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Far Left

The evolution of the European radical left - and some current controversies

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Introduction

The topic being very broad, the following contribution is necessarily schematic and partial. The first three parts are centered on the European experience or, more precisely, the French and Southern European ones. I wish to give here a sense of what the new revolutionary Left has been in Europe in the 1960s-1970s and how different the present European radical Left may be. I shall thus compare two generations of radicals – which, roughly, may correspond to similar generations in the Philippines.

In the fourth part, I shall address some of the “burning issues” mentioned in the preparation of this seminar. Rather than starting again from the European framework, I shall look at what we, in Europe, can learn from the Philippine history of struggles.

My contribution surely reflects the experience of one generation (that of May 1968, the equivalent in the Philippines of the First Quarter Storm), in a given country (France) and region (Southern Europe). But no one can speak for a whole generation or even for one given political trend.

This contribution reflects as well my personal experience. For example, I have been deeply influenced by the Asian revolutions (Vietnam, China, Philippines...), while many of my comrades have been more influenced by those of Latin America. In any case, we have been asked, in this seminar, to freely speak for ourselves. So be it.

I. FROM THE MID-1960s TO THE MID-1990s

A. The context

During the mid-1960s, a new (and plural) revolutionary Left shaped up in Europe. Its radicality is easily understood, considering the context of the time.

The international context, dominated by the Indochina wars, with the Vietnamese people's resistance to the US unprecedented military escalation. The year 1968 symbolized the worldwide character of struggles with the T^h offensive in Vietnam, the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, the student barricades and the general strike in France, the student upsurge in Mexico...

The European context. There were still dictatorships in the south of the continent: military Colonel's regime in Greece and two neo-fascist regimes in Spain (Franco) and Portugal (Salazar). The wave of radicalization of the late 1960s did not concern only the students, but also the (youth of the) working class: in France, in May 68, the student barricades opened the way for the biggest strike ever in the country.

The political context. The youth radicalization in the 1960s expressed itself in Europe in very political terms, and not only “cultural” (“Woodstock”) as it is often said. In many European countries, the dominant references among young radicals were Socialist, Communist and Marxist. In the name of Marxism, they challenged the main traditional workers parties: Social-Democracy and pro-Moscow CPs, denouncing their reformism.

The European “new Left” of the time was shaped within this context. It gave birth to a number of new currents (including various Maoist trends). It also gave a new life to older but minority currents (including various Trotskyist and anarcho-communist currents).

B. The revolutionary spirit of the time

Most of the new revolutionary Left currents were ideologically clearly defined. The Maoists hoped that the international communist movement would be reorganized around China. Trotskyists were the children of the anti-Stalinist fight within the Third International, incarnated by the Left Opposition. Each of the political parties which succeeded in consolidating itself, even if temporarily, presented specific qualities. Maoists often proved able to help organize unorganized sectors (such as the migrants). Trotskyists were better able to address the organized sectors of the working class (trade-unions...) and to project a democratic, anti-bureaucratic Marxism.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/May68-01.jpg>]

Paris, May 1968

Ideological labels meant something (Maoists identified with China, Trotskyists with the Third International Left Opposition). But already at that time, “labels” did not tell you much about the political characteristics of an organization.

There were very different types of Maoist parties - from what we called “Mao-Stalinist” to “Mao-Spontaneist”. There were as well very different types of Trotskyisms (ourselves, we were often called “Guevaro-Trotskyists” by others who claimed to be better Trotskyists: no harm in this, we loved the Che). Many organizations were neither Maoist nor Trotskyist.

We all belonged to the new revolutionary Left. We were different from the established Social-Democracy and pro-Moscow CPs. It was not only a question of program. It was expressed in daily practice. Unlike a reformist one, a revolutionary activist found her/himself often forcibly brought to police stations. Time and again, some of us were jailed. Our organizations could be banned (mine was banned twice).

We were also banned from entering some other countries (especially the United States of America), and we had to travel accordingly. We related to underground parties (just beyond the Pyrénées!, in the Basque Country and Spain, under Franco) and we had to take the appropriate measures not to endanger them.

We organized underground soldiers' committees among the draftees in the army (this was a “specialty” of my own organization). There were weekly fights with fascist groups in the student districts and in market places. Our offices had to be guarded in permanence.

We were not engaged in armed actions, but we studied the experience of past and present armed revolutions, as a means to prepare for the future. Actually, some of our comrades, from the same generation in Latin America, were involved in armed actions at the time of the military dictatorship; they were crushed and we had to help them escape when it was still possible.

If I describe all this a bit in detail, it is to show that my generation of activists entered in politics at a time of “revolutionary spirit”, and that to be then revolutionary, even in Europe, could mean something very concrete. It helps also to understand the problems we were faced with, when history turned out differently from what we had expected.

C. The process of selection

The Revolutionary Left of the 1960s-1970s went through four tests, which challenged its capacity to last beyond the mid-1970s. A long and harsh process of selection occurred.

1. First test: from students to class. The first problem was apparent immediately after May 68. The new revolutionary Left was student-based. To last, it had to root in the working class; and it was not easy (in France, we were physically chased out of the factories by the pro-Moscow CP and fired by the bosses). Not so many organizations succeeded in doing so (mostly some Maoist, Trotskyist and anarchist organizations).

2. Second test: from short-term to long-term perspectives. In the late 1960s, most of us thought that class struggles would decisively sharpen in four to five years times. There were many reasons to think so. But in the mid-1970s, it became obvious that history was not shaping up as predicted. The situation tended to “normalize” in Europe. The end of dictatorships in Greece, Spain and Portugal eventually led to controlled “democratic transitions”.

Even if they were late in doing so, some organizations could adapt to the new situation. Others could not. A few got involved in costly “private wars” against the state and Capital (or even against the reformist Left), especially in Germany and Italy, where a fascist Right was deeply encroached in the state and had been very active (planting bombs) and provocative. In France, one of the main Maoist parties (of Mao-Spontaneist trend) decided to dissolve itself.

3. Third test: re-evaluation of strategies. No component of the “new Left” could survive without a substantial re-evaluation of its vision, program and strategy. I shall explain this important point later, when I shall present the evolution of my own current's thinking in the 1980s.

4. Fourth test: sheer survival. From the mid-1980s, the situation became very difficult for the European revolutionary Left. It had to face the new situation created by the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc and the subsequent Capitalist Globalization. Even the parties like ours, which had denounced Stalinism a long way before, suffered from a negative evolution of the relationships of forces between classes.

The bourgeoisie was very much at the offensive and we were really swimming against the stream. This was the first time for my generation. The situation began to improve in the mid-1990s, with early signs of the anti-globalization revolt. But in the meantime, we had suffered bad setbacks (loss of members) and a number of organizations had disappeared.

The end result was a quite weakened revolutionary Left in the mid-1990s. Most of the 1960-1970s activists are no more or only marginally politically involved; and some turned bitter. A number of the most well-known figures happily joined the social elite. But for dozens of thousands of them, something remains of their past experience. Hundreds or thousands of trained cadres still play a significant role in mass organizing, including in the development of “new” social movements.

II. THE BRIDGE: A PROCESS OF RE-EVALUATION

There is no simple way of explaining why some political organizations survived and, more than surviving, are still “alive”, meaning still able to play an active role in today's processes of radicalization. For each of them, one can

study what helped them to do so in their original program and ideological outlook, or in their political and organizational traditions, in their social roots.

But overall, no ideological trend proved in practice its superiority versus the other ones. This is especially clear from an international point of view. In France, the only three significant organizations remaining, from the 1970s radical Left (meaning to the left of the French CP, then pro-Moscow), are labeled Trotskyists, even if they are indeed very different from one another. In India, the main organizations to the left of the CPI-M are all coming from the ML (meaning Maoist) tradition -even if they are no less different from one another.

Whatever their political and ideological origins, to remain today alive, organizations shaped by the 1960-1970s experience had to pass through a deep process of re-evaluation. To me, this seems to be one of the main necessary conditions for the long-term survival of any movement (even if it is not in itself a sufficient condition).

To illustrate this point, I shall present the evolution of my own movement, in France, which is of course the one I know the best. Somehow, we were better prepared to face the new world realities of the 1990s, more than many other currents; because our Marxism was anti-Stalinist (there was no idealization of USSR!), anti-bureaucratic, relatively pluralistic and respectful of social movements' own democratic life. Nevertheless, we had to undergo profound processes of re-evaluation, even on our theoretically strongest fields.

Evolutions and re-evaluations are often empirical, little thought of, or even denied in the name of (previous) "orthodoxies". Organizations often have a strong capacity to deny realities! During the 1980s, a number of us had the opportunity to attempt to rethink these over, giving them a conscious, explicit formulation, because of a collective work developed around an Amsterdam-based international activist school and institute.

I wish to outline, in a very synthetic way, the scope of these re-evaluations. The way I'll do it may be quite personal, even if it is the outcome of a collective endeavor.

The "original sin" of my ideological trend's generation of militants was a combination of "programmatism" and short-term "activism". Our "programmatism" was a legacy from the previous two generations: while we were few with little social roots, we had inherited a full-fledged program for the World Revolution, shaped by the early experience of the Third International and, later, by its Left Opposition and Trotsky.

Let's say that we had a very big head on very small legs. Thus, our viewpoint of politics tended to be rather unbalanced. Things were made more complex because we were also the typical children of our time and milieu, expressing very much the short-term activism of student radicalization. Small, our legs ran too fast for our moves to be strictly straitjacketed by our big head! For a number of years, there was a dynamic tension between our "programmatism" and our "short-term activism".

1. Lessons, yes. But no applicable models

A re-evaluation often happens when a growing gap between over-used theoretical formulas and concrete political or historical analysis can no longer be ignored. This happened to our "models" of revolutionary patterns. The 1917 Russian revolution was supposed to offer us a clear pattern for revolutions in imperialist countries. Problem: this "model" never existed.

The social structure and dynamics of Russia was quite different from the ones of Western European countries. Rather than spreading from the town to the countryside, the revolutionary process combined women, workers,

peasants; urban, rural and national upsurges. As well as soldiers' upsurges, who massively went back to their villages and districts, keeping their weapons.

One of the most complex strategic issues (how to arm the people) found a very specific answer, because the context of the Russian revolution was WWI and the decomposition of a huge standing army. Valuable lessons from the Russian revolution are plenty. But how can one speak here of a model, if its pattern has been so deeply shaped by the world war framework?

A similar question can be raised with the way the Maoist currents built a model out of the Chinese revolution. Maoists tend to refer to the Third Chinese revolution (let's say from the Long March to the 1949 victory), while Trotskyists often studied mostly the Second one (1925-1927).

In fact, one of the main keys to understanding the concrete pattern of the Chinese revolution is the link between these two periods. The Red Army came out of massive popular upsurges and broad rebellions in the army, not from small armed propaganda groups slowly growing into guerrilla forces: it was 300.000 strong at birth! And the Long March was an attempt to save as much of it after the crushing defeats of 1927-1930. Lessons of the Chinese revolution are also plenty. But how can we make a model out of such a specific experience?

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Europeansocialforumflorence2002.jpg>]
European Social Forum, Florence 2002

We can of course construct theoretical "models" to reflect on the variety of revolutionary patterns. It may be useful to do so (I am not so convinced about it). But it has to be clear that such models are abstractions, and are not directly applicable. Which leads us to a second field of re-evaluations: the issue of strategy.

2. The concrete character of strategies

The other side of the "revolutionary model's" coin was the question of strategy. The Russian model was identified with the formation of councils (workers, peasants and soldiers) leading to the Soviet system of power (a reality of the Russian revolution). For quite good reasons, it was seen as a key goal: a way to give life to socialist democracy.

Thus, we applied what I call a "programmatic determinism" in the definition of our strategy: the strategy should fit the (unfortunately non-existent) Russian model to fulfill our programmatic aim, socialist democracy. Surely, the choice of a strategy is influenced by one's program; but it depends also on many other factors (including, most importantly, the result of previous periods of struggles).

Maoist organizations developed what I call a "sociological determinism". A Third World country being by definition "semi-feudal, semi-colonial", protracted people's war was necessarily the chosen strategy. To build such a general, abstract, model, they had to empty the Chinese revolutionary experience from much of its richness. Too bad for the lessons.

It took quite a while for us to really break away from an abstract definition of strategies, while it should have been obvious from the start that in a given country, several successive strategies had to be applied from the 1930s to 1975. I find the case of Vietnam especially telling on this matter, because of the length of a continuous struggle (from the late 1920s to 1975).

We always understood that the definition of tactics needed a concrete analysis of the concrete situation. We eventually understood that, at its own level, it was also true of the strategies. A concrete strategy is generally

combining elements of various “models” of strategy; and evolves in accordance to changes in the correlations of forces. We then reached the notion of “concrete, combined and evolving strategies”.

3. Lessons from the women and ecological movements.

Re-evaluations also happen when an organization is faced with the development of new fields or forms of struggles. For my generation, in the 1970s, it was especially the case with the women and ecological movements. Few of us were originally involved in the emergence of the ecological movements.

Quite a number of our women comrades were very much part of the new wave of women struggles, at all levels: political as well as theoretical elaboration. Nevertheless, the organization (male-led) as such was confronted with these new developments rather than being an organic component of them at the start. It took a long time, with much turmoil, to integrate these dimensions better -with an uneven success.

Both the women and the ecological movements forced us to think anew the linkages between class society and patriarchy; between modes of production, human societies and nature.

4. Can politics be based on predictions?

Repeated mistakes should and sometimes do lead to re-evaluations. It is what happened to us on the issue of “predictions”. Time and again, we based a policy on a prediction, which time and again proved false. The most famous one concerned the previous generation: the coming of the Third World War. There was nothing ludicrous about such a prognosis, made at the time of the Korean War.

The problem is that, very concrete and sharp political decisions were applied based on this prediction, and that these policies were maintained long after it became clear that WWII was not anymore on the agenda. As mentioned before, my generation made its own errors of prediction, especially concerning the rise of class struggles in Europe in the mid-1970s.

Prediction is not only difficult, because so many factors are involved in the evolution of situations. Middle- or long-term prediction becomes also impossible, because future evolutions depend on the results of ongoing struggles which, by definition, cannot be known in advance (they will be determined by the struggles...). We can brainstorm on future evolutions to open our minds to a range of possibilities. But not to the point of determining a concrete policy on guesses, instead of on actually emerging trends.

We tend to replace the “art of prediction” by what we called in the 1980s “conscious empiricism”. “Empiricism” because the aim is to feel as early as possible new emerging trends, new emerging possibilities, for the organization to react quickly to the changes and make the best of them. “Conscious” because program and theory are strongly needed to “read” social realities. It is not to diminish the importance of program and theory, but to stress that politics is based on existing changing realities, and that knowledge is also empirical.

5. A deeper understanding of pluralism

Most of the issues mentioned above concerned fields where we were (relatively) weak, notably because of our “original sin”. What I find especially interesting is that we had to re-evaluate our conceptions even on some of our (relatively) stronger points. This is the case of pluralism.

Contrary to a number of other currents in the 1970s, we always recognized the plural character of the Marxist and labor movements. Our program on this matter borrowed from original Marxism, the early century European socialist movement, Bolshevism and the anti-Stalinist fight of the Left Opposition. Our references were many.

There was a common stock of “classics”, often quoted and whose selected or collected works always could be found on our bookshelves: Marx and Engels; Rosa Luxemburg; Lenin, Trotsky and several other Bolshevik thinkers, Che Guevara, etc. There was also a wide range of other references, more personal, from Gramsci to Lukacs, from Jose Marti to the Sandinistas. And I was not the only one to read as well Mao or Le Duan.

We thus always considered that several workers' parties could (and indeed did) exist, and that there was a dynamic variety in Marxist thought. We also favored democratic space in our own organizations, including rights of tendencies or fractions. It was one of our qualities. But one day, faced with the Salvadoran experience of a united front between revolutionary organizations, we realized that time and again we were using the formula (inherited from the previous generation): “several workers' parties and one revolutionary party”. Then only did we integrate further the notion of pluralism, stating that several revolutionary parties could (and indeed did) exist.

6. A significant change in our global outlook

The deepening of our understanding of pluralism corresponded to a more general modification of our outlook. We had inherited from the previous generation a schematic vision of the international socialist movement as organized around three “poles”, two of them reformists (Social-Democracy and Stalinism), the third one being “Revolutionary Marxism” (which essentially meant us). Between these three poles, various types of “centrist” currents were oscillating. With the help of historical experiences, independent centrist currents and the left wing within Social-Democratic and Stalinist parties would radicalize, “discover” the truth of our program and join ranks.

For sure, this is an oversimplified presentation of the 1950s' legacy, but I think that it touches something essentially true. Many of us were never very happy with this historical schema. Two of the three “poles” mentioned were physically very strong, with a powerful force of attraction.

The force of attraction of Revolutionary Marxism was essentially “programmatic”: it did not operate within the same level as the first ones. The notion of “centrism” had proven quite useful in some circumstances. But it lost meaning once it was applied to a too wide range of parties, including parties which were very coherent in relation to their own struggle, like the Vietnamese CP.

The plurality of the revolutionary movement was then not fully recognized or was seen as a transitory stage. Our vision changed precisely on this. The revolutionary experience is very complex. Too complex for the “truth” of one given program to be obvious. The plurality of the revolutionary movement is now seen as a lasting reality, to be addressed positively and not as a lesser evil. It does not mean that we should not fight for the unification of revolutionary forces. It means that the way we understand relations between radical parties, or the functioning of one unified party, should effectively take into account this question.

7. The notion of “open history”

Our vision of history changed too. We learned from the previous generation (and from Marx!) the criticism of the “linear conception” of history and of the dominant discourse on this question developed by Social-Democracy and Stalinism alike.

But somehow, even if we did not say so, my feeling is that we considered the pluri-linear character of history a fact of the past. Human societies followed several lines of development, as shown in the discussion on modes of production, and the European one was not universal. But did not imperialism and the unification of the world capitalist market open a new era?

During the 1980s, we went beyond the discussion on modes of production. We integrated a broader notion of “open history”, where the future is not given; where, in times of crisis, “historical crossroads” open a (limited) number of possibilities; where strong constraints do exist (socio-economic, ecological...) but where social struggles play their role in determining which of these possibilities will become reality; where revolutionaries look at such possibilities rather than at an abstract historical “necessity”...

Intertwined with the vision of history, helped by gender and ecological thoughts, we integrated, as well, a criticism of the traditional conception of “progress”; or of values imposed by capitalist relations of production and power.

8. Which Marxism, which politics?

A general trend clearly emerged from these various re-evaluations (and others I did not mention here).

In the realm of theory, we attempted to develop, even more than before, a dialectical, “non-reductionist” conception of Marxism. This does not mean to “water down” Marxism and class analysis. My friend Daniel Bensaïd, with regard to the rise of anti-Marxist theories in the name of “modernity”, claimed its right to an “open dogmatism”: to defend basic lessons of Marxism while opening it to a wide range of realities.

In the realm of action, we realized how much politics cannot be simply deduced from theory or program. How much politics has something to do with consciousness. How much the mediation of the “concrete analysis of a concrete situation” (a Leninist motto, of course) was a vital necessity. In the 1960s already, we considered that knowledge came from “praxis” (social practice). This conviction gained in depth.

In some twenty-five years, we changed a lot. Other revolutionary movements too. It would be very useful to compare how we changed -or how we understand the changes we went through (which is not necessarily the same thing). I would be very happy to share on this.

Of course, some organizations will pretend that no change ever occurred nor was necessary. The “right line” being eternal, it was theirs thirty years ago, it is today still theirs. It may express a lack of reflection on its own history. More probably, such certitudes hide a negative process of political impoverishment and sectarianization.

The re-evaluations mentioned here remain controversial. They have been unevenly integrated by my own generation. More problematically, they might be ignored by the new generation of activists, because it asserts itself in a very different way from ours.

III. FROM THE MID-1990s TO TODAY

My generation of activists, which emerged during the period between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, continued to shape politics until the mid-1990s (to the growing irritation of those who became active during the 1980s). A radical change of generation occurred since the mid-1990s. Differences are many.

Politically, it has not lived the Cold-War period; it is a child of the post-Soviet bloc disintegration era and of capitalist globalization. Its references are no more ours: events from the Russian to the Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions are facts of history, not part of their own (imagined) history and identity as was the case for us. Except for a tiny minority, traditional ideological "labels" have lost most of their (always relative) relevance.

A. Changing relations to politics

I do not know to what extent what is true for France (and surely a number of other countries) can be generalized. But as a whole, the relation between present activists and organizing is different from what it was for our generation (taking of course into account that there is no uniformity in one given generation).

In the 1960s-1970s, all types of organizations (from trade unions to political parties) recruited and grew in the same way that mobilizations expanded. This is presently much less true. Many young activists keep contact through more informal networks and, when they join parties, they tend to protect other sectors of their lives from the dictates of politics (while for us, every sphere of life came within the framework of our political engagement).

It is today difficult to speak of revolutionary organizations in Europe in the same way that we did thirty years ago. Today, the daily life of a member of a radical party is not so different than the one of a member of a reformist party; she/he is simply consistent and coherent in his fight against neoliberal and war policies (while reformists are not at all).

Things are beginning to change with a trend to criminalize radical trade union activities and with the quick erosion of what is left of civil liberties in the name of anti-terrorism. But still, state violence is mostly turned against urban poor youth rather than against political activists (with exceptions: see Berlusconi's bloody repression of the Genoa anti-G8 mass mobilization).

B. Addressing the issue of strategies

Since the start, my generation entered head on into the debates on strategies. Old and new organizations confronted each other at this level, and not only about current politics.

We often started our political involvement by taking sides in these disputes. It is not the case now. The concrete lines of demarcation operate at another level than strategies per se: should we confront globalization or give it a social touch? Should we enter into center-Left governments, or build an independent Left radical pole?

It does not mean no re-evaluation is presently thinkable insofar as strategy is concerned. With the development of the Global Justice Movement, it is possible to think anew certain elements of a strategy like the plural character of the revolutionary subject and the combination of struggles which can initiate a revolutionary transformation of societies.

This is quite important in itself. But to fully reopen the debate on strategies, issues like property and state have to be squarely addressed. The issue of property has begun to be broadly dealt with, especially on question of "common goods" and public services. But the matter is much more difficult as far as the question of the state and violence is concerned.

This last issue was central to our own radicalization. After the 1973 Pinochet coup d'état, for example, discussion raged on the class nature of the state, the need to break down the state machinery -versus attempts to reform it. It is

hardly debated presently beyond parties' educational sessions.

Or it is approached in a typically escapist way, often by rather old figures like Tony Negri... This situation reflects of course the fact that we have little new to say on the question of state power and the disarmament of the ruling classes. To go beyond speculations regarding this field of re-evaluation, we probably still need some new historical experiences -and not only from a few Third World countries under US military occupation.

Here is probably one of the last responsibilities of our old, declining, generation: to prepare the ground, as quickly as possible, for issues of strategies to be assimilated again by the movement as a whole. It is not an easy task, because this field of thought has to be truly updated.

C. A period of refoundation

How to update? We are not only going through a period of reconstruction, after the downturn of the 1980s-early 1990s. Because of the depth of the crisis of the socialist reference (due to the failures and betrayals of Social-Democracy and Stalinism), we are going through a period of refoundation of a radical (and potentially revolutionary) project in Europe. This is surely true for a number of other regions (see Latin America...).

For sure, many old truths are still valid nowadays. Capitalism is very much at work, which means that its Marxist criticism remains very much valid. But a process of refoundation is deeper, more complex than a process of reconstruction. Old truths have to be re-assimilated in new ways. And the "new" has to be discovered as well. Refoundation is not only a matter of pedagogy (to give again life to old truths). Rethinking is an essential element of it.

Our chance is that the growth of the anti-liberal, anti-capitalist globalization and anti-war movements helps us to do both: to rebuild and to rethink. It represents for new generations a common, world-wide, "founding experience".

It is rich, because it is socially more broadly rooted than the 1960s-70s radicalization (even if May 68 in France gave birth to the biggest general strike ever in this country and even if a number of Third World struggles were deeply rooted). New relationships, more equal, between parties and social movements are being tested. New ways of bringing together a variety people's struggles are being attempted.

The Global Justice Movement has created a framework, notably through the social forum process, within which the 1960s-1970s generation can encounter the new one. It is a space for dialogue and exchanges, as well as for collectivizing struggles and campaigns. It is one of the many reasons for which the radical Left should be fully part of these processes.

IV. ON A FEW OF THE PRESENT "BURNING ISSUES"

The organizers of this seminar listed a number of "burning issues" to be discussed throughout the agenda. I would like to come back on some of them, even if briefly. All the more because the historical record of the revolutionary Left need to be looked at in a sharp and self-critical way. This is true for all ideological trends of the radical Left, including mine.

How to learn from experience? I find it especially interesting to study successes, when odds were so big that the struggle should have failed: this is, for example, the case of the Vietnamese resistance against the French and US invasions (it is as well the case at various turning points of the Chinese revolution). I also find it especially interesting to reflect on our own failures, when setbacks came from ourselves, rather than from the strength of the enemy.

I have attempted, until now, to present faces of the European radical Left and its evolution. I would like, in the last part of my contribution to the seminar, to explain how much we learned from the Philippine experience. And to share with you reflections on some of the most burning of the “burning issues”.

A. Forms of struggles

If this contribution had been given in the early 1980s, it would have been centered on the many “positive” lessons we learned from the Philippine people's struggles. It proved for us all the more interesting because it was a contemporary experience, rather than a past one, where one could learn from direct interaction, rather than from history books. Thus, together with Latin American contemporary experiences, the Philippines became part of the collective work of re-evaluation engaged in our Amsterdam-based international school.

This point concerns of course, among others, the debate on the changing articulations between forms of struggles, or various experiments in sectoral organizing and program (agrarian, urban poor, etc.). It includes key issues, which I find relevant for European countries as well. Here are two examples.

1. Territorial forms of mass struggles

There is little tradition of “territorial” stoppage of work and territorial-based forms of mass struggles in European countries (at least in France). Trade unions are not used to link with social and civic movements outside the companies, while the need to develop such forms of organizing and struggles is becoming acute.

Local social forums offered a framework for tying links between TUs and a wide range of movements. But it is in the Third World that one can look at full-fledged experiences in this field, like in India or in the Philippines, notably with the *welgang bayan*.

2. Inter-communities solidarities

In the framework of capitalist globalization and the crisis of the unifying socialist perspective, new divisions are emerging between popular “communities” in France. To this extent, it is a very new problem we are facing.

Even when legitimate, some issues are beginning to divide the progressive movement itself, to the point that it has become sometimes difficult to organize one common demonstration against all racisms (anti-Arab, anti-Black, anti-Jew racisms). As if, for some, a hierarchy had to be established within the anti-racist movement, pitting one community against the other one. Mindanao offers many examples of how “tri-people” solidarities can be tried between communities, in a much graver context.

This contribution being given in 2005, we are unfortunately obliged to learn from the darkest sides of the Philippine revolutionary struggle, and not only from its brighter ones.

B. Issues raised by the 1980s purges

The communist (Stalinist) movement has known many bloody purges; they were fractional, politically motivated, often socially rooted (bureaucracy), reflecting power drives. The specificity of the purges, which occurred in the 1980s within the CPP, is not their scope, but their nature: paranoid and self-destructive. There are probably other similar cases (in Vietnam in 1945, on a smaller scale?). Still, it is the first time for many of us to confront this type of internal purges. So, the importance of the question: how was it possible?

Answers to such a question are necessarily multiple. Some of them are clear. In the background, the effects of lasting militarization of Philippine society and the violence of the civil war.

The possibility left by the CPP leadership to use torture in “exceptional” cases: torture became widespread in the search for military agents within the CPP ranks and it explains to a large extent how the purges mushroomed and thousands of good-standing militants were killed. The very fact that torture could be used shows also how much the universal character of basic human rights was not truly recognized within the CPP tradition.

The easiness with which a party member could become a suspect shows how much there was a lack of democratic political and organizational culture within the party. Etc.

The danger here is to stop at a first layer of explanation, the one we are the most used to, the one seen traditionally “political”. This layer of explanation is key, necessary, but I do not think that it is the only relevant one. How could decent persons and devoted cadres be compelled to become torturers? Why did the purges spread down to the mass base and become massive in certain provinces, and not in others even when they were under the same CPP regional commission?

To answer such questions, and many others, we need of course to know the truth about the purges, which is not yet fully the case, and to know their concrete history in various places. For this, Path's work deserves to be actively supported. We also need to address issues, more “psychological”, introduced by Bobby Garcia in his very valuable book [\[1\]](#).

The nature of the relationship to the party is also part of the overall the picture. When I asked cadres who lived that nightmare the question “how was it possible that orders to implement torture were applied?”, I received various answers: the political ones mentioned above, the atmosphere of collective paranoia, sheer fear (to oppose orders was to become suspect)... but also the following one, which struck me: “To obey such orders was the ultimate proof of our loyalty to the party”. Shouldn't the ultimate loyalty be to the people rather than to the party? And shouldn't the loyalty to the party imply a right of rebellion against party leaderships when such orders come? By the way, in certain cases at least, provincial leaderships did refuse to continue to apply orders, beyond a certain point.

C. What has the CPP become?

I dealt with this issue in my answer to Fidel Agcaoili's “Rejoinder”. The relevant part of my answer is reproduced below in annex. I just wish to underline the following points:

– The post-1992 evolution of the CPP is neither unique nor banal. It is extremely important that we understand the mechanisms and the process leading to this specific type of degeneration. It needs an intimate knowledge of the history of the concerned party and revolutionary struggles. This knowledge cannot be reached in cases like the Cambodian Khmers Rouges. It exists in the case of the CPP. So, the peculiar importance of the Philippine (painful) experience.

– Here too, we should not feel satisfied with a first set of explanations (the Mao-Stalinist traditions of the CPP, the effects of militarization of the society and of the revolutionary movements, etc.). An original in-depth understanding of such a process will have to combine different layers of analysis. We surely need to apply a “non-reductionist” Marxist approach of power relations, integrating elements from various fields of knowledge (as was the case for the gender issue).

– We have lived the degeneration of the original social democracy, leading to the 1914 betrayal; then the post-victory Stalinist degeneration; and now that of the CPP. They nourish one another. And they all show the gravity of the “danger from within”: how social and political counter-revolutionary trends can grow from within the revolutionary movements itself, from within the revolutionary struggle.

D. Back to the classics: revolution as a process of self-emancipation.

In all the three types of process of degeneration mentioned above, the party (or the party-state) rose above its own social base to the point of turning its might against it. So the question is posed: how to keep the revolutionary party under control. One essential answer to that question is to give (again) all its meaning to the classical Marxist conception of revolution as a process of self-emancipation (both individual and collective).

It is important not to take this principle for granted but to look at all its implications, as:

- Party is not governance. It cannot substitute itself to representative people's organizations.
- Self-determination begins now, in the very way the struggle is conducted. It is not something to be addressed sometime after the seizure of power. This is true for Lumad and Muslim communities, of course.
- Similarly, self-organization is favored. Democratic processes of self-decision are to be enhanced in all sectors.
- Self-defense remains the only source of legitimacy of revolutionary armed action. When necessary, armed struggle aims at protecting and helping mass organizations and mobilizations; not the other way around. Politically, armed struggle is a subordinate form of struggle.
- Pluralism of the people's movement and of (popular layers) of society has to be recognized as an essential component of people's democracy.
- Revolutionary parties have a specific (and evolving) role. They are not and must not become the leading faction of society (see below on this question).

The hard question is not so much what we mean by defining revolution as a process of self-emancipation. It is how to apply it in very difficult conditions of struggle and repression. The Philippine experience is enlightening in this matter.

E. Responsibilities of Marxists or of Marxism?

For some, including former communists, Marxism and class analysis are to be blamed for the many failures of the socialist struggle and for the crimes committed in the name of revolution. I'd rather think that we have to look at the responsibilities of Marxists, and their organizations, rather than to make the “doctrine” the culprit.

There is now a long history of capitalism, which proves that it is indeed an exploitative mode of production, with deeply inhuman consequences. We do need today, as yesterday, an in-depth critical understanding of capitalism, and a framework to perceive the transformation of societies. Marxism was and remains an essential tool in this regard.

But Marxism was never an “achieved” doctrine and probably can never be one. Some 20th century trends

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represented a real betrayal of the revolutionary and emancipatory content of Marxism (I think of “modern” social-democracy and Stalinism). But many other trends can be attached to the living history of Marxism.

It is quite important to take into account this diversity of Marxist legacy, the plurality of Marxisms, when we try to draw a balance sheet and lessons from the 20th century struggles. It may be somehow difficult to do it in the Philippines, so dominant has been the “national-democratic” tradition.

The richness of other trends has been ignored by most. I shall take one example, which is less “exotic” than it may seem (this is added to the contribution I gave at the seminar).

After the seminar, I went shopping at National Bookstore. In a carefully locked cabinet, among books explaining how to enjoy sex, I find Jojo Abinales' *Love, Sex and the Filipino Communists* [2] (Poor one who would buy it, hoping to learn pleasant, special and unknown communist ways to do it!) In chapter 7, Jojo compares the sexual doctrine of the CPP to the ones of other parties in Western Europe and Asia.

All of them are the “official” ones, as if they alone represented “Marxism”. Jojo had little time to develop this chapter of his otherwise quite interesting work, but he lost a good occasion to show the depth of the breaks within the Marxist reference, and their meaning.

Among other things, the 1960s movement in France was an upsurge of the youth against the hypocrisy of the dominant morals. We fought, against many odds, for our right to sexuality. The “new Left” was engaged in sharp polemics with the French Stalinist CP for its moralistic, conservative, positions.

If we had been told that a revolutionary movement forbade sexuality before marriage and that one could be sentenced to five years abstinence for breaking the rule, we would have laughed, bewildered. To be politically correct was not to marry. In the 1970s, the women's liberation movement fought head on against the patriarchal family. The right to abortion was still far from being won, and many women of my generation were still paying a high price for its illegal character.

At that time, the new homosexual organizations were also politically radical, mobilizing against capitalism and patriarchy.

How to win freedom in gender equality? We (males) surely did more than our share of mistakes at that time. It took time for homosexuality to be truly recognized by my activist generation. But these mobilizations of the youth, the women, the gays and lesbians on the issues of sexuality, moral, marriage were components of a global fight for freedom and emancipation; it was seen (and is still seen) by most of us as an integral part of the socialist combat.

The role of the political party was not to rule on such issues, to impose its own norms, but to contribute to create the conditions of individual free choice, of self-realization.

The CPP ruled, in a very moralistic way (I bet that the presence of so many priests in the movement played its part, here). More than this, it organized courtship, married and continuously intruded into inter-personal relations. Doing so, the party went far beyond the role of a political organization. It took over the function of the state, the church and the enlarged family! It is through such mechanisms that a party (leadership) begins to view itself as a leading faction in society (something which goes far beyond “vanguardism”).

What type of parties do we aim to build? This essential question comes once more in the picture.

We should not blame "Marxism" for the moralistic inquisitorial behavior of the CPP (leadership) nor for our libertarian traditions. Nor should we reduce everything to cultural differences, even if differences of cultures do exist and necessarily influence political patterns.

Much of the same could be said on other fields of theory and action. We all made political choices. It is time for our generation to re-evaluate them. Then, we may be in a position to draw a more thorough balance sheet of "Marxism" in its diversity.

F. The need to update our thinking on democracy

The party is not the only question that should bounce back time and again. It is also and especially true of the issue of democracy; or to be more precise, of the way democracy is part of the revolutionary project.

Classical Marxist framework remains true. Socialism will be more democratic than capitalism; or there will be no socialism. Democracy cannot bloom when economic power is monopolized by a ruling minority, and when social inequalities are widespread. Civil liberties and political rights are one condition of democracy; as well as an egalitarian transformation of social and power relations. Democracy has to penetrate the realm of production. Etc.

What is new, then?

First, the failures of the past and the terrible legacy of Stalinism. The democratic nature of the socialist project has to be proven again.

Second, the crisis of bourgeois democracy. Capitalist globalization is emptying traditional bourgeois democracy of its content. For example, the WTO has de facto legislative power, above elected assemblies.

For these two reasons, the democratic issue is more than ever central to our struggle.

Because of the crisis of bourgeois democracy, democratic demands are more immediately subversive than in the past.

Because of the crisis of the socialist project, we have to show more than ever, in daily practice, that we do respect the democratic rights of the population, the rights of the members of mass organizations, the rights of party members. This is surely one of the main responsibilities of today's revolutionaries: to draw all the conclusions of the democratic nature of socialism.

F. In conclusion: Internationalism today.

Lessons from the 20th century revolutionary struggles -and more specifically from the successes and failures of my generation of activists- cannot be drawn from the experience of one country or one region alone; nor from one political trend alone.

It is one of the many reasons for which we need an international framework of collaboration between radical parties.

This framework does not exist yet. If we think about it, this absence is rather strange. It seems obvious that in times

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of capitalist globalization, internationalism is more necessary than ever; both to elaborate and to act. Nearly every type of organization is part of broad international networks (more or less bureaucratic, more or less lively): trade-unions, peasant movements, women networks, NGOs, social-democratic parties, etc.

For sure, many Trotskyist organizations belong to an International, a legacy of the importance given to internationalism in their history, their programmatic references and their political traditions. But these Internationals, even the best ones, are too limited in scope to respond to what is today needed.

Some broader regional networks formed around a decade ago, like the European Anti-Capitalist Conference and the Asia-Pacific International Solidarity Conference. It is a valuable progress, but these networks remain regional and are slow in translating their links into a capacity of collective action and common programmatic elaboration.

The most recent attempt is the International Network of Radical Parties, which met for the first time in Mumbai, at the occasion of the 2004 World Social Forum. Here again, the hope in a common framework of collaboration between anti-capitalist political organizations from different continents and ideological trends was clearly expressed. But it seems very difficult to translate this hope into reality.

Without trying to formalize things too much, it seems quite important to do some steps forward in this direction, in the coming period.

ANNEX

Extract from: Pierre Rousset, ["Philippines: on the CPP-NPA-NDF assassination policy, What can we learn from Fidel Agcaoili's "Rejoinder"?"](#), May 10, 2005.

What has the CPP become? In the mid-1980s, the CPP could have evolved in several ways. The proof of it is that various components of it actually did evolve quite differently. There are many reasons for which the majority of the party leadership apparatus changed for the worse (the main one may be the deeply demoralizing effect of the 1980s' paranoiac purges). In my own understanding, a qualitative degeneration occurred at the turn of the 1990s, which needs to be understood in depth. How did it happen? I am far from having all the answers to such a question, but I feel that it is more than time to address the issue. I shall briefly present here some first and very personal elements of analysis.

From a revolutionary Marxist point of view, we have had to understand in the past the transformation of the social-democratic labor movement (leading to the betrayal of 1914) and, later, Stalinism. The first process of degeneration is in essence easy to address, even if there were many debates on its mechanisms and scope: bureaucratization of the labor movement's top apparatuses and their cooptation into the social elite. The second process (Stalinization) was much more difficult to approach because it occurred in a historically new situation: a non-capitalist transitional society. It took time to understand how bureaucratization could grow from within the state to the point of giving birth to a new and very specific type of bureaucracy, of social elite.

We are now confronted with a third, different, process. It does not lead to the cooptation in the bourgeois social elite. It does not occur in the framework of a transitional society state. It gives birth to a totalitarian power structure to which traditional class definitions are not easy to apply. The first time I was confronted with this question was in 1975: Pol Pot's Khmers Rouges. This faction shaped and took control of the Cambodian CP (killing all cadres supposedly linked to the Vietnamese) before the seizure of power. Can we say it was "proletarian" while its first act once in power was to disintegrate the existing proletariat and semi-proletariat? Can we say it was "peasant" when it soon submitted the peasantry to forced labor? Can we say it was "bourgeois" when it destroyed all elements of capitalist economy,

including money?

In the 1970s, we could have thought that the Khmers Rouges phenomenon was unique, because of specific historical circumstances related to the way Cambodia was brought into the Indochina wars by US intervention. But there is a larger trend, probably incarnated by Shining Path in Peru or today's CPP. With the violence of class domination (national and international) and its consequences (militarization) as background. With armed struggle as framework (control of arms and money allowing the emergence of a new power structure). And, like in previous processes, with social uprooting as one key mechanism changing the very fabric of an organization. But we need to go much deeper in the analysis if we want to understand what happens. Armed struggle is, most of the time, not a "free choice" but an act of self-defense faced with the violence of the dominant classes (this is what gives it legitimacy). Many armed groups did not degenerate in the same way as Shining Path or the CPP and when they did, they usually turned to banditry "while ideology is still an essential element of cohesion for the CPP.

Activists who joined the CPP gave away everything (career, family...) to "serve the people". The very same ones (or, to be precise, some of them: the majority of the early 1980s CPP members are no more in it and many evolved quite differently) now impose their own power over people's organizations. Much beyond simple "vanguardism", such parties build themselves as a leading faction of society. How did such transformation happen? Why did it occur in some parties and not in others -or in some sectors of a given party and not in others? What are the elements of continuity and the qualitative changes in this process? The answer needs a very concrete analysis of the trajectory of each party, combining its ideology, politics, organization, social roots, etc. It also calls for a theoretical framework of understanding.

"Classical" Marxism and "class analysis" constitute an essential part of this theoretical framework: the revolutionary transformation of societies is first of all a process of self-emancipation, which implies people's self-organization and self-initiatives. To limit the danger of internal degeneration of the revolutionary movement, this process of self-emancipation has to be put back at the center stage of conceptions, politics, strategies and struggles. But to get into the fabric of the phenomenon, I feel that we have to add other elements of analysis like finer social analysis (evolution of layers of the radical intelligentsia...), as well as elements borrowed from psycho-sociology (transformation of uprooted individuals...) or from gender-based studies on power relationships. Surely, much can be discussed on such a matter. But it is an urgent task to grasp this issue in depth, to find the appropriate response to this new form of totalitarianism growing from within our own ranks and struggles.

The CPP rose above the people. At the same time, for many, it continues to represent a class-based revolutionary party. Mass organizations it leads are part of people's movements. They should be included in a progressive united front policy. This must not be forgotten. But such a "complexity" is nothing new. We already had to address it with social-democracy and Stalinism.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/pierre2ac.jpg>]

[1] Robert ("Bobby") Francis Garcia, *To Suffer Thy Comrades. How the revolution decimated its own*, ANVIL, Manila 2001.

[2] Patricio ("Jojo") N. Abinales, *Love, Sex, and the Filipino Communist*, ANVIL, Manila 2004.