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Strategy

The Left: a fundamental historical ambiguity

- Features -



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The notion of the Left contains a dual dimension. For more than a century, both its opponents and its supporters have agreed in describing the Left as the “party of movement,” the natural gathering place of “all progressive forces” and all advocates of “change.” [\[1\]](#)

At the same time, however, this formidable historical movement, whose ideas have at times become dominant in specific historical circumstances and in many areas of contemporary culture, has never succeeded in breaking practically and permanently with the capitalist system and replacing it with a truly human, free, egalitarian, and decent society.

In fact, since its origins, “the Left” has encompassed different historical realities. Moreover, over time it has concealed, or even obscured, processes that produced ruptures and divisions among various social and political forces. Thus, in order to rebuild a project for the radical transformation of society, it is necessary to deconstruct what is meant by “the Left,” disentangling what belongs to the emancipation of peoples, and particularly of workers, from what has kept these liberation movements within the framework of capitalism.

“The Left” or “socialism”...

What is called “the Left,” particularly in France, is the product of a highly unstable historical compromise between a workers’ socialism, which at the time was more Proudhonian than Marxist, and the republican camp, that is, those sectors of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie that opposed the Ancien Régime.

The modern distinction between the “Right” and the “Left” (which is the French adaptation of the opposition that originated in England between the conservative Tories and the liberal Whigs) corresponded throughout the nineteenth century to the conflict between the defenders of the Ancien Régime, a theological-military society, and the advocates of progress, reason, and economic development.

Original socialism was, in principle, largely independent of this divide. It drew its roots from the far left of the petty-bourgeois radicalism of the French Revolution, such as the most radical Jacobins and Gracchus Babeuf’s Conspiracy of Equals, which advanced for the first time the idea of collectivization. It also emerged from the first popular protests against the devastating human and ecological consequences of liberal industrialization: the English Luddites and Chartists, the silk workers of Lyon, and the Silesian weavers in Germany.

Throughout the nineteenth century, in the occasional alliances they were obliged to forge, sometimes against the powerful remnants of the Ancien Régime and sometimes against liberal industrialists, the most radical socialists were primarily concerned with asserting the autonomy of workers’ organizations.

The originality of the first socialist uprisings was that they embodied a double rejection, experienced with varying degrees of consciousness: the rejection of the Ancien Régime, namely the power of the Church and the landed aristocracy, but also the rejection of the “new regime” dominated by the liberal industrial bourgeoisie. Marx repeatedly emphasized, particularly after the revolutions of 1848, the necessity of working-class independence from the bourgeoisie. It was only after the Dreyfus Affair that the socialist movement truly became firmly incorporated into the camp of “the Left,” defined as the camp of progressive forces. What is at issue in this political and ideological shift is not the defence of Dreyfus himself.

Those within the workers' movement who failed to defend Dreyfus, such as Jules Guesde, one of the founders of French socialism, or certain anarchists, were mistaken. Dreyfus and fundamental democratic freedoms had to be defended.

Likewise, the struggle of the socialists of that era for universal suffrage, such as that of the Chartists in England, the first essentially working-class party to demand universal suffrage, was fundamentally justified.

However, where the problem arose was that democratic freedoms and democracy itself came to be identified or conflated with the defence of the bourgeois state and its institutions, a sleight of hand accomplished through the glorification of the Nation and the Republic. It was also on this basis that "the Left" emerged not only as the camp of progress but also as a bloc uniting socialists and the republican bourgeoisie. Within this framework, one should not forget, republicans and socialists of the time invented the famous "republican discipline," which advocated systematic electoral withdrawal in favour of whichever republican or socialist candidate was best placed against the anti-republican Right.

This confusion between freedom, democracy, social progress, and participation in state institutions would become a constant feature, trapping many historic social mobilizations within the established order. In France, from the "ministerialism" of Millerand to the plural Left via the, the Popular Front, Cartel of the Lefts, the governments after the Liberation, from 1944-47, without forgetting those of the Union of the Left. All these governmental formulas, each with its specificities, canalised mobilisations and popular hopes in the framework of institutions that submitted to the ruling class.

The unity of "The Left" or working-class political independence

It is these confusions that have nourished, particularly in certain historical circumstances, another fundamental ambiguity: a contradiction between the unifying dynamic of the social and political mobilization of the popular classes and their organizations, and the governmental and institutional political expression of that movement in policies of class collaboration.

For revolutionary Marxists, the issue is not to underestimate the need for policies of class alliances, nor the strategic necessity of the unity of workers and their organizations in the process of conquering political power.

From the middle of the nineteenth century onward, Marx and many revolutionary socialists emphasized the strategic necessity of alliances with other social classes, such as the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie, in order to avoid what Marx called "the proletariat's funeral solo." Likewise, revolutionary Marxists have always stressed the strategic importance of working-class unity, or more broadly the unity of the social movement, against capitalist power.

At the same time, however, they have consistently emphasized the strategic necessity of combining such alliances, or a united-front policy, with the political independence of the workers' movement in defence of both its immediate demands and the socialist objective. This is the famous formula advanced by Lenin and the revolutionaries of the 1920s to define relations between communists and social democrats: "March separately and strike together."

However, the notion of "the Left" or "unity of the Left," in its various forms, far from preserving the political independence of the world of labour, has subordinated it to respect for the institutions of the ruling classes and for private property. The reference to "the Left" or to the unity of the Left conceals precisely this fundamental difference

between supporters of alliances with the bourgeoisie and those who resolutely oppose such alliances.

As firmly as revolutionary Marxists support united-front policies and the unity of action of workers and their organizations, they reject all policies of class collaboration, whether carried out through alliances with the liberal or national bourgeoisie, as in the experiences of Popular Fronts, or through governments composed mainly of reformist socialist or communist parties.

The fundamental distinction between the workers' united front and the various policies of left-wing coalitions, Popular Fronts, or alliances of the Left lies in this: through its logic of social mobilization against employers and capitalist governments, the united-front policy, or the unity of action of the social and political Left, generates a dynamic that intensifies and sharpens workers' struggle against the bourgeoisie.

By contrast, through their logic of respect for existing institutions and private property, all forms of support for, or participation in, governments of left-wing unity subordinate the fulfilment of popular demands to the dominant institutional political balance. They slow the development of social struggles and, at times, actively oppose them.

The policy of revolutionary Marxists has a dual character. It is pedagogical, because it is through experience that the combativeness and consciousness of broad masses deepen. But it is also strategic, because without workers' unity there can be no conscious revolution of the majority.

One must therefore distinguish between the unifying dynamic of mass mobilizations, which may take inspiration from the unity of the Left, the Popular Front in France and Spain between 1934 and 1936, or Popular Unity in Chile from 1970 to 1973, a dynamic that must be infused with revolutionary content, and the governmental coalitions of class collaboration that may preside over those mobilizations and which revolutionaries oppose in forms appropriate to each situation. It is in this sense that revolutionaries advocate the perspective of a workers' government, supported by popular control and implementing a programme of anti-capitalist rupture.

A blind spot: the bureaucratization of workers' and social organizations

As we have seen, alliances with the bourgeoisie, even the republican bourgeoisie, have always been a powerful factor in subordinating workers' organizations to institutions and private property. Yet through their own development, workers' organizations gave rise to an even more important phenomenon: the integration of the workers' movement into bourgeois society.

This process is linked to the functional division of labour within mass workers' organizations. As long as such organizations remain small, workers themselves can directly control them without the mediation of large bureaucratic apparatuses. When they grow larger, which is indispensable if policies are to succeed or gains are to be won for wage earners, a decisive objective for trade unions, professional leaders begin to emerge.

A permanent apparatus develops, recruited chiefly from workers themselves but also from the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. This apparatus tends to identify itself with the organization as such and to subordinate the vital interests of workers to the interests of the organisation and its bureaucracy.

Through what Rosa Luxemburg called "the dialectic of partial gains", the fear of jeopardizing achievements through struggles that could lead to major confrontations with employers or governments, the leaderships of workers'

organizations gradually come to restrain or even oppose the development of mobilizations. They thereby become forces seeking only to preserve the status quo. Combined with the material advantages attached to positions within labour organizations or state institutions, this process transforms the behaviour and motivations of leaders. They come to form a new social layer: the labour bureaucracy.

This bureaucracy performs a dual function. Its power derives from the existence and strength of workers' organizations, yet at the same time it does everything possible to ensure that those organizations remain within the limits established by the ruling classes. By its very nature, it is fundamentally conservative. In exceptional circumstances it may act simultaneously in defence of its own interests and those of working people. In general, however, the bureaucracy subordinates struggles for popular demands and aspirations to the preservation of its own privileges within society.

This, fundamentally, explains why the upper ranks of the labour movement and the Left sided with the Sacred Union during the First World War. It also explains why the leaderships of the French Section of the Workers' International (SFIO) and the French Communist Party (PCF) channelled the general strike of 1936 and the Popular Front into a framework compatible with the international policy and economic objectives of the country's ruling classes.

Similarly, despite the magnificent struggle of the Resistance, and particularly that of Communist militants, this logic dominated the policy of the leadership of the Left between 1944 and 1947 through the National Council of Resistance and allegiance to General de Gaulle. This does not negate the social and democratic gains won by the popular movement. Yet the dynamic of struggle made it possible to go much further.

Finally, it explains why the popular hopes invested in the Union of the Left in the 1970s, and in a different way in the Plural Left governments of the 1990s, once again evaporated as governments placed respect for existing institutions and the capitalist economy at the centre of their policies.

As regards the French Communist Party (PCF), from the early 1930s until the late 1980s, its leadership and the organizations under its control also functioned by subordinating the material, political, and moral interests of workers to the interests of its own bureaucratic apparatus. At that time, however, this apparatus was itself dependent upon the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy.

After the collapse of the USSR, the PCF entered a new historical phase. The coordinates of its intervention and political practice were profoundly modified. It was no longer dependent on the Soviet Union or on any other international bureaucracy. Nevertheless, its orientation continued to be marked by its integration into existing institutions and by an internal functioning shaped by the need to preserve bureaucratic balances within the party leadership and apparatus.

Throughout this historical process, it was not reformist leaders who transformed institutions or the economy. Rather, as Ernest Mandel explained, it was the political and economic power of the ruling classes that: "transformed the representatives of the workers in their convictions, mentality, motivations, and material interests." At the beginning of the twentieth century, Trotsky had already concluded that: "the leadership tends to detach itself from the working class and is drawn into the orbit of the ruling class."

Over time, as the song says, the bureaucracies became crystallised. During the period of economic growth from the 1950s until the end of the 1970s, they enjoyed "real room for manoeuvre," linked to the development of class struggles and to the social compromises that resulted both from the dynamism of those struggles and from policies of class collaboration that contained them within the framework of capitalist equilibrium.

With the profound transformation of the world economy and world politics at the end of the 1970s, and the

emergence of a new mode of capitalist accumulation, the general political conditions confronting traditional reformism and the traditional Left changed fundamentally. These forces were compelled to move to a higher stage of integration into the liberal order. They were required first to accept and then to implement liberal counter-reforms: wage restraint, budgetary austerity, labour-market flexibility, privatizations, and similar measures.

Blair's "Third Way" injected a substantial dose of liberalism into social democracy. Other socialist parties formally distanced themselves from the excesses of New Labour, but all of them, each in its own way, from Lionel Jospin to Lula, followed paths of adaptation to liberalism.

Yet while these parties entered a new phase of integration into capitalist society, and while their leaders in many cases merged with the upper levels of the state or with representatives of major corporate boards, their usefulness within the alternation between "Right" and "Left" required them to maintain some political connection with their own history and some of their traditional references, notably the idea of "the Left."

As shown by commemorations of the anniversary of the Socialist Party's founding congress of 1905, the historical ambiguities of "the Left" allow the leadership of the Socialist Party to claim continuity with the whole socialist tradition, even if this requires considerable distortion, because figures such as Mitterrand, Jospin, and Hollande stand politically far to the right of Léon Blum and the leaders of his generation.

At the same time, the historical association of the Left with social progress continues to lead citizens and workers to use their votes strategically in favour of the Left against right-wing conservatives, particularly when conservatives hold power. There is, however, a notable difference compared with the 1930s or the 1970s: these electoral votes are no longer accompanied by organic growth in the major parties of the Left.

"The Left" or an "anti-capitalist workers' party"?

How is it possible that a historical movement of such magnitude, dedicated to progress and social transformation, has never succeeded in breaking practically with the capitalist organization of society and replacing it with a genuinely humane, free, egalitarian, and decent social order? It is because, as shown by the facts and the reasoning in this article, the Left remains tied to the old society by a thousand connections.

Alliances with the bourgeoisie, integration into state and para-state institutions, and the bureaucratisation of large organizations have all contributed to subordinating it to the power of the ruling classes. Of course, not all failures of the Left can be explained solely by the policies of its leaderships or of the traditional workers' movement. In many cases, objective and subjective factors were combined, including political immaturity or relationships of forces unfavourable to the workers.

Nevertheless, in a number of historical situations marked by pre-revolutionary or revolutionary conditions, the leaderships of the Left, both socialist and communist, channelled, diverted, and blocked the momentum of mass movements in the name of respect for capitalist institutions. That is what happened in Germany in 1918 and 1923 under social democracy; in France in 1934–1936; in Spain in 1936–1937; in France and Italy during Liberation in 1944–1946; in France during May 1968; and in Chile between 1970 and 1973.

The reconstruction of a revolutionary project therefore requires drawing all the lessons from the policies of socialist and communist parties, but also from the weaknesses of revolutionary activists and organizations in formulating an

alternative strategy.

The guiding principle should be the reconstruction, through a series of social and political experiences, of a movement of workers' self-emancipation independent of bourgeois parties and institutions. Such a movement would replace the logic of profit and capitalist property with a logic centred on the satisfaction of social needs and the socialization of production, with the ultimate objective of political power being won by the popular classes.

It should be clear that our political tradition identifies more with the history of the workers' movement, its organizations, and social movements than with "the Left" as such.... Although the histories of the workers' movement and the Left have often intersected, and although it remains necessary to defend what many people perceive as the progressive content of an authentic Left, in general against the left leaderships, the "progressive content" that masses see as an authentic or 100% left.

But the reconstruction of a revolutionary project for social transformation must go beyond the reference to the Left itself. Even the most authentic Left remains burdened by the fundamental ambiguities of its history.

"Dare to make the break." This is the distinctive feature of a modern project aimed at developing a movement for the emancipation of workers and, beyond them, of society as a whole. That does not mean that anyone already knows the precise form future revolutions of the twenty-first century will take.

The introductory text to this discussion asks: "Between the obsolete myth of the 'Great Day' (the revolutionary insurrection) and the banality of realism, is there a path along which a redefined Left can move forward?"

For revolutionary Marxists, the revolution has never been identified with the myth of a sudden and miraculous "Great Day." The lessons of the Russian, German, and Spanish revolutions, as well as the Popular Front experiences, never presented revolution as a short-lived rupture, the work of an active minority, or a coup d'état supported by only a temporary mass mobilization.

Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Gramsci, and others who studied the revolutionary processes of the twentieth century all emphasized the combined nature of the struggle for political power. Revolutionary forces must win hegemony within society through experiences of social control and democratic management of economic and daily life, while also confronting revolutionary crises made unavoidable by the resistance and violence of the ruling classes and the state.

From this standpoint, the debate is not simply "reform or revolution," but rather: "social liberalism, reformism, or revolution."

For revolutionaries, this is not merely a question of words. They support every reform that improves the condition of the majority. They connect struggles for reforms to an anti-capitalist perspective, arguing that only a break with capitalism can ultimately secure and extend those reforms.

By contrast, they reject social liberalism because it has abandoned the struggle for reforms in favour of adaptation to liberalism. They also reject participation in social-liberal governments.

Although they may agree with reformists on specific demands, such as opposition to neoliberal European policies or support for the regularization of undocumented migrants, they oppose reformism itself, because reformism is the belief that capitalism can be gradually transcended through participation in governments and capitalist institutions

while steadily accumulating reforms.

Historical experience has invalidated this perspective – from ministerial participation at the beginning of the twentieth century to the governments of the plural left. Given the currently unfavourable balance of forces between employers and working people, the construction of a modern revolutionary project requires new experiences of revolutionary social and political crises, a recomposition of social movements, and the reorganization of new political parties.

Within this framework, the gathering together of anti-capitalist forces into a workers' party, whose strategic orientation toward revolution may still remain unfinished, is presented as a decisive step toward building a new alternative leadership.

Yet, once again, “unfinished contours” should not mean reviving the historical ambiguities of even the most authentic Left. Rather, it means founding or refounding a party dedicated to class struggle, the rejection of all forms of class collaboration, and the conquest of political power by workers.

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*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from **Critique Communiste**.*

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[1] Photo: Speech by Jaurès beneath a red flag at Pré-Saint-Gervais, during the demonstration against the Three-Year Law, 25 May 1913. © Maurice-Louis Branger / Public domain.