

Left Strategy Project

Polarizing Democracies: Left Parties at the Crossroads of Economic and Political Crisis

SEMINAR

SEEKING POLITICAL HEGEMONY

Vienna, 26-27 April 2013

FINAL REPORT

by Panayotis Pantos

In the context of the 2013 Left Strategy Project, a two day seminar was organized in Vienna on the 26th and 27th of April. In the first day the focus was on the revival of the Extreme Right rhetoric and politics throughout Europe, which brings up once again the issue of the strategy of the Left towards fascism. René Monzat (journalist, researcher on the Extreme Right - France) made the initial speech on the issue.

According to R. Monzat, the Radical Right exists everywhere in Europe and is based on common notions on a European scale. Its discourse in each country focuses on the decline of national states, but also of Europe as a whole, on the threat internal and external enemies pose for the European nations and on a severe distrust of global oligarchy. That discourse is often shared by people who are not related to extreme right parties (for example Thilo Sarrazin in Germany) and it is being based on three main issues: the economic crisis and the role of the banks, the democratic deficit of the EU, and a fear about immigrants and minorities, not only on the grounds of security, but also based on the fear of Islam and geopolitical concerns.

The extreme Right responds to these political challenges –which have both a national and a European dimension– by pushing for a return to national, self-sufficient economies (albeit in some countries focusing on shrinking liberalism and in others on shrinking the State) and for the establishment of a social model that will favour the “real nationals” of each country (e.g. the Real Germans, Greeks, Hungarians etc) in comparison to everyone else, on issues like work rights, expression and self-organisation freedoms, civil rights, religion etc. Although they defend the idea of an “eternal identity” of the nation, in several cases they accept modern elements that have appeared in the respective societies; that is to say the Extreme Right isn’t as old fashioned as one might expect it to be.

During the last decade the Extreme Right seems to be in a rising orbit on a European scale, managing either to influence the political agenda of governments and countries or even to achieve to participate in coalition governments. In front of the danger of a possible domination of the extreme right discourse or, even more, of the transformation of our societies to apartheid states –if racist policies prevail–, the Left needs to rethink its strategy. First of all it needs to deeply understand what the

supporters of the Extreme Right think and why, and then to provide real, concrete, radical left solutions to the existing problems; solutions that can be put to practice. During this process the Left needs to actively contest all the notions that the extreme right embraces (e.g. islamophobia, xenophobia, populism etc.), creating alliances with different social actors and thus building a new “we” which will include many identities (instead of just the supposedly “real national” one).

In the discussion that followed many of the issues raised by R. Monzat were discussed and/or enriched further. Among them the importance for the Left to take on its shoulders the fight for a wider approach of human and civil rights –one of the failed promises of liberalism– focusing on the weaker part of the population, as well as the need of a deeper political/class analysis to determine whether some part of the bourgeois class could find in the Extreme Right valid answers to its agenda. Finally, the important idea of studying not only the successes but also the failures of the extreme Right was put forward.

Roberto Morea from Transform! Italia, Dan Koivulaakso from the Left Forum, Haris Triantafyllidou from NPI and Elisabeth Gauthier from Espaces Marx, took the floor presenting the situation in their countries and the relative discussions made in their political foundations about the strategy of the Left and its ability to reconceptualise key notions of the extreme right discourse (like nation, security, family values).

R. Morea focused on the difficulty the Left has to challenge the Extreme Right in the field of notions related to the nation, since, for example, the idea of the nation as the sum of “all of us” is in contradiction with the Left’s perception of the vast majority of the people in each European country. Similarly, D. Koivulaakso wondered if we have the right tools to enter the debate on the nation, so as not to do it on conservative terms and noted how important it is for the Left (either in the opposition or in government) to keep a clear focus on promoting its goals, than managing the existing system in crisis, in order not to be considered part of the problem. E. Gauthier on the other hand presented the particularities of the French case, where Marine Le Pen managed to moderate the discourse of the Front National and thus speaks to a broader part of the population, with the main goal of discrediting collective effort and reduce all issues to the individual’s level. As she mentioned, in order for the Left to face this situation, it must act in an autonomous way clearly distinguishing itself from neoliberalism, in contrast to other political forces (like the Socialist Party in France), by understanding, for example, that today in Europe the national question is about popular and not ethnic sovereignty. The Left needs to define this notion and enlarge the space of popular sovereignty (e.g. democracy, economic sovereignty et al.). Finally, H. Triantafyllidou presented the situation in Greece with the rise of Golden Dawn and its relation to the conditions created by the memorandum. According to her the ideological struggle over ‘national identity’ and “security” is one that the Left should dare to take upon, introducing class elements in the way of conceiving the nation (if we are to understand the nation itself as a product of the class struggle, among other, and not as something static and eternal), but also historical references.

During the second day the seminar focused on the revival of state authoritarianism in Europe, a trend intensified by the exigencies of the current capitalist crisis. In this context the EU institutional apparatus shields itself against democratic processes in order to reproduce its power. As this happens though, we have, particularly in southern countries, the emergence of new political actors as pivotal players in the party systems, either originating from the traditional Left and Right (e.g. SYRIZA in

Greece, UNITED LEFT in Spain) or even in contrast to, as is the case in Italy (5 Stars Movement). Walter Baier, coordinator of transform!, and Roberto Biorcio (ass. prof. of sociology, University of Milano) were the two key speakers of the day.

According to W. Baier – who focused on an alternative approach towards the Europe and the nation based on the work of the Austromarxists – the discussion about the nation on a European level should be seen in terms of “how can coexistence be managed democratically”. The case of Austria-Hungary exhibits certain interesting analogies to that of the EU, and a great number of theoretical elaborations of the time can be proven useful today. In 1889, the five points of the Nationalities Programme of the Social Democratic Workers’ Party of Austria were an important effort to describe a strategy towards a democratic federal state of nationalities.

On the other hand, we usually perceive Europe from an economic point of view, failing to see the social relations that constitute a rupture with the past. At the same time the low EU budget doesn't just constitute a structural deficiency, but it also creates a competition field for states, insurance systems etc. The European integration process has class characteristics since those privileged by the European integration process -and support it on an ideological basis- belong in their great majority to the higher class of each country. According to Baier, the refoundation of Europe should be based on the following five principles:

1. Europe isn't a nation and can't be seen as a national state
2. Establishment of a European Constitution
3. Establishment of a European charter of the rights of nations and of national minorities
4. Strengthening of national and European parliaments
5. Abolition of ECB independence. Monetary policy should be under the European Parliament's control.

Nevertheless, as W. Baier concluded, we have to always keep in mind that a constitutional process isn't enough to put into action the above mentioned principles; the Europe we describe can only be created through social struggles and not just institutional efforts.

R. Biorcio, on his part, focused on the rise of the 5 Star Movement (M5S) of Beppe Grillo, which fulfilled the desire for change in the recent Italian elections, taking 25% of the votes. Before arriving on the election scene, Grillo built and consolidated a true movement starting online. One should keep in mind though that the M5S isn't just a virtual structure, existing only online. A crucial role to its development was played by the “Meetups”, platforms that allowed people to organise themselves as local activists in constant contact (today, the M5S has a network of around 1.100 “Meetups”, across 900 cities and small towns, with almost 140.000 activists).

According to R. Biorcio the way M5S has so far translated protests into proposals is very different from the populist right. In contrast to the central role played by the "strong" leader in these parties (as the one able to represent the will of the common people to the institutions), M5S's plan is to establish itself as a tool for regaining the sovereignty of the people, by making way for participation by the public. The programme put together by the Grillo movement is almost the opposite of the platforms supported by populist parties, focusing on encouraging a democracy in which the public is involved, defending a universal welfare state, protecting and enhancing common and/or public property.

Although the M5S is very different to traditional political forms, it has had to find new ways of reproducing many of the roles that the parties have been carrying. Starting with creating a network of activists spread across the country, selecting and monitoring candidates elected to political institutions, and finally understanding and communicating the public's requests. And apart from its electoral success there are still great challenges it has to face, especially since Grillo remains the key link keeping together the activists and ensuring they have a significant influence in the political arena. In any event, R. Biorcio concluded, the M5S has provided an important contribution to political change, focusing attention back on many critical issues and problems which beleaguer our democracy and how it works, from loss of sovereignty and powers of the people to the distrust of the current public bodies, to the difficulty of creating new and credible ways of participating in politics.

Matthias Wåg from CMS, Jiri Malek from the Society for European Dialogue, Gonçalo Pessa from Cultra and Gregory Mauzé from the Association Culturelle Joseph Jacquemotte, took the floor presenting the situation in their countries and the analysis made by their institutes about the increase of authoritarianism in Europe and the possible strategy of the Left against it.

According to M. Wag, Europe is returning to what could be called in Poulantzian terms, a renewed authoritarian statism. Elites are trying to present the economic crisis as a value crisis, while there is an increasing fascistisation and reactionary mobilization. Therefore he suggested that the Left should undertake as its main political project the task to defend personal rights against surveillance and authoritarianism, to promote new forms of representation, and to fight the Extreme Right tendencies that are getting stronger in European societies. J. Malek, on his part, noted that the Extreme Right can be an important actor in an authoritarian regime, as the political force that can guarantee law and order. As he explained, the Extreme Right populism has in its core a fear about the future and a desire for security and stability, which can only be achieved, as it claims, through an authoritarian state.

G. Pessa in his contribution presented the current situation in Portugal, where the Extreme Right is politically non-existent, mainly because all mainstream parties are populist themselves. For example the Christian Democrat Party has an intense discourse against social welfare beneficiaries (i.e. Roma, various other minorities etc.) and participates in a government that is promoting an authoritarian state. To such a policy (e.g. unemployed are asked to show up at the Unemployment Agency every week to continue being listed) the only efficient answer can be given in the streets. On his part, G. Mauzé explained that the Extreme Right has a low presence at the French part of the Belgium, while at the Flemish part it is the second strongest party. Although the basis of its success is the Belgian national question, it also attacks immigrants and demands more "security". According to G. Mauzé in order for the Left to fight the Extreme Right it needs to refuse to endorse right-wing populism themes as traditional mainstream parties tend to do, to defend the working class rights and social achievements and re-appropriate the idea of sovereignty, promoting an alternative view of citizenship based on a sociopolitical basis.

The seminar revealed an agreement among transform! members on most issues that were tackled, a fact which provides the basis for a closer and deeper future cooperation. It is clear, therefore, that the Left is in front of a strategic question at a moment that the economic crisis not only changes things but also shifts beliefs and gives space for new political actors to rise. Particularly regarding the strengthening of different forms of Extreme Right in many European countries, one has to take into account the role of the crisis, the support it gets from the systemic forces as a counter balance to the

Left, the pressure real social problems are putting on wide social strata, as well as a series of psychological and cultural parameters. Apart from the immediate political implication that it's the Extreme Right's success, we shouldn't oversee more long term ones, as the forging of new personal and collective identities, based on order, security and "real nationality" (i.e. "we are the real Finnish, Germans, Greek etc.").

The Left needs to understand this phenomenon, comprehend its appeal to parts of the population and suggest radical left solutions but also radical left actions. It doesn't just need to defend the existing state of things from the Extreme Right, but has to make clear that it wants to overcome it and change "here and now" the way things have been working under the rule of neoliberalism.