

Europe: The lefts in the crisis

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The situation of the "lefts" cannot be understood without starting from the crisis, its multiple dimensions and its effects on the social and political field. Hitting head-on all the organizations and parties linked to the history of the workers' movement, precipitating ruptures, it obliges political forces to recompose around new axes. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet bloc announced a new era: the current upheavals give this era its content. The present crisis is global: in economic terms, it is the consequence of an over-accumulation of capital, an overproduction of goods and commodities and an under-consumption of the masses. The "real economy" of the imperialist centres is settling into a long-term recessive logic, and none of the "orthodox" economic experts ventures onto the theme of a "way out of the crisis".

The comparison is often made between the present crisis and that of 1929. The latter led to fascism and World War II. For the moment, the current crisis is being contained. Some people have used the expression "the crisis of the 1930s in slow motion". But today's crisis has a double singularity, as a "crisis of civilization", especially in its ecological dimension, and as an expression of a "tilting of the world". The centres of gravity of the economy and world politics are shifting. The crisis struck the capitalist societies of the centre and their immediate periphery, while countries such as China and India, and others in Asia, are experiencing a lasting expansion. To a lesser extent, some Latin American countries are experiencing a long phase of growth. This lasting crisis of capitalism - the third of such magnitude after those of 1857 and 1929 - is likely to put an end to the domination of Europe over the world, and to a whole historical period.

These changes are not conjunctural but structural. They affect all the economic, social and ecological equilibriums in the world. And this is in a situation where capitalist globalization has left its mark in every part of the world. So the austerity plans affecting Europe today are not the umpteenth austerity plans that the continent has experienced: under the present effects of international capitalist competition and of the more and more direct pressure of a unified world market of the labour force, it is the place of the European continent that is being challenged. Capitalist globalization demands that Europe, the weakest link in the system, if it wants to secure its place in global competition, must break what remains of its "model".

The ruling classes and the financial markets are aiming at the reduction of the purchasing power of the working classes by 15 to 20 per cent, if not more in the South of Europe, at the destruction of public services, at blowing the labour code to pieces. Everywhere in Europe, the counter-reforms, in particular those concerning the labour market, are going in the same direction: more flexibility and more precariousness. The brutality of these austerity policies is even greater in that it results from

the diverse trajectories of different economic zones of the Union: Germany and its satellite states, France, Italy, Southern Europe, Eastern Europe... These contradictions are even stronger in that there is not, unlike the United States or China, a central state.

In the global concert, Europe combines economic decline and political weakness. The tensions, the internal contradictions, the risk of implosion exist in several traditional political formations in Europe. This translates into a full-scale attack on rights and democratic freedoms. "Pro-austerity" tendencies reinforce the authoritarian traits of the regimes in place. This "democratic" crisis plays directly into the hands of fascist or far-right populist parties. We can no longer rule out that, under the pressure of the crisis, there will emerge alliances or political reorganizations promoting reconciliations between the Right and the far Right. The policies of the Troika - EU, ECB and IMF - and of the financial markets override the decisions of the institutions of classical parliamentary democracy. With the crisis of the nation-state and parliamentary democracy, the traditional parties are caught up in a turmoil that has undermined their social and political bases. The political earthquake that has just hit Italy is a good demonstration. Berlusconi's Right lost more than seven million votes. The Left lost 4.7 million votes. The organizations linked to ex-Communist Refoundation collapsed. And up popped Beppe Grillo and his 8 million votes - the expression of people being fed up with austerity, with corruption, with the European Union, but also of a leader with problematic political positions with regard to the trade unions and the rights of immigrants and whose trajectory is difficult to predict.

The historical crisis of the European workers' movement

How, under these conditions, could the 'lefts' not be impacted? During the first months of the crisis, around 2008, it was hoped that the crisis would cause reactions, large-scale social struggles and the strengthening of the workers' movement. Five years later, it is another scenario that has been written. There has been and there is resistance and social struggles. Southern Europe - first of all Greece, with its 8 one-day general strikes, but also Portugal and in an impressive way Spain - with its indignados, its strikes and demonstrations - have experienced an upsurge of struggles. Radical forces have obtained good electoral results in Greece with Syriza, an exceptional phenomenon, and to a lesser extent in Spain and France, with Izquierda Unida and the Left Front. But this reality can also express itself in a movement such as the "Five Stars" in Italy. However, in none of the countries of Europe has a significant blow been delivered against the attacks of the governments and the employers, despite exceptional struggles in Southern Europe. Moreover these struggles are not producing a phase of organic growth of the workers' movement: there are no massive waves of people joining parties or trade unions.

No reformist, left reformist, anti-liberal or revolutionary current has experienced substantial growth, apart perhaps in Greece, with a large number of recruits to Syriza which, despite weaknesses in its implantation and organization, had at its last National Conference nearly 35,000 members. But in general the rate of unionization continues to decline, after declining significantly in the 1980s and 1990s. Only IG Metall maintains its position in Germany. As for the parties, they are experiencing a steady erosion of their members, and in the best of cases tend increasingly to be reduced to big electoral machines. Even the powerful German Social Democracy has dropped from a million members in the 1970s to less than 500,000 members. And almost nothing remains of the great Italian Communist Party!

A party like the PCF, which has contained its crisis following the election results of the Left Front, has seen a significant drop in its membership. The number of members went down from 78,779 to 64,184 between the last two congresses. The number of members who voted for the last congress

(February, 2013) was 34,000, whereas 48,000 voted to choose their candidate for the presidential election in June 2011. "34,000 is the lowest figure in recent years," noted Roger Martelli, historian of the PCF and himself a former member of the party. So there is a singular situation, which combines one of the deepest crises of the capitalist system and a very much weakened European workers' movement. This is a notable difference with other crisis situations and in particular the 1930s, when all organizations and currents experienced impressive growth, on both the political and the trade-union level...

"Already no longer and not yet"

This weakening of the workers' movement has deep causes. It is firstly the result of thirty years of neo-liberal capitalist offensive that have unravelled, dismantled and then liquidated a series of social achievements. The crisis comes at a time when the workers' movement has for years been thrown onto the defensive. The changes that have been made to work processes have been shaped by these unfavourable relationships of forces. While the working class has never been as big (between 85 and 90 per cent of the active population), it is segmented, divided, individualized, and in significant proportions engaged in precarious work. This undoubtedly inhibits the development of class consciousness and of trade unions or working-class political organizations. Finally, even in the countries of Southern Europe which demonstrate great fighting spirit, there is a very considerable lag between social explosions and socialist consciousness. The absence of an alternative puts a brake on any project of revolutionary socialist transformation.

These discrepancies exist in other regions of the world, as for example in the Arab world which is today destabilized by the outbreak of revolutions for democracy and social justice. Dictatorships have been overthrown by the popular classes and by coalitions bringing together democrats, secularists, nationalists, religious people and revolutionaries. The revolutionary processes are continuing, but as shown by the developments of the situation in Tunisia and Egypt, the dominant political forces come from the Islamist movement, even though it is diverse and divided. If, as Gilbert Achcar explains, "We have to go through the experience of Islamism in power", that does not explain the weakness of the progressive and revolutionary currents today. The balance sheets of the Arab nationalism of the 1950 and 60s and of Stalinism on the international level weigh painfully on the formation of socialist consciousness.

To come back to Europe, the propulsive force of its workers' movement strengthened parallel to the expansion of capitalist Europe, even though the workers' movement was controlled by the bureaucracies of Stalinism and social democracy. Europe's decline on the socio-economic level has been accompanied by cultural and political weakening; it reduces the influence of the workers' movement on the continent... Of course, some counter-tendencies offset these declines: social resistance to the attacks by capital, new social movements such as the global justice movement, the indignados, and new radical currents among youth. New socio-political experiences which block austerity policies can cause sharp turns in Europe, as evidenced, for example, by Syriza in Greece.

From a geopolitical point of view, the potential of the workers' movement and of social movements is considerable in the new emerging powers, especially China. The social weight of the Chinese proletariat, its progress in the fight for wage increases, social security, its ability to build trade unions, associations for democratic rights, independent political movements can play a key role in a reorganization of the lefts... In a situation where the traditional workers' movement "is already no longer", as long as new movements - the young indignant ones and Chinese and Indian workers and those of other countries in Asia and Latin America..., "are not yet", what is most promising about the new epoch keeps us waiting... At the same time, capital is scoring points. We must therefore be lucid

about the reality of the global relationships of forces, and in order to resist, know how to defend a political project able to respond to sharp turns in the situation.

A social democracy that is “more and more bourgeois and less and less working-class”...

The evolution of social-democracy is a good indicator of the tendencies in the situation. The crisis of the 1930s occurred in a context of a rising dynamic of the workers' movement after the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the crisis itself caused a radicalization of the working classes and their organizations. All the currents of the workers' movement, from the reformists to the revolutionaries, polarized millions of workers. Coupled with the rise of fascism, the crisis pushed the big battalions of social democracy to the left, leading significant sectors of it towards more radical positions.

Today, the movement of social-democracy is in the opposite direction: the more the crisis deepens, the more social democracy adapts to neoliberal capitalism. How can we explain this transformation? Some people thought that, under the effects of the crisis, sectors of the ruling classes, and following in their traces the parties of the Socialist International in Europe, would move towards Keynesian or neo-Keynesian policies of stimulating demand, of stronger public intervention. On the contrary, the Socialist parties have continued with austerity policies, and sometimes even initiated them, as in Southern Europe and in France today. No ruling class or state has taken up Keynesian policies or those based on social compromises. On the contrary, these sectors are using the crisis to increase the rate of exploitation and of surplus value. Inter-capitalist competition is leading to a forced march to lower the standard of living of millions of people. But beyond the economic trends, there is a political problem: the choice of Keynesianism is the product of relationships of forces imposed by class struggles. It was the Russian Revolution, the impact of the struggles of the 1930s and those of the post-war period and the 1960s that imposed such policies on the bourgeoisie and on states.

Today, the deterioration of the relationship of forces to the detriment of the popular classes in no way forces those at the top to make political concessions or social compromises. On the contrary, they redouble their attacks by imposing austerity and they dictate this policy to their social-democratic “lieutenants”. From PASOK in Greece to other Socialist parties in Southern Europe, and involving the whole of the Socialist International, there reign policies of submission to debt, of respect for the “golden rule” of budgetary austerity, of defence of the interests of the employers. This process of adaptation is also due to a growing integration of social democracy into state institutions, and of the upper layers of these parties into the milieux of the financial markets and of captains of industry. The arrival of someone like Strauss-Kahn to head the IMF illustrates this process. Lenin, in his time, defined the Socialist parties as “bourgeois workers” parties. These parties are now “less and less workers’ and more and more bourgeois”. They remain linked, by their historical origin, to the workers’ movement, but their links with their social and political base are more and more weakened.

Each party has its history and the differences are significant between, on the one hand, the ties that unite German social democracy to the workers’ movement, and, on the other hand, the more distant links of the French Socialist Party with the workers’ movement. But, overall, their relationships with the popular movement are increasingly weak, undermined by their support for austerity policies. Some have experienced a massive loss of members, as in Germany in the 1990s, while others, such as PASOK in Greece, can suffer a collapse or, as in Spain, confront crises that endanger their existence. This qualitative change, if it was taken to its conclusion, would transform these parties into “Democrat parties on the American model”. This is the type of transformation that has been experienced, not by a social-democratic party but by the Italian Communist Party, which has become

a bourgeois centre-left party. This trajectory can be slowed down because of the necessities of alternation in government, which encourages these parties not to be bourgeois parties like the others. In countries where the history of the workers' movement remains alive and where social democracy is still strong, the latter can only play a key role in political life and in political institutions because it is "social-democratic". This is the reason for the maintenance of historical references, although the Socialist parties of the beginning of the twenty-first century no longer have much to do with those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Spaces and limits of the radical Left

This shift to the right of social democracy has released a space for the forces to the left of the Socialist parties. In the past months, forces such as the Left Front in France, Izquierda Unida in Spain and Syriza have occupied it. The left reformist forces have even succeeded in winning back a substantial part of the electorate of the anticapitalist or revolutionary Left, especially in France. Indeed, the space occupied by the "radical Left" results more from the rightward evolution of Socialist parties and the crisis of European political representation than from an advance of the mass movement and the political radicalization of sectors of society, except in Greece with the experience of Syriza. A phenomenon like that of Beppe Grillo has also drawn in not only voters for the radical Left but also voters from the Left and the Right. The spaces occupied by Grillo and Syriza may overlap, but the Five-Star movement is not Syriza, far from it. In the one case, beyond the aspirations of the citizens who have identified with Grillo, which must be taken into account, we are dealing with a movement whose positions are problematic; in the case of Syriza, we have a political movement of the radical Left.

In a situation marked by resistance but also by defeats, parties (such as the Communist parties) which have a better social implantation and positions in the trade unions or in representative institutions are more resistant and represent a more credible alternative than the anticapitalist forces (except in Greece where the KKE, a party that is very Stalinist and divisive, has isolated itself, even though it continues to have militant forces). But the electoral rebound of these parties is not accompanied by a corresponding organizational and political strengthening, which takes us back to the degradation of the global relationships of political forces.

But the crisis also changes the relationships between social-liberalism and the Communist parties. The latter are prey to new contradictions between, on the one hand, interests linked to the alliances forged between Socialist and Communist leaders, and on the other hand, the austerity policies endorsed or implemented by the social-democratic parties, which are of such brutality that they make joint governmental coalitions more difficult. In Spain, these contradictions lead Izquierda Unida to oppose the policies of austerity, but at the same time to participate in a government with the PSOE in Andalusia. In Italy, the nebulous ex-Communist Refoundation has lost its way by remaining subject to the centre-left of the Democratic Party. In France, the Left Front appears, for popular opinion, to be opposed to Holland, but what contortions it gets into to avoid stating clearly that it is part of the left opposition to this government! How many hesitant and contradictory votes in Parliament on government policies.... And it is no secret to anyone that the PCF will be torn, at the next municipal elections in 2014, between those who will continue alliances with the Socialists and those who want to be part of the Left Front lists. And these contradictions will not disappear, even behind good electoral results.

In France, the Left Party, led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, has been able, thanks to its alliance with the PCF, to give real dynamism to the Left Front. The four million who voted for Mélenchon and the tens of thousands of participants in the meetings during the election campaign have been a point of

support for action and debate against the austerity policies. But this time once again, this dynamic has not resulted in a strengthening of the organizations of the Left Front.

In France, Jean-Luc Mélenchon represents, within the spectrum of the European radical Left, the French exception, with his fight for the "Republic". In many aspects, he comes across one of the most virulent against the government's policies, but he combines his references to the class struggle with a "nationalist republicanism" that adds to the confusion of ideas and programmes. On the political and historical level, his reference is not to the Republic of the Communards, who put the social republic in opposition to the bourgeoisie, but that of the republicans who merge, in their defense of the Republic, the words "nation", "republic" and "state". At the strategic level, this conception subordinates the "citizens' revolution" or the "revolution through the ballot box" to respect for the institutions of the state of the ruling classes. However, these references, far from being ideological coquetry, are not without political implications. Thus, during the presidential campaign, he reaffirmed in *Cahiers de la revue de la Défense nationale* "that in the current situation, nuclear deterrence remains the essential element of our strategy of protection". Moreover, it is surprising that a supporter of ecosocialism defends the French nuclear bomb.

But it is especially faced with a key political question like the French intervention in Mali that the conceptions of Mélenchon on the state and the Republic have consequences. His defence of the Republic leads him to wonder whether or not "French interests" are or are not threatened. Although he rejects "any neo-colonial intervention", he "takes note", in the first place, of the military intervention, then "wishes for the victory of the French forces in Northern Mali". His refusal to define François Hollande's policy as being that of French imperialism prevents him from demanding the stopping of the bombing and the withdrawal of French troops from Mali.

Once again, these differences are not without political implications. The refusal to participate in the Hollande government, some of its votes in Parliament against austerity policies and its support for social struggles create the conditions for joint action with the Left Front. But its ambiguities with regard to the Socialist parliamentary majority, the refusal to affirm itself as a left opposition to the Government, the institutional links which bind it to the PS are a brake on the construction of an alternative. All the more so as the Left Front is at present controlled by the PCF and Mélenchon, despite a few dissenting voices that are unable to modify the relationships of forces within it.

The "Syriza" singularity

Quite another thing is the Greek configuration. We cannot understand Syriza without starting from the Greek crisis, which has resulted in social destruction unprecedented in Europe since the Second World War. Socio-economic demolition goes hand in hand with the political decomposition of the traditional parties, in particular PASOK. At the same time, the austerity plans of the Troika are massively rejected by the population. Greece has experienced in recent months eight one-day general strikes. On the far right, against a background of racism, the Nazi party "Golden Dawn" is making a breakthrough. In these exceptional circumstances, those of a "global national crisis," Syriza has been propelled into being the first party of the Left: its election results have gone from 4.6 per cent to 26.8 per cent!

Syriza, originally a coalition, has been transformed into a party. It comes from the history of the Greek Left, the crisis of the Communist movement, its splintering: Synaspismos, the majority current, comes from the Eurocommunist currents of the 1970s and has experienced internal crises and shifts to the left, notably under the pressure of the younger generations. Syriza has also worked with the global justice movement. The KKE, a very Stalinist party, more organized, is outside Syriza.

At the last National Conference of Syriza, the left current and the left pole presented a separate list that obtained 25 per cent of the votes. Although the majority of Synaspismos remains on left reformist positions, the instability of the coalition, its sensitivity to the mass movement, its capacity of attraction with regard to the anti-austerity forces, the place of the revolutionary left within it, contribute to giving Syriza a radical role very different from that of the Left Front in France.

Syriza's essential strength and its dynamic come both from its radical opposition to the memorandums of the Troika (EU, IMF, ECB), its rejection of austerity policies, and, over and above formulas, from its real defence of a programme in favour of social rights, public services, the annulment of the illegitimate debt, nationalization of the banks under social control. In this situation of acute confrontation, these demands have a transitional role. Syriza has pursued a policy of unitary proposals towards the KKE and Antarsya, which have rejected them. Lastly, it is practically engaged alongside sectors in struggle. Syriza is the expression of the anti-memorandum movement. It has also popularized the proposal of a government of the lefts on an anti-austerity programme, whose content is an issue between the left and the right of the party. Because, to date, it clearly a question of a "government of the lefts," a government breaking with austerity and not a "government of national union or salvation", as has been stated here and there by some leading members of Syriza.

Of course, nothing is settled. Social decomposition is increasing day by day. The stakes in Syriza are considerable on the level of the pressure exerted by the EU and the Greek capitalists. The left reformist orientation that is dominant within Syriza, and also the gap between its electoral strength and its organic weaknesses, limits its capacity for action. The temptations of the Syriza right to seek agreement with sectors of the ruling classes for a compromise with the EU are real. Other sectors of the Left, outside Syriza, discuss the possibility of a project of national reconstruction. But, at this stage, the EU remains intractable: no salvation outside "the memorandum"! So, faced with the attacks of the Troika and the Samaras government, there is no other perspective than confrontation, mobilization to overthrow this government, the battle for a "government of the lefts", and creating from the rejection of the austerity conditions the first breaks with the capitalist system.

The revolutionary Left: a difficult mutation

In the context of the overall political decline that the social movement is experiencing, the revolutionary lefts have been hit harder. No doubt there are historical explanations: too marked by the form, the content and the ideas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they do not manage to take sufficiently into account the demands of the new epoch and the need for a fundamental mutation. No doubt, and the NPA is not the only example in Europe, or even in the world, the revolutionaries and the anticapitalists are not succeeding in moving from the stage of "organization" to that of "small popular party". No doubt there is also a difficulty for organizations that, for decades, were "against the stream" or "in opposition", to be part of a real global political alternative experiencing the difficulties of political action!

These weaknesses did not allow the NPA to take sufficiently into account the emergence of a force like the Left Front and to adjust a political tactic which combines unitary proposals and political struggle. So it suffered a double temptation: adaptation, in the name of unity, to the dynamic of the Left Front, and sectarian propagandism by way of politics. This double temptation awaits other anticapitalist and revolutionary forces. A detailed balance sheet of the NPA is not the subject of this article, but the redeployment of the anti-capitalist Left implies emerging from this double temptation. This redeployment is possible because, even in reduced proportions, there is always a social and political base for anticapitalism.

This implies clarifying three issues:

(1) The question of unity, unity of action of all social, trade-union and political forces for a convergence of struggles against austerity policies. This is decisive, but it must also be accompanied by a political united front, building a political alternative against austerity and, in particular, by an orientation to build a left opposition to social-liberal governments. In France, this involves proposals to the Left Front for action, struggle and debates.

(2) The question of an anticapitalist action programme is also fundamental. How to combine the immediate demands of the ongoing class struggle, for jobs — the banning of sackings, starting with those made by companies that make profits —, wages, defence of public services and transitional proposals for a break with the neoliberal capitalist logic: auditing and annulment of the debt, expropriation of the banks and constitution of a unified public banking service, nationalization of key sectors of the economy under workers' control; a break with the Fifth Republic and a constituent process for real social and political democracy based on social self-management. This programme is not a prerequisite for action. In a situation of exceptional crisis, basic demands against austerity may have a transitional dynamic towards breaking the system. Every step forward is support of these demands must be fully supported.

(3) Finally the construction of an anti-capitalist force demands putting forward a political perspective of government based on decisive tasks against austerity and the neoliberal capitalist logic. "Workers' government", "popular government", "government against austerity"; those are some general formulas. "Government of the lefts" in Greece, because the concrete situation calls for a concrete answer. These formulas are opposed to all policies of participation in or support for governments which manage the capitalist economy and institutions. In the present crisis, it is politically important to explain the contours of a political alternative to social liberalism, showing that there is nothing inevitable about it.

The political alliances of the radical Left are diverse. So are the experiences. The Left Front is not Syriza. The relationship between the dynamics of the mass movement and these alliances, as well as the state of the internal relationships of forces within this or that coalition are important factors in determining a political tactic. The dynamic of social struggles and their combination with political crises will be decisive for the emergence new political generations. It is up to revolutionaries to learn and to become part of these real movements.

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P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>