

Strategic imagination and party - “The struggle, law of life”

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1. Movement-party. After decades of crisis of left-wing political forces and of activist refuge in social movements, the current rebirth of the political-electoral combat and the building of new political tools is happening together with the need to rethink and renew the very notion of party. As a result of a long decline of the political left since the late 1970s, the (uneven) crisis of the parties has been a crisis of content (programme), form (organisation), and practice. In short, a crisis of project, sense and strategy. Indeed, the resurgence of the eternal “party question” conceals a broader discussion of political strategy, the nature of political struggle itself, and the relationship between the political and the social.

The notion of movement-party sums up well the vocation to undertake a movement-inspired renewal of the party, as a certain analogy of the concept of social movement unionism. Used in academic circles by Kitschelt[1] to refer to the anti-authoritarian and green parties that emerged in the 1980s in several European countries, the term can be reformulated in a broader sense. Applied to the debate in Podemos, it shows a pretension of political-symbolic continuity between 15M and Podemos in a scenario of crisis of legitimation of the whole political system of the Spanish State that puts forward the need to develop, in Gramscian terms, a counter-hegemonic project and not merely an alternative political voice.

In this context, a movement-party takes on several simultaneous meanings: party as a movement (movement features), in movement (action-oriented and in continuous transformation), part of the movement (part of social struggles), and debtor of the movement (that is inspired by a foundational political-social event, 15M). Movement debtocracy means a party indebted to the movement (and the event), fidelity to which implies thinking beyond the same and its own limits to reveal all of its possibilities - excluding both its sanctification and its crude instrumentation for electoral purposes.

Although social movements (in fact, social organisations) reproduce many of the problems that are commonly associated with parties, the call for a movement-party is an attempt to go beyond conventional party politics and, at the same time, to follow in the tracks of a political tradition of, if

we adapt Draper's classic formula, change from below.[2]

2.Strategist-party. A party oriented towards a policy of emancipation must be conceived as a strategist-party, using Daniel Bensaïd's term.[3] A movement-strategist-party. Addressing reality strategically is a precondition for victory, although there is no guarantee of it. Planning a strategy does not mean that it is correct. Or that it is useful for advancing the cause of emancipation. Or that its implementation is tactically correct. Or having a correlation of forces that leads to victory. But thinking strategically is the first step. "There is no victory without strategy," notes Bensaïd.[4]

A strategic view of the world is, therefore, a helpful starting point, even though it does not ensure the destination will be reached. This is done on the basis of working hypotheses, as provisional road-maps for political action that will need to be contrasted and to pass the test of a never conclusive practice. In the era of the GPS (Global Positioning System), we therefore need to recognise that when it comes to political strategy, we are still navigating with an astrolabe. The politics of the astrolabe assumes that a political struggle does not work with imaginary certainties or inconsistent improvisations. It is based on rigorous and flexible approaches to a changing reality that is too complex to be understood perfectly. The uncertainty of the result of the action itself is an intrinsic part of any strategic approach. "In the revolutionary struggle there are no guarantees in advance" Trotsky warned in 1934 discussing the situation worldwide.[5]

The culmination of all strategic thinking is to develop what I have called strategic imagination, echoing Wright Mills' well-known concept of 'sociological imagination'.[6] Defined as 'the vivid awareness of the relationship between experience and the wider society', sociological imagination requires open-mindedness with regard to society. Strategic imagination needs a similar mentality. It means thinking strategically from a self-reflective and permanently innovative point of view, and having an indomitable and insatiable will to search for new possibilities to transform the world. In that sense, all strategy for revolution also has to be a revolution in strategy. The space-time perspective, that is to say, having both the historical and geographical scope to draw lessons from failed and successful past and contemporary experiences, is always a fundamental basis for strategic learning - a basis for the expansion of the imagination's frontiers. Therefore, short and long term, and concrete experience and comparative knowledge, are all intertwined.

3. Integral strategy. A political force must operate in all dimensions of social life. Changing the world needs 'daily work in all fields' to borrow an expression from Lenin.[7] It works its way into every last nook and cranny. No aspect can be neglected. Neither political, nor economic, nor ideological. All the details matter. All flanks are important in order to avoid strategic blind spots that may conceal unforeseen vulnerabilities and hinder the capacity to react.

An emancipatory political project essentially requires what I might call an integral strategy, by analogy with the Gramscian concept of integral state, which Gramsci synthesized in his formulas of 'State (in its integral meaning: dictatorship + hegemony)' and 'State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony armoured with coercion'.[8] It is not my intention to discuss here the virtues and problems of the Gramscian conception of the State and the controversies surrounding his work. It is simply worth noting, following Peter Thomas, that Gramsci sought to use the conception of integral State to analyze "the mutual interpenetration and reinforcement of 'political society' and 'civil society' (to be distinguished from each other methodologically, not organically) within a unified (and indivisible) state-form". The integral state, then, designates 'a dialectical unity of the moments of civil society and political society'.[9] Using the strategic imagination we can devise an integral strategy whereby we have to operate on several levels and manage a dialectic of "civil society" and "political society" where the struggle takes place in all fields within the framework of a unified and indivisible strategy.

4.Variable rhythms of time and sliding scale of spaces. Every integral strategy faces the challenge of governing time and space - two variables that any political strategy has to consider and that are permanently redefined by the logic of capitalist development as Harvey has pointed out[10].

Political activity, like any social process, is not linear. Acting strategically implies understanding what I call the variable rhythms of time. Political time is 'a broken time', and 'full of knots and guts, sudden accelerations and sudden braking, leaps forward and backward, syncopes and counter-times' to quote Bensaïd.[11] Knowing how to change rhythm in permanence becomes the key to a good strategic approach and good tactical execution. Neither a short-term sprint, nor a marathon at a fixed pace, political combat seems more like a cross-country race on irregular terrain full of slopes, mud and puddles that force constant changes of rhythm and require good endurance. So the short, medium and long term overlap. Hence the Bensaïdian metaphor of the party as a gearbox.[12]

By way of shortcuts through space and time, crises open wormholes that make it possible to reach destinations that seemed impossible before. Every party (or organisation), if it does not understand the nature of a crisis situation, runs the risk of entering a process of strategic routinization that may deteriorate into true strategic zombification when the mismatches between its theory and practice and the abrupt changes of the real world become too big. Business as usual ad mortem. Crises involve a crisis of strategy and the need for a strategy of crisis. In times of crisis, there is a fundamental need to read the sudden changes in the situation in order to revolutionise it and destabilise the adversary. This is precisely what happened with the launch of Podemos which shook the political landscape of the Spanish state like a flash of lightning - 'he dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash' noted Benjamin who captured the combination of crisis and broken temporality well when he wrote: 'catastrophe - to have missed the opportunity'.[13]

Space management is the other side of any political strategy, although, as Harvey[14] has pointed out, it often tends to be forgotten as a consequence of the very social practices that led to its subalternisation over time. A real challenge, space has always been elusive for labour and popular movements, which have traditionally been more comfortable, as Harvey tells us again, controlling place rather than space[15]. The concept of sliding scale of spaces, introduced by Bensaïd[16], strategically addresses the multiplicity of scalar levels of political space in times of global capitalism. 'Exercising strategic gymnastics that permit simultaneous intervention at various levels' is, for him, a way of avoiding dead-end localisms, impotent nation-state retreats and abstract and uprooted internationalism.

5. State and (alternative) social powers. The deployment of a comprehensive strategy means adequately synthesizing the relationship between the political and the social, as a kind of 'politicization of the social and a socialization of the political' (to borrow the formula of Spanish activist Miguel Romero).[17] Not all politicisation of the social or any socialisation of the political is useful, but only those that seek to break exploitation and oppression, to weave alliances between the subalterns of all conditions, and to foster a culture of struggle and antagonism.

The political and the social work with specific logics. Between the two there is desynchronisation and misalignments and a path full of bumps, bends and bifurcations, which indicates a chaotic and stormy relationship, with explosive outcomes. As Bensaïd insisted, the political is not merely a mechanical reflection of the social, but has its own codes, rhythms and language.[18] This is not the same, however, as postulating a contingent relation between the political and the social, in which the former is constructed almost independently of the latter, as maintained by the former political secretary of Podemos, Iñigo Errejón.[19] A given social process opens up multiple and conflicting political possibilities, the materialisation of which is not guaranteed beforehand. This is where strategy work comes in. But strategy does not operate in an isolated political sphere, but in a political terrain that interacts with the social and in a social terrain that interacts with the political.

The strategic articulation between the political and the social needs a good understanding of the nature of the State, in particular in its narrow sense of institutional framework, in order to be able to define a relationship with it that avoids the great historical problem of political parties (and such other organisations as trade unions): their institutional integration, assuming the State as the fundamental lever through which to change the world. The opposite fiction of a pure exteriority with respect to it, whether in its anarchist or autonomist version, simply reverses the problem without solving it. Neither of the two options, 'the politics of the oppressed', notes Bensaïd, 'must be kept at a prudent distance from the State. But this distance remains a relationship, not an absolute exteriority or indifference.[20]

The building of a solid network of alternative social powers, as a system of fortifications that secure the provisional conquest of positions in hostile terrain, is fundamental as a base camp for any electoral assault on political power and the implementation of a real policy of change once some Government responsibility (local, regional or national) has been achieved - then the fundamental question is to avoid getting caught up in the old gears of the state. 'The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes, Marx observed in his account of the Paris Commune.[21]

6. Radicality and reality. A revolutionary and emancipatory programme and strategy start both from a request for radicalism and the challenge of achieving it. Inspired by Marx, we can understand "radicality" to have two complementary meanings. The first is his well-known claim in his Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right of 1843-44 that "to be radical is to grasp the root of the matter"[22] and, therefore, to go beyond the surface. The second is that of "the ruthless criticism of the existing order", to quote his letter to Arnold Ruge, also in 1843-44[23], in which he defends the need for "the ruthless criticism of the existing order, ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries, nor from conflict with the powers that be".

This contrasts with the assertion by the general secretary of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, that radicalism in politics is measured by radicality in results, not by principles.[24] Although there is some truth in this, in opposing the radicality of principles with that of results, he forgets that without the former ("the ruthless criticism of the existing order"), the latter are likely to be highly superficial. Without radicality of principles there will be no radical results. "One must always try to be as radical as reality itself" Lenin advised the young Romanian pacifist poet Valeriu Marcu[25] in a conversation during World War I. It is then when results can live up to the needs of reality.

7. Transition and regulatory horizon. Every emancipatory party needs a "regulatory horizon." Having one is strategic and any strategy requires one. Hence "regulatory strategic horizon" is how Bensaïd[26] synthesizes the idea. It is based on two aspects: the notion of revolution or rupture and the core idea of another model of society. That is, the how and the what, respectively. A regulatory horizon that only relies on one of the two, because it lacks the other or because it is poorly defined, is politically weak. Being confused about the road and / or about the goal is equivalent to getting lost at some point in the journey.

This double regulatory horizon has now been evaporated from all political-strategic imagery in left wing parties and movements. Without it, the very notion of transition has disappeared. A transitional perspective may work in two senses. First, as a programmatic definition that seeks, on the road to power, to connect daily demands with a view of another society. Second, as a trajectory after the conquest of power, to undertake a process towards another model of society. Both meanings of a transitional strategy are absent today. The horizon for "change" advocated by parties like Podemos, consequently, remains imprecise in its objectives and diffuse in its march forward.

Faced with this, two tasks are required. The first is to develop a programme appropriated to the

radicality of reality. Not facing the Gordian knots involved in changing the world, as if they did not exist, does not eliminate the problem. It is not the programme that makes reality, but reality that makes the programme. Second, to rehabilitate the very idea of “alternative”, that “another world is possible”. To achieve this, a multilevel effort is required: programmatic discussion, cultural activity, street mobilising and organising. Imagining things in a different way, contributing small experiences to make them so, and winning victories that raise expectations, are ways of making people believe that the world really can be different. Utopia has an ambiguous legacy, says Jameson[27], who considers that in a context of crisis of the socialist and communist perspective and the revolutionary horizon, “we have no alternative to utopia”. The challenge is, we could add, to synthesise utopian and strategic imagination. That is, to strategise utopia to, starting from its possibilities, go beyond its limits.

8. Democracy and militancy. A necessary but insufficient condition, internal democracy is essential for reaching a destination without the horizon of emancipation being sabotaged by a “bureaucratic gremlin” whose growth is directly linked to the fall of social struggle and the institutionalisation of any party. Bureaucratization implies the autonomisation of the apparatus and the formation of an internal stratum (“caste”?) whose interests are partially differentiated from rank and file membership. As Ernest Mandel noted, “the problem of bureaucracy in the labor movement is posed in first instance as the problem of the apparatus of workers’ organisations”. [28] But although it is present at any stage of the struggle, the sinister shadow of bureaucracy is amplified when accessing government responsibilities - triggering what Rakovski in 1928, discussing the degeneration of the communist party in the USSR, called “the professional dangers of power”. [29] For them, there is a need to oppose a preventive anti-bureaucratic strategy.

Internal democracy and the exorcism of bureaucracy require not only a culture of participation and mechanisms to control the leadership, but also an unceasing struggle against the social and sexual division of labour and against any form of inequality that inevitably penetrates any organisation. The old world is always embedded in all the seeds of the new, whether the new refers to instruments of struggle or to experiences of change. At the same time, democracy presupposes management of the irremediable contradiction between the demands of external temporality, pressing and plagued with urgencies, and the internal, marked by the slow rhythms of deliberation and discussion. The broken and syncopated time of politics comes into tension with that of democracy and organisation. The militancy of democracy is the other side of the democracy of militancy.

Does democracy imply political-organisational centralisation or decentralisation? An excess of the former entails several problems: it concentrates power in a few hands; it leads to errors or simply to subordination of local or regional interests to the benefit of general needs; and stifles the potential of local and regional cadres, whose fate depends on the all-powerful central leadership. At the same time, too much decentralisation generates opposing setbacks: it dilutes the party’s own sense and weakens its capacity for intervention at decisive moments; propitiates centrifugal dynamics; and facilitates the creation of fiefdoms and micro-scale authoritarian leaderships disguised as a democracy-from-below rhetoric. [30] Neither of these options, the algebraic formula advanced by Daniel Bensaïd [31], of “as much decentralization as possible, as much centralization as necessary”, seems a good way of being dialectically oriented in this field.

9. Militancy and life. Transforming the world is a militant task. To vindicate militancy is a must before any attempt to turn political commitment into à la carte narcissistic activism or, worse, into a matter of professional careerism à la Podemos. A party that fights for emancipation must be a militant organisation, opposed to an electoral-professional party of passive membership either in its traditional social-democratic or in its online-plebiscite populist version as Podemos. But there is a need to define a conception of militancy that is stripped of any fetishism of almost military connotations or religious devotion. The militant-vital strategic imagination involves managing the

irresolvable tension between the imperatives of political life, its absorbing dynamics and its infinite responsibilities, and the other vital spheres. That is the condition to avoid organisational discrimination based on gender, age and profession, or of those who have less time available for politics. It is also a way to avoid a certain activist isolation from society itself.

Militant politics is not for heroes “but for ordinary people, rebels in the street” because “a revolution can only succeed if ordinary people understand it and make it theirs” as Miguel Romero[32] noted. This implies that militancy and politics must be in permanent relation with other facets of human existence and life that are also part of the political struggle but have their own logic – something especially important in an epoch of fragilisation of biographies and social individualisation. “Revolutionary politics”, for him, “has to be a passion, but it should not be the only one”. The passion for politics is also a passion for life. The life of militancy is the militancy of life. “‘Transform the world’ Marx said; ‘change life’, Rimbaud said: these two watchwords are one for us” proclaimed André Breton in his address to the International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture in June 1935.[33] To fuse political and vital perspectives, that is the question.

10. The law of life. “The duty of a revolutionist is the fight, the fight come what may, the fight until death” wrote the indefatigable Auguste Blanqui[34], “whose distant thunder had made the preceding century tremble” as Walter Benjamin[35] wrote. Hence the struggle. But it must be strategically considered and conceived from a global vision of human existence. If not, there is a risk of it becoming the fruit of a militant commitment that is as praiseworthy as sterile, as epic as unsustainable, and as brave as poor in its facets.

To struggle and to do so in every field. Therein lies the possibility of articulating an integral strategy from the strategic imagination. “The struggle” is precisely what Marx alluded to in his last known interview, given in September 1880 to *New York Sun* journalist John Swinton.[36] Swinton explains that during the conversation he asked him a question concerning the final law of being, to which Marx solemnly replied: “struggle.” Swinton adds that “At first it seemed as though I had heard the echo of despair; but, peradventure, it was the law of life”.

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Notes

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[4]Bensaïd, D. (2014). An impatient life. London: Verso, p. 324.

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[6]Wright Mills, C (2000[1959]). *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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- [10]Harvey, D. (1996.) Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference. Oxford: Blackwell
- [11]Bensaïd, D. (2008). Penser Agir. Paris: Lignes, p. 274. All quotes from non-English sources are my translation.
- [12]Bensaïd, D. (2003). Un monde à changer. Paris: Textuel.
- [13]Benjamin, W. (1999) The Arcades Project. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p.473 and p.474.
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- [17]For an analysis of Romero's life and political and intellectual legacy see: Antentas, Josep M (2015). "Miguel Romero (1945-2014): A Political and Intellectual Portrait", Rethinking Marxism 27 (4): 590-600.
- [18]Bensaïd, D. (2008). Éloge de la politique profane. Paris: Albin Michel.
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* <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/strategic-imagination-and-party>