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Interview

The Twenty-First Century Left will be Anti-Capitalist

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - IV532 - May 2019 -

Publication date: Thursday 23 May 2019

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Enzo Traverso interviewed by Vincent Martign about the current state of the international left and its future prospects. [1]

How do you see the situation of the left in France today?

Both in France and elsewhere, the situation of the left is bad but not desperate. There are several signs showing that something is beginning to move, a molecular process that has not yet reached a moment of coagulation. France is undergoing the same dynamics affecting the left in Europe and the United States.

You reject the idea that the left is dead?

The left is not dead, but it has still not managed to overcome the defeats of the twentieth century, which left it models that are no longer operational. I will mention four of these. First of all, the left as revolutionary force, embodied by communism, which saws taking power in quasi-military terms. Then communism as a system of power – ‘actually existing socialism’ – which collapsed in the late 1980s. We are still paying the price of this legacy, which is very heavy to bear, as the very idea of a different society was discredited.

Then there is a third left, third-worldist, which is today called decolonial. This has transformed the colonized peoples into historical subjects, but has also experienced biting disillusion. This model no longer functions, as shown by the Arab spring of 2011, which abandoned it. Finally, the fourth, social-democratic left, was able to appear as an effective alternative to communism by achieving social conquests in a democratic framework. But if we draw a retrospective balance-sheet, its ‘parasitical’ dimension seems to me very clear. It was able to play this role because capitalism was forced to humanize itself in the face of the communist threat. Once this threat disappeared, capitalism took on a neoliberal, unchecked face, and inequalities exploded, while social democracy has exhausted its trajectory and become social-liberal.

Should the left cut itself off from its past?

It should overcome it, which means developing a critical history rather than a renouncement. All the movements that have arisen in the last ten years – Occupy Wall Street, the indignados, Syriza, Nuit Debout – have in common their rediscovery of an anarchist or libertarian sensibility, which was marginalized in the twentieth century. This is expressed in horizontal practices of direct democracy, the rejection of old organizational apparatuses, the pleasure of collective action, the quest for new ‘forms of life’, but also a tremendous distrust of any form of political representation. All these have generated rich experiments, creative and interesting, which could in due course produce something new, but which at the moment are still ephemeral – isolated laboratories.

We have the impression today of a dominance of conservative or even reactionary ideas. Is it still possible to be on the left in Western societies?

Yes, even if this is difficult. Neoliberalism is far more than just an economic system: it is an anthropological model premised on profitability, individualism, competition, the reification of social relations, the privatization of desires. It has swallowed up social democracy, which has completely internalized it, and eclipsed communism, which appears as a vestige of a bygone age. In this context, the deep malaise of society is often channelled by the far right, which always reformulates its old recipes: the search for scapegoats, authoritarianism, return to sovereignty and closure of

borders... The result is a reactionary, xenophobic and racist wave on a continental scale. In Italy we now have a hybrid coalition that is quite monstrous, combining a xenophobic policy towards refugees with social policies that the left should have implemented long ago. Suddenly the left finds itself paralysed and unpopular.

Do you share the point of view that the left has lost the sense of common good because of identity struggles on behalf of minorities?

The struggles of the left in favour of minorities were just, they made possible considerable advances that should not be denied, even if I would not define these as 'identity-based'. But it is true that these were often accompanied by policies of social regression. The rhetoric of human rights has become the only language of a 'post-ideological' left, and has frequently been transformed into an alibi for its anti-social policies. The European Union has made this hypocrisy a fine art – starving Greece with the one hand, while organizing commemorations of the Holocaust with the other; one the one hand proclaiming human rights, on the other closing frontiers to refugees. The result is the dismantling of social rights and the rise of xenophobia. In this context, the idea of blocking populism and the far right by championing the European Union is like calling on pyromaniacs to put out a fire. In no European country has the left in government been capable of a discourse of truth about immigration.

Some people call for a return to republicanism. Do you see this as the solution?

I don't think so. Or else we would have to go back to the sources of French republicanism. If republicanism means the republic of 1792, or June 1848 or the Paris Commune, then yes! That's a republican tradition that should be rediscovered. In the nineteenth century, the idea of emancipation took a republican form. Then the republic became colonial and nationalist... Today, when Marine Le Pen and Laurent Wauquiez call themselves republicans, I find it hard to see how the French left could be renewed on this basis. There are fundamentally two forms of republicanism: one liberal, embodied by Macron and those currents in the Socialist party that have followed him, and the other one 'national', stretching from the right to the sovereigntyist left of the PCF and Mélenchon. There is a great ambiguity here. As I see it, the national-republican tradition is a major obstacle to the renewal of the left.

What must the left do to rebuild itself?

A first precondition for this reconstruction is to take stock of accumulated defeats. This task cannot be dispensed with. We have to find forms of conveying and sharing the fragmentary experiments of the last few years, as well as the critical ideas that have accompanied these. I do not believe in rebuilding the old organizational apparatuses. This may work from time to time for electoral purposes, but not beyond that. The rebuilding must proceed from below, from citizens.

And what new ideas can accompany this movement? Is its perspective an ecological revolution?

I believe that what is sometimes called intersectionality is an achievement of the culture of the left in the twenty-first century. The question of social inequalities is intimately bound up with that of discriminations and xenophobia, and it is impossible to conceive any model of an alternative society that does not take the ecological question into account. All these questions must be linked together, but not in a hierarchy, as they are interdependent. We cannot promote economic growth against poverty and delay until later the solution of ecological problems.

What role can young people play in this coming renaissance?

I see on this point a fairly significant difference between the United States and France. In France, the participants in

Nuit Debout or the ZADs, currents that mobilized the new generations, show absolutely no interest in traditional politics. Whereas in the United States, Occupy Wall Street led to Bernie Sanders. The movement of young people who define themselves as democratic socialists and sometimes win elections against old stalwarts is proof of its political maturity. It is also fuelled by a lively and creative critical thinking that is starting to look beyond the college campus. Its relationship with traditional political organizations is instrumental, as no one has any illusions about the nature of the Democratic party. In France, on the other hand, we see on the left two contrary tendencies. On the one hand, 'anti-political', and on the other, a politics subaltern to the institutions of the Fifth Republic, with parties embodied by a charismatic leader and organized with a view to presidential elections.

Is the left today in the process of inventing new forms of political participation?

Let's take the case of the mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau. She was elected thanks to a kind of constituent assembly of the Catalan left, made up of a series of movements and organizations that came together while preserving their independence. Her candidacy was not the result of an agreement between apparatuses, rather they were compelled to respond to a mobilization from below. This indicates that it is possible to overcome the hiatus between experiments that are interesting but politically sterile, and politics in the traditional sense of taking power.

What would be the intellectual, political and cultural shape of a left reborn from its ashes?

I believe in a left able to accept its two centuries of history while making a critical break with its past. We have to rescue the emancipatory kernel of these experiments. To be reborn, the left needs new utopias, but this can only arise from deep within society.

Do you see reasons for hope on the part of those who feel themselves belonging to the left?

Of course! I am far from resignation! We are living in an age of transition that gives the impression of being permanent. The world of the twentieth century had fixed geopolitical and ideological frontiers, whereas our age is characterized by vague and confused frontiers in all domains. In this context, I am sure of one thing. The twenty-first century left will be anti-capitalist. It will radically question the dominant socio-economic system that is in the process of consuming the planet. Will this future left call itself communist, socialist or anarchist? Will it still recognize itself as 'left'? Impossible to say. It will have to synthesize the experiences of recent years and build new hopes. Many scattered elements have not yet crystallized. For the time being, we have to go with the flow.

7 May 2019

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[1] Originally published by [Le Un Hebdo, 10 October 2018](#) Translated by David Fernbach