil society, ask to be recognised as the civil society, without showing any social roots, any mobilising capacity? And how many trade union leaderships will adamantly forbid their members, or all the strikers, to decide on the continuation of their own struggles?

The right of people to decide has to be enhanced both within society as a whole and in our movements as well.

III/ Finally, I would like to address the issue of radicality and democracy. It lies on the background of many things here said. I'll refer especially to Joel Rocamora's written contribution at this conference, much more developed on this question than his oral one. I feel that it reflects a rather common assumption: that to be more democratic and more moderate goes hand in hand. I'll challenge this assumption.

Democracy will not bloom in our societies without deep social changes. We have to start from that recognition. The right for people to decide will not be asserted without a qualitative change in power relationships within society. To a large extent, the crisis of the Left is a loss in the hope of a radical democratic change, and the two words “radical” and “democratic” are of equal importance here. This hope has been betrayed by the very anti-democratic behaviour and nature of parties identified to revolution (of Stalinist character, but not only). It has been betrayed as well by social democracy, so easily co-opted into bourgeois power.

Moderate forces can be moderately democratic, not more. And sometimes much less: ask Third World people if Western powers, under whatever government, look democratic when they launch their colonial wars! Radical forces can be radically anti-democratic. But they can also be radically democratic: because to be radically democratic, one has to be socially radical as well; to be able to transform the inner relationships of power within society. To be socially radical is surely not a sufficient condition for us to be radically democratic. But it is indeed one necessary condition. Our task is to reconcile radical democracy with social radicalism.

P.S.

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