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Where is the radical left going?

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In the past couple of years the fortunes of the radical left have diverged sharply. The most important case on the negative side was provided by the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista in Italy.... Fortunately, there are more positive experiences. The most exciting of these has been the initiative taken by the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire to launch a New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA).

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Logo of the NPA

In the past couple of years the fortunes of the radical left have diverged sharply. The most important case on the negative side was provided by the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista in Italy. The party of Genoa and Florence moved from 2004 onwards sharply to the right and joined the centre-left coalition government of Romano Prodi that held office briefly in 2006-8. PRC deputies and senators voted for Prodi's neoliberal economic programme and for the participation of Italian troops in the occupation of Afghanistan and in the United Nations 'peace-keeping' mission to Lebanon. They were punished in the general elections of April 2008 with the loss of all their parliamentary seats.

The radical left also suffered reverses elsewhere. In Britain first the Scottish Socialist Party and then Respect split: when the rival fragments ran against each other, both sides predictably suffered electoral eclipse. In the Danish general election of November 2007, the Red-Green Alliance lost two of the six seats it had previously held.

Fortunately, there are more positive experiences. The most exciting of these has been the initiative taken by the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire to launch a New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA). In Germany, Die Linke, officially constituted as a party in June 2007 and the result of a convergence between dissident social democrats in western Germany and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the heir of the old East German ruling party, continues to make electoral inroads into the base of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD).

And even in Italy, the country that has seen the most catastrophic collapse of the radical left, the trend isn't uniformly negative. In reaction to electoral eclipse, the PRC national congress, when it met in July 2008, moved left. Bertinotti and his allies were defeated by a coalition of left-wing currents led by Paolo Ferrero. The delegates, elected by meetings attended by 40,000 members, voted for a document calling for 'a shift to the left' and declaring an end to 'organic collaboration [with the centre-left Democratic Party] in governing the country'.

The primacy of politics

Nevertheless, the sense of participating in a general forward movement that prevailed a few years ago has been replaced by a marked divergence. What has caused this shift? To answer this question we need to understand the driving forces behind the rise of the radical left, particularly in Europe. Two main objective coordinates were involved. First, the emergence of mass resistance to neoliberalism and war, starting with the French public sector strikes of 1995 but gaining momentum after Seattle. Secondly, the experience of social liberalism – social-democratic governments, brought to office all over Europe in the second half of the 1990s by popular opposition to neoliberalism, proceeded to implement neoliberal policies, and in some cases – New Labour under Tony Blair in Britain and the Red/Green coalition headed by Gerhard Schröder in Germany – to go further than their conservative predecessors had dared.

The rightward shift of mainstream social democracy opened up a space to its left. Furthermore, the revival of resistance created a pressure to fill this space. Various political formations, of very diverse origins and history collectively took on the role of trying to fill it. Generally they didn't do so on an explicitly revolutionary programme. In some cases this reflected a tactical decision by far left organizations to attract allies and a broader audience, but as often it was a consequence of the fact that many of the leaders of the new formations were themselves reformists, often seeking to restore a more 'authentic' social democracy that, as they saw it, had been corrupted by the likes of Blair and Schröder.

The emergence of this radical left marked an extremely important, and positive development. It represented an opportunity to remake the left on a much more principled basis than had prevailed in the heyday of the social-democratic and Stalinist parties. But this, while a step forward, generated its own problems. The political field has its specific logic, which subjects to its hazards and contingencies all those who try to grapple with it.

After an initial period of forward movement, bounded roughly by the years 1998 and 2005 the various radical left formations were confronted with the question of how to continue in an environment that was somewhat less favourable – for example, because the tide of mass opposition to the war in Iraq was receding. A similar problem confronted the altermondialiste movement, which has failed to address it effectively and hence undergone a significant decline.

The response of the radical left formations was, of course, conditioned by the politics prevailing in them. This proved in the case of two key figures – Fausto Bertinotti in Italy and George Galloway in England – to be a reformism that began to shift rightwards. Bertinotti reacted to the decline of the Social Forums that had spread throughout Italy after Genoa and driven the mobilizations for Florence and the anti-war protests by turning back towards the centre-left, with the disastrous consequences already noted.

In the case of Galloway and the circle around him, the decline of the anti-war movement from the peak it achieved in 2003 combined with pessimism about the capacity of organized workers to mount effective resistance to the attacks mounted by New Labour and the bosses to generate the conclusion that the way forward for Respect lay in sustaining alliances with local Muslim notables who could deliver votes. But this reasoning – and the split that it produced in Respect – was overlain by a growing reconciliation between Galloway himself and New Labour. This was reflected first in his support for Ken Livingstone's unsuccessful re-election campaign for Mayor of London in May 2008 and then in his rallying to the aid of Gordon Brown's beleaguered government during the Glasgow East by-election that July, when a Blairite candidate was defeated by a massive swing to the Scottish National Party.

Elsewhere the politics has played out better, so far. Amidst general disarray on the French left, the majority in the LCR leadership seized the initiative – running Olivier Besancenot in the first round of the French presidential elections in April 2007 and then capitalizing on his relative success to launch the NPA.

Die Linke is a much more solidly reformist formation than anything envisaged by the LCR. It is, however, defined by the struggle between two tendencies – a right-wing, powerful both numerically and in the apparatus, constituted largely by the ex-leadership of the PDS, and a more left reformist current that is dominated by the ex-SPD trade-union officials clustered around the figure of Oskar Lafontaine, who is pursuing a project of reconstituting German social democracy on a more left-wing basis.

What kind of party?

The recent advances of Die Linke and the LCR show that the objective coordinates responsible for the initial rise of

the radical left remain. But the experiences of the PRC and Respect highlight the political dangers faced by these formations. How can these dangers best be addressed? The response of the LCR is particularly interesting. It is influenced by the negative examples of centre-left governments, not only in Italy, but in France itself and in Brazil.

Determination to avoid any repetition of a situation where the radical left could be integrated into a social-liberal coalition government shaped the attitude of the LCR majority towards the attempt to make the collectives that had driven the No campaign against the European Constitution in 2005 the launching pad for a unitary 'anti-liberal' candidate in the 2007 presidential campaign. The LCR's scepticism about the project of a unitary anti-liberal candidate led to a negative and sometimes ultimatum attitude towards the collectives, which caused its temporary isolation. But the Ligue was at least partially vindicated by the behaviour of José Bové in the presidential campaign.

It is to ward off this kind of danger that the LCR insists that the new party must be anti-capitalist, and not simply opposed to neoliberalism. It is to be 'a party for the revolutionary transformation of society', but yet not a revolutionary party in the specific sense in which it has been understood in the classical Marxist tradition. In that tradition, particularly as a result of the experiences of the Russian Revolution of October 1917 and the early years of the Communist International (1919-24), socialist revolution is assumed to take a particular form, involving mass strikes, the development of dual power counterposing institutions of workers' democracy to the capitalist state, an armed insurrection to resolve this crisis by establishing the dominance of the workers' councils, and, running through all this, the emergence of a mass revolutionary party with majority support in the working class.

On the LCR's view, the NPA should not commit itself to this specific understanding of revolution, but simply to the necessity of 'a rupture with capitalism'. If this notion may seem vague, its political significance lies in what it rules out: more specifically, the Ligue correctly argues, it's not enough to oppose neoliberalism as a set of policies, but capitalism as a system. Failing to draw this distinction can lead participation in centre-left governments in the hope (usually the illusion) that they will produce a more benign mix of policies.

There is much to commend the LCR's conception of the NPA. The political experience of the 20th century shows very clearly that, in the advanced capitalist countries, it is impossible to build a mass revolutionary party without breaking the hold of social democracy on the organized working class. In the era of the Russian Revolution it was possible for many European Communist parties to begin to do this by splitting social-democratic parties and winning substantial numbers of previously reformist workers directly to the revolutionary programme of the Communist International. October 1917 exercised an enormous attractive power on everyone around the world who wanted to fight the bosses and imperialism.

Alas, thanks to the experience of Stalinism, the opposite is true today. Social liberalism is repelling many working-class people today, but, in the first instance, what they seek is a more genuine version of the reformism that their traditional parties once promised them. Therefore, if the formations of the radical left are to be habitable to these refugees from social democracy, their programmes have not to foreclose the debate between reform and revolution by simply incorporating the distinctive strategic conceptions developed by revolutionary Marxists.

All the same, navigating between the Scylla of opportunism and the Charybdis of sectarianism is never easy. On the one hand, drawing the dividing line between anti-liberalism and anti-capitalism isn't necessarily straightforward. Given that, as the LCR would put it, anti-capitalism has 'incomplete strategic delimitations' – i.e. it leaves open how the 'rupture with capitalism' would be achieved, there is plenty of room for debate about what concrete steps are necessary. There are perfectly respectable left-reformist strategies for achieving a break with capitalism that presumably would have a right to a hearing in these debates. But these strategies merge in with proposals that seek to target neoliberalism rather than capitalism itself.

On the other hand, while the LCR are entirely right to oppose as a matter of principle participation in a centre-left

government, they can't assume that everyone attracted to the NPA will share this attitude. On the contrary, many of them may want to see Besancenot in government. 18 per cent in a poll in August 2008 said the PS should come to an understanding with him.

The role of revolutionaries

The underlying problem at work here is that it is the breach in reformism that has given the radical left its opening: how then does it try to draw in people from a reformist background while avoiding the betrayals of reformism – betrayals recapitulated in a highly concentrated way by Bertinotti's trajectory? The LCR's solution to the problem seems to be to install a kind of programmatic security lock – commitment to anti-capitalism and opposition to centre-left governments. But this is unlikely to work; the more successful the NPA, the more it is likely to come under reformist pressures and temptations.

When it first became involved in the process of left regroupment at the beginning of the present decade, the Socialist Workers Party came up with its own conception of the nature of the new radical left formations. This was articulated by John Rees when he argued: 'The Socialist Alliance [the precursor to Respect] is thus best seen as a united front of a particular kind applied to the electoral field. It seeks to unite left reformist activists and revolutionaries in a common campaign around a minimum programme.' It is extremely fortunate that we refused to liquidate the SWP, since in that case the crisis in Respect would have led, not just to the temporary electoral eclipse of the radical left in Britain, but to a far deeper fragmentation and weakening of the organized socialist left.

The idea that the NPA should be conceived as a united front of a particular kind has recently been criticized by one of the project's main architects, François Sabado:

There isn't a linear continuity between united front and party, just as 'politics' isn't a simple continuation of the social. There are elements of continuity but also of discontinuity, of specificities, linked precisely to political struggle ... It is from this point of view that it is incorrect to consider the new party as a kind of united front. There is then a tendency to under-estimate the necessary delimitations, to consider the NPA as merely an alliance or a unitary framework – even of a particular kind – and therefore to underestimate its own construction as a framework or a mediation for building the revolutionary leaderships of tomorrow. There is the risk that if we consider the NPA as a kind of united front of making it wage only united front battles. For example, we don't make the unity of action of the entire workers' and social movement conditional on an agreement on the question of the government; but is this a reason for the NPA to relativize a struggle over the question of government? No, we don't think so. The NPA makes the question of government – refusal to participate in governments of class-collaboration – a delimitation of its political fight. That shows, self-evidently on this issue, that the NPA isn't a kind of united front. Our aim to construct it as a confluence of experiences and activists doesn't mean that we must give up seeing this party as one of the decisive links of a global political alternative and of an accumulation of class-struggle and even revolutionary cadres for future crises.

Sabado is right in two important respects. First, successfully building the radical left today is a step towards, not away from, the construction of mass revolutionary parties. Secondly, the fact that radical left formations intervene in the political field shapes their character. Even if their organizational structure is that of a coalition, as that of Respect was, they need to define their global political identity by means of a programme, and function in many ways like a conventional political party, particularly when engaging in electoral activity.

But what the formula of a united front of a particular kind captures is the political heterogeneity that is characteristic of the contemporary radical left. This is more than a matter of the specific history of individual formations: the particular

form taken by the crisis of social democracy today has created the conditions for a convergence among elements from the reformist and revolutionary lefts in opposition to social liberalism. The fact that this political convergence is only partial, and in particular doesn't abolish the choice between reform and revolution, demands organizational structures that, if not explicitly those of a coalition, give the different currents space to breathe and to co-exist. But it also helps to explain the programmatic basis that Sabado seeks to give the NPA, which is essentially against social liberalism rather than against reformism altogether.

It's very important not to take fright at the political ambiguities that inherent in the contemporary radical left. Any revolutionary worth his or her salt should throw themselves enthusiastically into building these formations. But this doesn't alter the fact that these ambiguities can lead to a repetition of the kind of disasters to have overtaken the PRC and Respect. More positively, if the NPA is really to see what Sabado calls 'an accumulation of class-struggle and even revolutionary cadres for future crises', then this isn't going to happen automatically. It will require a considerable effort to train the new activists won to the NPA and its like in the revolutionary Marxist tradition. But who is going to undertake this task? Some political education can occur within the framework of the party itself. But this can only be within well-defined limits; otherwise the revolutionaries in the NPA can justifiably be accused of violating the political openness of the party and seeking to exploit its structures to put over their own distinctive politics.

It is right to build the radical left on a broad and open basis, but within the resulting formations revolutionary socialists should organize and fight for their own politics. Both parts of this sentence deserve their proper emphasis. It is a mistake to try to define the boundaries of radical left parties too narrowly. But, while building on a broad and open basis, revolutionary socialists should maintain their own political and organizational identity. The precise form this may take will naturally vary – sometimes an independent organization participating in a coalition, as the SWP did within the Socialist Alliance and Respect, sometimes a current in a larger organization. A revolutionary socialist identity within the broader radical left is necessary not for reasons of narrow sectarian loyalty but because the theory and politics of revolutionary Marxism matter.

They matter because they provide an understanding of the logic of capitalism as a system and because they recapitulate the accumulated revolutionary experiences of the past two centuries. Of course, the relevance of such a tradition to the present isn't something that can be taken for granted. On the contrary, it has to be shown in practice, and this always involves a process of selection, interpretation, and creative development of the tradition. But, because of the importance of practice, revolutionaries must retain the capacity to take their own initiatives. In other words, they should maintain their identity within the broader radical left not as a theoretical debating club but, whatever the circumstances, as an interventionist organization.

Of course, the presence of organized revolutionaries can be a source of tension within a radical left formation. They can be targeted and denounced by the right within the party. This can be a particular issue if the revolutionaries have a relatively substantial weight, as the SWP did within Respect and as the former LCR will in the NPA. The far-left elements who broke away with Galloway have sought to justify their actions by accusing the SWP of seeking to dominate Respect. This was the opposite of our intention: we would have been very happy to have been a relatively smaller force within a much larger radical left coalition.

The problem was that despite the enormous political upheaval surrounding Britain's participation in the invasion of Iraq, Galloway was the only leading Labour figure who was prepared to break with the party over the issue. This meant there was a structural instability built into Respect from the start. The coalition was dominated by two forces – Galloway and the SWP. This was fine so long as they worked together relatively harmoniously. But a conflict between a revolutionary organization and a reformist politician was all too likely to develop sooner or later, and, once it happened, there were no other forces powerful enough to contain it.

Where is the radical left going?

This structural imbalance is a consequence of the particular form taken by the decline of social democracy today. The social base of reformism shrinks, not thanks to organizational splits, but through a gradual process of attrition. This doesn't alter the fact that there is a space that the radical left can fill, but it will probably take the form of quite a long-term process of electoral interventions and other campaigns that gradually attract voters and activists. And the erosion of the old reformist social base gives the extreme right an opportunity to appeal to working-class people who feel disenfranchised and unrepresented, as is shown very starkly by the ugly racist forces unleashed by the victory of Berlusconi and his allies in Italy. Hence the importance of the case of Die Linke, where a real crack has taken place in the SPD monolith.

This is one reason why it would be unwise to claim that reformism singing its swan-song, as the LCR sometimes implies, as, for example, when it declares: 'Social democracy is completing its mutation. After having explained that socialism can be built step by step within the framework of the institutions of the capitalist state, it henceforth accepts its conversion to capitalism, to neoliberal policies.' This seems to posit a unilinear trend for social-democratic parties to transform themselves into straightforwardly capitalist parties like the Democrats in the United States. As such, it is mistaken.

Reformism can't be identified simply with specific organizations but arises from workers' tendency, as long as they lack confidence in their ability to overturn capitalism, to limit their struggles winning improvements within the framework of the existing system. This tendency finds political expression despite the development of social liberalism.

Understanding this is important for immediate political reasons. The attractive power of reformist politics means there is no programmatic or organizational magic bullet that can exclude its influence from the new formations of the radical left. It is precisely for this reason that revolutionaries need to maintain their identity within these formations. The radical left has to be open to reformists if it is to fulfil its potential, but the examples of Bertinotti and Galloway should serve as a reminder that left reformists can move right as well as left.

This is important to bear in mind in the case of Die Linke. Lafontaine has been a bulwark of the left, but, should he decide the time has come to cut a deal with the SPD, he is quite capable of turning on it brutally. But revolutionaries preserving their political and organizational autonomy shouldn't be seen as a form of sectarian defensiveness. On the contrary, this autonomy should give us the confidence boldly to build the radical left on the broadest and most dynamic basis – but preserving an instrument that will be needed to wage the political battles that any real success will bring.

This article appears in 'Critique Communiste' alongside ["Toward the Foundation of a New Anticapitalist Party"](#), a contribution by [François Sabado](#), a central leader of the Fourth International.