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Book review

Reform and revolution today: The strategic puzzle

- Reviews section -

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Between 1945 and 1979, capitalism was overthrown in substantial parts of the planet. Alongside bureaucratic tyrannies, this yielded promising experiments like the Sandinista revolution, and a wealth of material for debates on socialist democracy and strategy. After 1979, with capital on the offensive, the strategic debates fell still. Only in the new century have we seen the beginning of what Daniel Bensaïd called ‘the return of the strategic question’. Flemish socialist Matthias Lievens’ new book on socialism and democracy in the 21st century provides a welcome opportunity to continue the discussion (which should not be restricted to those who can read it in Dutch).

Lievens has set himself no easy task. Marxists have traditionally believed that strategy and the shape of a socialist society can only be the product of victorious struggles. There has been no lack of struggle in the past 30 years, but few victories and no anti-capitalist breakthroughs. There have also been many changes in capitalism over these years, which have partly sapped the foundations of old methods of struggle, while new methods have yet to prove their efficacy in the new conditions. Lievens’ book has no pretension to provide a full-fledged socialist strategy for our times. Its greatest strengths are its appealing portrayals of a socialist future.

Lievens’ socialism is above all the opposite of the reigning neoliberalism. Although all neoliberal and social-liberal parties, from the right to the centre-left, talk non-stop about democracy, Lievens rightly insists that neoliberalism is profoundly antidemocratic. In fact, he writes, ‘No genuine pluralism is possible under capitalism.’ (62) Thatcher came up with the phrase that can still serve as motto for the dominant policy almost everywhere: ‘There is no alternative.’ There is nothing to discuss, nothing to decide; almost all decisions are better left to unelected corporate managers and the market. So it is no surprise that a gap has widened between citizens and bourgeois politics, which loudly proclaims its own incapacity!

Faced with this denial of politics, Lievens compellingly argues, the response of the left must be ‘to once more politicize the relations of power that economic categories are covering up’. (89) So we need more discussion, more joint action, more collective solutions. In recent decades the market has shown how incompetent it can be: in transporting people, running hospitals, building homes or disseminating knowledge. Now it’s the citizens’ turn: they can and must show how much smarter they can be.

In this connection Lievens makes a useful distinction (borrowed from Carl Schmitt) between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’. Politics is the business of corrupt, manipulative, professional politicians. People have every reason to be sick of it. But everything in society is political. So the political is too important to leave to the politicians. This has consequences for our image of socialism. Rejecting Engels’ claim that politics would disappear under socialism and make way for ‘the administration of things’, Lievens argues that political discussion and democratic decision-making must be at the heart of socialism.

He also has no patience with the idea that socialist decisions can only be taken by workers (and perhaps peasants) councils. Without denying the importance of economic struggles, he stresses the importance of other movements and other social subjects. Feminism in particular has been indispensable in broadening our conception of the terrain of politics. Housewives, neighbours and consumers must also actively contribute and help decide in a democratic socialist society, at least in part on the basis of universal suffrage.

Much of Lievens’ book is taken up by a discussion of the role of the market, plan and democracy in a socialist economy. While not terribly original – he depends largely on the earlier work of Diane Elson and Catherine Samary

These sections are clearly written and well thought-out. After careful discussion, Lievens rejects both market socialism and a centrally planned economy (even democratically planned). He argues for an economy based on workers' self-management, as decentralized as possible, that gives a limited role to a socialized market. His 'intermezzo' on ecosocialism, though brief, is also solid.

1917, 1789...

The book's strategic reflections are weaker. Not because they lack a fully elaborated strategic model that is not to be expected at this point in history but because they give a one-sided picture of the situation. Above all, they neglect too many strategic lessons that were learned at a terribly high price in the last century.

Lievens suggests for example that in Europe today the idea of transitional demands demands rooted in contemporary struggles that call for solutions beyond the limits set by capitalism threatens to get bogged down in pure propaganda'. (220) Given the current state of Flemish politics, this is an understandable opinion. But that does not justify drawing such a conclusion for all of Europe, for every movement, or for an entire period. The enraged protestors on the streets of Greece in recent months have seemed quite open to anti-capitalist demands. Even in countries where anti-capitalist forces are weak, a vision of education that refuses to accept the limits of the market can be attractive to protesting students. And of course, as Lievens writes himself, the defensive situation that the radical left is in today could change very quickly'. (221)

The book also suggests that Lenin and Trotsky's strategy mass strikes in which power structures are formed based on grassroots democracy, a period of dual power in which these new institutions compete for power with the bourgeois state, resolved by an insurrection that definitively overthrows the old state is not plausible in Europe today. This is not a quick or easy argument to refute. Many things have changed since 1923 or even 1968; it would be surprising if socialist strategy could stay completely unchanged. The experience of Stalinism also compels us to search constantly for safeguards for a democratic transition to socialism.[1] In this connection, Lievens' position that any 'proletarian dictatorship' should be understood as a 'state of exception', 'in fact an unavoidable element of any legal system' (178), can be useful. But there are problems with the alternative strategy that he advocates.

In a sense, Lievens' search for an alternative to the strategy of dual power takes him back before 1917, to the French revolution of 1789. He claims that 'virtually all the concepts that we use today to think about politics and democracy ... date back to the French revolution'. The 'socialist movement', he writes, 'has had little to contribute to the formulation of new concepts in this field'. (45)

There are various objections to be made to this assertion. It hardly does justice to Marx's theorization of the Paris Commune, Lenin's of the soviets or Brazilian socialists' of the participatory budget. Lievens' arguments also take too little account of democratic revolutions other than the French. The French revolution was certainly not the first it was preceded by the Dutch revolt (with its most radical moment in Ghent, in Lievens' own Flanders[2], by the Levellers and Diggers of 17th-century England, and by North American revolutionary democrats like Tom Paine nor the last, nor socially the most radical: in this respect the Mexican revolution of 1910-7 and the Indonesian revolution of 1945-9 went further. Nor is Lievens' account of the French revolution above criticism. He is mistaken for example in asserting that the king before 1789 was 'the owner of the state', 'both the exploiter and the political ruler', or that the peasants were immediately dependent on the king. (53-4) The origins of the revolution are incomprehensible without an understanding of the struggle between the royal court and the aristocratic parlements. [3]

Lievens takes up a very French position when he reasons that the state cannot wither away in a socialist society (as

Marx and Lenin believed) because the political will remain essential. In Lievens' account the state is simply a 'public power of a political nature'. (102) Marx, himself a great admirer of the French tradition, nonetheless painted a very different picture of the French state:

This executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organization, with its ingenious state machinery, embracing wide strata, with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half million, this appalling parasitic body, which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores, sprang up in the days of the absolute monarchy.... The first French Revolution, with its task of breaking all separate local, territorial, urban and provincial powers in order to create the civil unity of the nation, was bound to develop what the absolute monarchy had begun: centralization, but at the same time the extent, the attributes and the agents of governmental power.... All revolutions perfected this machine instead of smashing it.[4]

Not 'the political', but this 'enormous bureaucratic and military organization' is the essence of the capitalist state. One can discuss the extent to which a socialist society would be able to manage without officials or soldiers. But it is not convincing to declare the state eternal without even mentioning professional politicians, bureaucracy, the army, the police or prisons.

Chávez/Allende

Lievens sees Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution as a source of hope for a democratic road to socialism, not only in Latin America but also in Europe. This road, as he describes it, would consist of a series of left electoral victories, a steady growth in the strength of extra-parliamentary movements, and a 'constituent' moment in which the state is radically democratized.

The history of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government in Chile in 1970-3 shows however how many pitfalls line this democratic road. Allende 'who, unlike Hugo Chávez, considered himself a Marxist' actually had a more radical strategic vision than Chávez does. He said that his government 'would take advantage of what openings there are in the present Constitution to open the way to the new Constitution, the people's Constitution', through a constituent moment taking the form of a referendum. More clearly than Chávez 'as Lievens notes, Venezuela 'has so far only taken very timid steps away from capitalism' (224) 'Allende foresaw that this transformation of the state would have to lead quickly to the conquest of 'real power when copper and steel [and the banks] are under our control ... when we have put far-reaching Land Reform measures into effect, when we control import and exports through the State, when we have collectivized a major portion of our national production'.[5] And yet his government ended in tragedy, with a bloody putsch on that 'other September 11th' in 1973.

In the years that followed, this terrible defeat occupied a central place worldwide in the left's strategic debates. Eurocommunists and other reformists responded by taking an even more cautious approach. The far left, by contrast, concluded that Allende should have attacked the centres of bourgeois power more forcefully. This implication is present, for example, in Nicos Poulantzas' last book. He wrote that 'political domination [that of the bourgeoisie, in the case of the capitalist State] is itself inscribed in the institutional materiality of the State'; therefore, 'It would be an error fraught with serious political consequences to conclude from the presence of the popular classes in the State that they can ever lastingly hold power without a radical transformation of the State.'[6] Ernest Mandel (in a book that Lievens cites, though not in this connection) drew an even sharper conclusion: 'The experiences of Spain 1936 and of Chile have ... made clear the need for a thoroughgoing purge and elimination of the whole repressive apparatus of the bourgeoisie, the disbanding of repressive bodies'.[7]

Yet Lievens fails, as he lays out his version of this strategy, to say anything about the necessity, nature or timing of

the radical transformation of the state that Poulantzas insisted on, or of the thoroughgoing purge that Mandel called for. In general, Lievens has little or nothing to say about the army, the repressive apparatus in general, or the danger of foreign counter-revolutionary intervention.

He focuses mainly on the national arena, arguing for ‘once more setting in motion a decentralizing logic once the centralizing logic of the world market has been defeated’. (228) This argument skips over the whole revolutionary process. A socialist transition in one country in Europe today would very quickly come up against a European Union that explicitly, systematically and aggressively defends neoliberal capitalism. This makes a European and international dimension indispensable and urgent for any transitional strategy.

Another troubling omission in Lievens’ discussion is the role of the trade union bureaucracy, left-wing parliamentary parties and the NGO-ized leaderships of social movements as obstacles to resistance to the rule of capital. He writes as if the unions’ and social democracy’s more or less reluctant acceptance of neoliberalism is simply a choice, made under pressure from the multinationals and the media they control. He leaves unmentioned the many ways in which the leadership of the labour movement has been integrated into the neoliberal elite. Yet without determined, intelligent resistance to this co-optation, any form of effective anti-capitalist politics will remain illusory.

Again, the point is not at all to reproach Lievens with not having a fully worked-out strategy. No such strategy can exist at this point in history. He deserves credit for pursuing this discussion. We should all continue to do so, in a spirit of openness to new, 21st-century ideas and possibilities. In doing so, however, we must not forget what the 20th century taught us about the bloody dead-ends to which reformist or left-reformist illusions can lead.

[1] For a valuable discussion of Gramsci’s and Poulantzas’ contributions to a strategy of democratic transition to socialism – within a broad spectrum of dual power strategies – see Peter Thomas, ‘Voies démocratiques vers le socialisme: Le retour de la question stratégique’, *Contretemps* no. 8 (Jan. 2011).

[2] See Robert Lochhead, *The Bourgeois Revolutions* (Amsterdam: IIRE, 1989), 24-29.

[3] Lievens’ insistence that pre-revolutionary French society was no longer feudal is not a convincing refutation of classic Marxist studies like Perry Anderson’s *Lineages of the Absolutist State*.

[4] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 121-2

[5] Régis Debray, *The Chilean Revolution: Conversations with Allende* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 82, 85

[6] Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1980), 14, 142

[7] Ernest Mandel, *Revolutionary Marxism Today* (London: NLB, 1979), 40