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Building new left parties

Reflections on the “party question” (expanded version) – an overview

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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On the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, the Spanish-language *Viento Sur* journal asked me to write an article on the “party question” (Rousset 2017). This is an expanded version of that piece. This version focuses far more on the present than on the past – and aims to contribute to an international debate, rather than a solely French one. [Pierre Rousset, ESSF, 27 March 2017]

Corrections and clarifications will probably be added in the future.

The question of the activist party is tied to very general analytical points (the theory of social revolution under capitalism – which is the very purpose of Marxism), but also to a host of concrete situations that are very different from one another and that it would be quite difficult to summarize. So I’ll limit myself to some brief introductory thoughts.

Parties, periods, changing consciousness

It should go without saying that I look at the party question from the angle of the anti-capitalist, radical Left. In the 1960s and 70s, we would have said that we did so from the angle of the *revolutionary* Left. I would say that the switch to the adjective “radical” merely registers a changed state of affairs. In a number of countries – beginning with the countries of Europe – there just isn’t the level and quality of social struggle to breathe life into a revolutionary organization. The adjective “revolutionary” does not refer solely to a program. In the 1960s and 70s, the daily lives of far-Left activists was different from those of reformist Social Democratic and Stalinist parties. A number of our activities had to take place underground or semi-underground. Prospects pointed to a powerful upsurge in class struggles and we had to be ready for that. Governments were certainly preparing for it in countries like France and state repression targeted political activism first and foremost.

The situation changed in Europe with the petering out of the momentum of the Portuguese revolution and the managed transition out of the Franco era in the Spanish State. “Normalization” on the left of the Left followed in more or less quick succession. The transition wasn’t easy and most far-Left organizations in Europe perished in the process. Since then, the daily life of a radical-Left activist is not very different from that of a member of a reformist party. The prospect of a major class confrontation has been pushed off into the mists of the distant future. Typically, repression has increasingly honed in on social movements (on the “dangerous classes”, whether in terms of social class or age groups) rather than on political activists *per se*.

Of course, the exact timeframe was different in the south, centre and north of Europe. Moreover, armed resistance to national oppression (Basque country, Northern Ireland and Corsica) continued for an extended period, but these struggles were no longer part of an international revolutionary outlook, and this raised the question of their exact purpose, altering the framework of the different peace processes. Though in a different context, this also applies to countries in the South where important guerrilla forces continue to exist, from Colombia to the Philippines. Initially, the change of period led the “surviving” far-Left to rethink the pace and methods of party-building. The “100 meter dash” sought to take advantage of the window of opportunity created by the crisis of imperialist domination in the 1960s, but this turned into a long-distance run to build stronger roots in order to hang on until the next crisis. Alas, the crisis only came three decades later (an entire generation!). As for the change of period, it was far more drastic than forecast.

Indeed, we are living through the end of an era (Sabado 2015b) with the implosion of the USSR and the end of geopolitics based on superpower blocs; the exhaustion of the revolutionary dynamic of the 20th century including in the Third World; capitalist globalization; the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism which, though temporary, has deeply penetrated mindsets; and thoroughgoing upheaval of social structures in the North, South and East.

With this backdrop, the generation gap between the heirs of the 1960s and 70s and the children of the present era is often huge (Rousset 2005). Generally speaking, young people show little interest in learning from the past, in contrast to the politicized segments of the “68 generation”, which saw themselves as being in continuity with the Russian Revolution of October 1917, the Chinese Revolution of October 1949, the Cuban Revolution of January 1959, the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s and the anti-fascist resistance.

This generation gap is even more pronounced in countries where “old-timers” lived through the experience of resistance to dictatorship and military regimes and “youth” came into politics following the overthrow of these repressive regimes, such as in Latin America and the Philippines.

Which brings us to a fundamental question. The main ways activists understand the world are not necessarily equal to certain present tasks and coming challenges. But political work is conducted on the basis of “actually existing” levels of consciousness and not categorical imperatives. So even when people genuinely want to build a party, there may be a gap between the party that is *possible* (given the level of consciousness) and the one that is *necessary* (given the tasks of the day). This is a major source of difficulty that gives rise to a great deal of experimentation.

Still, useful parties have indeed existed and continue to do so.

Useful parties that are both possible and necessary

We now face outright hostility to the very idea of parties from a broad layer of activist youth, including those with the most radical levels of personal commitment. At least this is what we see in some countries. The hostility is based on solid reasons that we have to take fully into account. The erosion of bourgeois democracy has ended up discrediting the party system, whereas it had some meaning in the past. And important sectors of the far-Left have acted in truly manipulative and authoritarian ways, and have even been plainly destructive on occasion.

It’s important to point out that the “party form” is not the only problem here. All past and present forms of organization should be studied with a critical eye. Trade unions have become thoroughly bureaucratized. An NGO can be the private property of a single person. Community organizations have become so institutionalized as to operate with highly unequal pay scales. Informal networks are manipulated by hidden leaderships. “Virtual” movements replace collective democratic procedures with an Internet “click”, involving no activism whatsoever. And guru-type figures are coming out of the woodwork.

No party is perfect. Nonetheless, in the 20th century parties played a central role in every single liberation struggle and in the revolutions that broke most with capitalism. To be sure, these revolutions became ossified; they gave rise to bureaucratic regimes and then yielded way for the revival of capitalism. This had multiple causes that I can’t go into here.

Intransigent critics of revolutionary parties would do well to consider what happened to revolutions without parties. And indeed what continues to happen to them into the present day. We have rarely seen a popular uprising as

massive and covering as vast a geographic zone as what is somewhat inaccurately referred to as the “Arab springtime”. The sudden surge of the “masses” into the political realm was spectacular, and the struggle waged against a range of counter-revolutionary forces quite remarkable. It continues to deserve our full support; but it’s now the opposing camp that has the wind in its sails. The struggle often persists in appallingly difficult conditions, such as in the Iraqi-Syrian theatre of operations.

The peoples of the area are paying a heavy price for the neglect and betrayals of the big left nationalist parties in the Arab-Persian region (and beyond) and the way they have been isolated internationally by the major powers – but also by those sections of the radical Left that support Putin and Assad or that have callously opted to turn their gaze elsewhere. Of course, there are still revolutionary organizations in Iraq and Syria that have remained faithful to their initial commitments – and who deserve our respect for continuing their fight in very difficult circumstances – but they have been seriously weakened. This weakness is truly regrettable – and who on earth would dare celebrate it in the name of a theoretical critique of the “party form”?

It’s currently only in Kurdistan that we can point to parties with a strong enough presence to play a significant role in the Iraqi-Syrian theatre of operations. Can anyone deny that the existence of the PYD in Syrian Kurdistan has been centrally important to the Kurdish resistance, symbolized by the Siege of KobanÃ®?

Radical parties can play a useful role today, even ones of a more modest size. To illustrate my point, I’ll look at examples in two of Asia’s most violent countries, Pakistan and the southern Philippines. In the former, the Awami Workers Party (AWP) operates entirely above-ground. In the latter, the Revolutionary Workers Party – Mindanao (RPM-M) still operates underground. This itself shows that the form taken by parties reflects not only the state of societies (marked by violence of many kinds) but also by the history of previous struggles and different Left organizations.

Both Pakistan and the southern Philippines have a range of deep-seated religious, sectarian and identity conflicts. Others could be selected, but this is the context that I have chosen to test the usefulness of a party. How to proceed? By looking at what the party does (rather than what it says); but also by asking what would be different if the party didn’t exist in the first place.

The Pakistani state is an artificial and fragile construct. Its unity and stability are undermined by unresolved national questions; by intense regionalisms and communalisms; by the impact of the Afghan war and great-power games; by the clannish behaviour of the big property-owning families; by the hugely diverse mosaic of socio-economic structures; by the extreme violence of (in this case Muslim) religious fundamentalisms; and by factionalism within the security agencies.

The AWP was founded in 2013 following the regroupment of three organizations (Rousset 2013b), one of which was the Labour Party of Pakistan (LPP) (Rousset 2010b) whose earlier work we look at here. The AWP is very responsive – defending small farmers at the Okara military farm against torture; textile-worker trade unionists in Faisalbad against imprisonment; freethinking and anti-militarist bloggers against abduction; Hindus and Christians whose villages have been burned down by Islamists; Shiite and Sunni victims of fundamentalist terror attacks; women buried alive for challenging patriarchal authority and staining their families’ “honour”; trans-gendered victims of violence; Baloch nationalist targets for summary execution; communities stricken by natural disasters, whether by floods in the Punjab or earthquakes in Kashmir; and human-rights campaigners receiving life sentences for their solidarity work as in Gilgit-Balistan. The party has also built cross-border relations by hosting Afghan communists, strengthening ties with Indian internationalists and participating in the building of regional and global networks.

The AWP (and the LPP before it) fights against all forms of oppression and exploitation and in defense of all victims. It recognizes diversity while asserting the shared and common nature of progressive struggles. And yet the two don’t

always go together. The focus on diversity can also foster narrow particularism and identity. “Producing” diversity does not necessarily mean producing something in common (Johsua 2017). Conversely, the rights of women and minorities have too often been smothered in the name of unity.

Each solidarity initiative stands on its own merits. Taken together, they bring about a culture of borderless solidarity “from below”. And that’s a real achievement in these times of division! To this fight, the LPP, and now the AWP, have brought the resources of a party rooted in a broad range of regions and social sectors. The party’s absence would be sorely felt.

For its part, the RPM-M (RPM-M 2006, Rousset 2010a) is based on the southern island of Mindanao, the most militarized region of the Philippine archipelago. Every possible type of armed organization is active there. Three peoples coexist on the island: Moros (Muslims), Lumads (mountain tribes) and the Christian descendants of waves of “internal” colonization of the southern Philippines. In this context, social conflicts (especially for land) often escalate into communal violence. Rivalries between (especially Moro) political clans can turn bloody. The state of war between Muslim movements and the government, and the existence of leftist guerrilla groups, raises the question of the pre-requisites for just and lasting peace. Military operations and natural disasters often give rise to humanitarian crises.

The RPM-M’s response to this situation is to defend all victims of oppression. It fights against the oppression of Muslims while opposing the massacre of Christian villagers by renegade Islamist commandos. It recognizes the Moro right to self-determination but refuses to deny this same right to Lumads on their ancestral lands. It organizes people from all three communities to work together to provide assistance to those hit by humanitarian disasters. It promotes the representation of all three peoples within peace movements. It fights to ensure that the interests of ordinary people and “cross-sectional” democratic, environmental and social rights are genuinely taken into account in peace negotiations.

The RPM-M is also an organization with a territorial footing. The organization is the result of a split of an entire region (Mindanao Centre) of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines. While it argues that armed struggle is not the appropriate form of struggle in the Philippines, disarmament is not a straightforward matter either. A territory-based organization has certain responsibilities toward the communities where it is rooted. The RPM-M has learned to respect the indigenous governance of the Lumads, who have their own self-defence forces to resist powerful special interests from the mining, forestry and other sectors. The RPM-M’s military bodies have a defensive stance, and its guerrilla forces are inactive; but they can provide reinforcements when a village is threatened. Were it to disarm completely, the RPM-M would be unable to protect itself and would have to withdraw and yield ground to hostile armed groups. The position of the Lumads and threatened villages would be seriously weakened.

We’re speaking here of organizations that are moderate in size (a few thousand members) but that have real roots in a number of areas. A political organization rooted solely in one sector (in workplaces, for example) wouldn’t be able to play the same role. Nor would a mainly parliamentary formation. Indeed, the question of combining forms and areas of struggle is at the heart of any discussion on what a party actually does.

Combining forms and areas of struggle

Practical examples are important because we should be wary of overly schematic approaches. For one thing, there’s no getting around national and regional specificities handed down over time. In Europe, the relationship between large parties and trade unions varies a great deal from one country to another. In India, every (parliamentary) party – including those on the Right – has its own network of “mass organizations” (trade-union confederations and women’s,

farmers and youth organizations, among others). They often clash with “anti-party social movements”. Recently, organizations that are independent but not necessarily hostile to parties have grown in importance. Any broad initiative raises the question of the need to cooperate.

A party does not hold a monopoly on theoretical and programmatic work, contrary to what many claimed in the past. Far-Left activists contributed centrally to feminist work in the 1970s but this took place outside existing political organizations before subsequently gaining traction within (often eliciting defensive and conservative responses). The same goes for questions of sexuality that same decade and then for ecology in the 1980s; and for changes in social relations and labour as well as for the strategic implications of innovative experiences of struggle.

However, *as far as possible* activist parties provide (or at least can and should provide) *options for alternative overall orientations* – or to put it another way, options for how best to combine forms and areas of struggle in a given period. As such, they help preserve the unity of social movements – with their members’ varied political positions finding expression elsewhere rather than serving to divide movements internally. And insofar as divisions appear nonetheless, they do so around questions specific to each social movement. Class-struggle or routine trade-unionism? Eco-socialism or deep ecology? Smallholder farming or agro-business? Socialist feminism (Trat 2010 & 2013, Duggan 2010) or institutional feminism?

Of course, all this presupposes that the activist parties in question respect the autonomous functioning and life of social movements, and this can’t be taken for granted. An alternative solution is put forward by currents that tend to be of anarchist inspiration – that of building socio-political movements of a “revolutionary syndicalist” nature (in a non-revolutionary period). This means building vanguard organizations of a necessarily competitive sort that create party-type divisions among wage-earners.

Two areas of struggle warrant special mention here: armed struggle and parliamentary activity. It might seem strange to mention both at the same time. And yet both have vast implications for an organization’s internal balance of forces and both can give rise to significant dangers when this balance of forces is not properly tended to.

Armed struggle. Armed struggle can sometimes be the only available path for advancing the fight for emancipation. The decision to choose this path, however, has enormous consequences, for example on the relationship between underground and above-ground work. In the interest of avoiding possible lapses, suffice it to say that others areas of work should not be directly subordinated to armed struggle. Politics always has to take precedence over the gun. Security does not justify quashing all forms of debate, democracy and collective decision-making. Involvement in armed struggle must not become a way of life from which no exit is possible. A good armed-struggle organization knows when to suspend or end military work when the political situation demands it.

The risk of degeneration of armed organizations grows when they remain intact when the context no longer justifies pursuing armed struggle. This is even true of organizations who take into account the changed context by adopting a defensive posture, but who nevertheless are unable to disarm. With this in mind, the RPM-M rotates membership in the Revolutionary People’s Army (RPA) so that members can leave mountain camps and get periodically re-immersed in civilian life. Getting out of the armed struggle is no simple matter, as can be seen with the RPM-M/RPA in Mindanao, the Communist Party of the Philippines and the Bangsamoro – not to speak of Colombia. Other movements (such as those connected to ethnic minorities, as in Burma) are faced with the question of peace processes. Some of these movements meet regularly to share experiences in this respect; this collective brainstorming merits greater attention internationally given the important issues involved.

Parliamentary and institutional work. Work in the parliamentary (and more broadly institutional) sphere fulfills genuine needs. It is a matter of defending the rights of the oppressed and exploited in all possible arenas, and of ensuring that they are politically represented. To fight the prevailing ideological hegemony and to use a parliamentary

group to support struggles at home and abroad – for example, to secure the release of political prisoners; or to help coordinate movements internationally.

Of course, this work cannot be undertaken at all places and times. The precise details and potential depend a great deal on the character of the political system and the election laws in each country – and as a general rule these have become harsher in recent years.

In Europe, it has been on the electoral terrain that the radical Left has scored its greatest successes in recent years – and also endured its most bitter failures. The first wave of electoral successes was above all seen in Denmark, the Spanish State, Greece and Portugal – with the high point coming in Greece with Syriza winning government on the basis of mass popular support for bringing a halt to austerity policies (Ntavanellos 2015, Thornett 2015, Toussaint 2015, Udry 2015). Of course, the first lesson is that such a remarkable event was indeed possible. The second, unfortunately, was the Tsipras leadership’s betrayal of its mandate and its incorporation (in a subordinate position) into the authoritarian governance of the European Union. First hope, then disillusionment – and with it a negative turning point for the radical Left in Europe. To be sure, the future of the Red Green Alliance in Denmark (Voss 2011), the Left Bloc in Portugal (Louça & Romero Baeza 2010), and of Podemos in Spain (Antentas & Souvlis 2016, Camargo 2016, Sabado 2015a) remains an important question, but they now face more of an uphill climb.

Another process has been initiated in Britain, with Momentum and Corbyn. As significant as this may be (Socialist Resistance 2016), it isn’t clear that anything similar will appear elsewhere. Germany has already had such an experience (Die Linke). In France, it was the creation of the Left Party (abandoned by its creator) and, together with the Communist Party, the launching of the Left Front (now clinically dead). Out of all this, only the presidential campaign of Jean-Luc Mélenchon remains. Meanwhile, the Socialist Party appears poised to implode, with no mass support or dynamic behind any of its component parts. The same goes for the PSOE in Spain (Pastor, 2016). It’s game over in Italy. In many countries, the hard-Right and far-Right are the forces best positioned to benefit from widespread mass anger.

While the future may hold new pleasant surprises, we should nonetheless be mindful of the “hegemonic logic” of electoral politics and the co-opting pull of institutions. In short order, an organization’s success gets measured by its election results and not by progress made in building a social base – despite the fact that electoral success does not automatically mean a stronger local presence. Fundraising priorities are taken over by the requirements of participation in a never-ending cycle of elections, which monopolize the attention of leadership bodies. Electoral failure shows that the emperor has no clothes – and that party coffers are empty. Success is dangerous. Entire organizations – Akbayan in the Philippines; Syriza in Greece â€” have lost their activist soul in the institutions, despite fierce internal resistance from party minorities. Others lost their parliamentarians, the better to save their souls – such as the RPM-M in the Philippines.

As far as possible, and in line with the needs of the hour, a radical party has to be able to intervene in all areas – including in parliament and the institutions, however unwelcoming they may be. The danger arises when our very conception of “actually existing” parties is adapted to electoral politics. It’s a good idea to constantly rotate parliamentarians. Financial arrangements (such as the stipend that party Members of Parliament are to receive) should be clearly spelled out and adhered to. The party’s social base should be strengthened and not weakened over time.

We could learn a great deal from recent original experiences, such as the Democratic Labour Party (KDLP) in South Korea. The mass movement was behind the creation of the party, with the KCTU trade union confederation and the Peasants League (KPL) represented directly on leadership bodies (KDLP 2005). The party achieved real electoral success but faced severe repression in the name of “national security”. What’s more, in South Korea it’s never easy for “national liberation” currents that focus on reunification of North and South Korea to co-exist with “people’s

democracy” currents that prioritize social struggles.

Is the KDLP experience too specifically South Korean and therefore non-reproducible elsewhere? Probably, but the substantive question of the link between radical parties and their social base will keep coming up.

In the absence of radical parties with a mass base, other class-struggle trade-union currents are looking at the question of creating one themselves. This is what we’re seeing today with NUMSA in South Africa (Irvin 2016).

Another recent experience, in Europe this time, is that of the Polish Labour Party (PPP), which was launched in 2001 out of the “August 80” free trade union (Malewski 2009; “August 80” 2010). So this is clearly something topical that has to form part of our international thinking.

Historical precedents in South Africa and Brazil illustrate how parties based on the trade-union movement can be exploited for other purposes. Once in power, this is what happened in Brazil with the Workers Party (PT) and the CUT trade-union confederation (Antunes 2014); and in South Africa with the ANC and COSATU (Gabriel 2014; Numsa 2014; Amandla! 2013). Clearly, we have to better guard ourselves against such risks.

Lastly, one of the features of recent European experiences in this regard is the time lag between the social mobilizations that paved the way for the radical Left and the actual electoral breakthroughs themselves – whether in Greece with Syriza, Spain with Podemos or elsewhere. As a consequence, the organized social base of parliamentary forces (or of the government in the Greek case) was strikingly narrow relative to the breadth of electoral support – a dangerous Achilles’ heel as it were. Experience shows that, subsequent to radical-Left electoral success, there is nothing automatic about resistance to the right-wing backsliding of political and trade-union leaderships, and for that matter nothing spontaneous about the broadening of the radical Left’s social base. It’s futile to rely on the supposed “dynamic” of the situation. These are all matters to be addressed by concrete political tasks and redeployment of the organization’s forces. We have to be active outside the institutions and not just within.

Of Lenin and parties

The centenary of the revolution of October 1917 is an opportunity to look back at the revolutionary experience of the 20th century and to revisit its lessons in light of contemporary problems. For Lenin, the “party question” was front and centre, among others of no less importance.

The remarks that follow don’t seek to summarize the history of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) and Bolshevism in this regard. Nor do they break down the history of the conception of the party within Marxist theory. Still, “Leninism” is actually a useful reference point because, aside from Marx and Engels, Lenin was the only reference common to Communist parties and to the majority of far-Left currents in the 20th century (Maoists, Trotskyists, and others).

The debate on “Lenin’s conception of the party” (as if he only had one) has often gotten bogged down in simplistic interpretations of *What is to be done?* (Lenin 1902; Draper 1999). And yet one needs a careful understanding of the rapidly evolving historical context and a complex interpretation (Le Blanc 1989; Löwy 1991) of Lenin’s never concluded activist and intellectual trajectory (Vercammen 1989) – and of the role assigned to politics and the relationship between strategy and tactics (BensaÃ¯d 1997).

Lastly, our own reading of “Leninism” is influenced by the present context and our accumulated experience and

therefore has to be constantly revisited (see the 2008 introduction to BensaÃ¯d and NaÃ¯r 1969).

Let’s take a look at the main thrust of the “Leninist” approach to the party.

Strategic horizon, concrete analysis. Lenin is especially interesting in the way that he connects (and not juxtaposes) theory and long-term aims, on the one hand, to an understanding of the specific context, “the concrete analysis of the concrete situation”, on the other. We’ve already looked at how the current context is not conducive to the building of the parties that we need today and will need tomorrow. That doesn’t relieve us of the need for in-depth strategic thinking. It’s possible to make headway around key questions such as that of the “revolutionary subject” – and much has already been done in this respect. Still, in many countries it’s impossible to answer other questions such as “how do we go about disarming the capitalist class?”. So we’re forced to build into the long term despite the existence of “strategic blind spots”, drawing on contemporary historical experience to fuel our strategic thinking for the present and future.

An activist and clearly delineated party. Should a party have neither borders nor requirements in the era of Internet and pick-and-choose activism? Should it be “fluid” in keeping with a capitalism that is itself “fluid”? Is class domination fluid? Is the daily ideological onslaught fluid? Is the security state fluid? Are the dictates of the banks, financial institutions and European Union fluid? How about imperialist intervention? Has the violence of class war turned to liquid all of a sudden? This is the question one must answer to determine whether we need a clearly delineated party whose members are actively involved in party and movement organizations.

Revolution isn’t a “one-off event”, so such a party has to provide “an element of continuity within the fluctuations of collective consciousness”. It is a place to think through “the representation of social forces in politics” as well as “the specific form class struggle takes on when it enters the realm of politics” (BensaÃ¯d 1997). The fact that a party is made up of active members enables it to be rooted within the working classes, with a relationship and organic connection to social movements.

A party that is politically active in all parts of society. A revolutionary party does not limit its activity to the workplace and the direct face-to-face relationship between bosses and workers. It “represents the working class, not in its relation to a given group of employers alone, but in its relation to all classes of modern society and to the state as an organised political force” (Lenin 1902). The examples provided earlier of present-day “useful” parties illustrate the relevance and importance of this question in a context that abets the fragmentation of struggles.

A responsive party. Such a party should be able to discern change and reorganize itself accordingly, whether in terms of its social base (for example, the rise of the precariat in Europe today) or in response to a drastic shift in the political situation. It should also be capable of responding to the unexpected, since unexpected developments are a certainty. Though not “fluid”, such a party does have to be flexible.

To be thoughtful about new developments one can’t be prisoner to yesterday’s debates; and one has to be capable of having a critical view of one’s own accumulated storehouse of positions (Johsua 2015). Understanding a new context through the prism of past debates is a sure-fire way to miss opportunities and potential forks in the road. And that can be very costly.

Continuity and conservatism. Building a party, as with any mass organization, is a process of accumulation of social, political, cultural and organizational forces. Such a process demands continuity and depth. So being responsive doesn’t mean flitting about looking for get-rich-quick schemes.

All organizations are also by nature conservative. They tend to recruit people with the same profile and to operate

using implicit codes that reflect their initial predominant make-up. That makes it difficult to truly integrate members who don’t conform to this prevailing “standard” – whether women in male-dominated movements, wage-earners lacking university degrees (even though a large number of low-income workers may have spent some time in post-secondary education), the precariously employed, migrants, and so forth. The problem is particularly severe in leadership bodies where behaviour can come to resemble that of a family (and often a dysfunctional one at that).

Party-building must therefore tackle the problem of conservative practices and outlook and provide for specific measures aimed at opening up the organization and training and integrating newcomers – with a focus on collective functioning (Duggan 1997). This is much more than a matter of quotas – and much easier said than done, precisely because much of the problem stems from implicit factors, a mindset and unwritten codes.

A party that can provide a general orientation (see above), bits and pieces of strategy, and then an appropriate strategy (in relation to the characteristics of the period) when the level of struggle permits.

Here too, this means an approach to party-building that enables it to develop roots in social sectors from where it is absent. There’s nothing spontaneous about this. Of course, the smaller a group the less it can deploy itself in this fashion.

A party that thinks about practical mediations – that is to say, about transitional organizational forms that bridge necessity and possibility, keeping in mind the real level of consciousness and the legacy of past struggles.

In many countries, actually existing conditions don’t provide a basis for building “the revolutionary party”. The challenge then becomes one of initiating or participating in the establishment of what can be called hybrid political formations. These are an expression of current experience and make it possible to influence the course of events, raise the level of consciousness and make forward strides. We can build such organizations and fight to ensure that they neither become ossified nor give rise to new forms of sterile reformism.

These “hybrid” movements could well prove to be only temporary in nature. They will go into crisis but not without having provided necessary experience. They may also give rise to more lasting and renewed organizations of the radical Left.

As for conceptions of the party and of “Leninism” that we have subscribed to in the past, there are three developments or clarifications particularly worthy of note.

The “rest” doesn’t follow. We helped fuel a very simplistic view of the Russian Revolution, in which the proletariat takes power and the rest of the labouring population follows. This is historically wrong given what happened with the peasantry and nationalities in 1917. As a side note, one of the failures of Bolshevism was its inability to build roots among the peasantry before 1917 and to anticipate the conditions for a lasting worker-peasant alliance – and yet this was a question of paramount importance (Rousset 2013a). The same can be said about the specific role of women’s movements in sustaining and deepening the revolutionary process.

Radical pluralism. A good past example of this kind of re-assessment is the way we applied the notion of pluralism to the revolutionary movement itself – and no longer only to the reformist and centrist workers parties. This was a break with the formulation that had traditionally prevailed within our ranks: “*many* workers parties, *one* revolutionary party”. Indeed, revolutionary experience is far too complex to imagine that it can be captured in one all-encompassing synthesis and be embodied in a single party. This revolutionary pluralism can be expressed in many ways – a number of parties; a permanent coalition; currents within a composite party – but it is here to stay.

Nothing can be taken for granted. For our organizations, the affirmation and integration of feminism have been especially important because it has a direct bearing on half of humankind (and dialectically on the other half too) and because it has a major impact in all areas – from theory to program and right down to daily political practice and life. Its scope was also more “personal” than other questions that also have “lifestyle” implications – environmentalism and anti-consumerism, for example.

However, in many cases (there are happy exceptions) feminism matter-of-factly recedes into the background, or is once again seen to be “divisive” (that old chestnut!). Anti-capitalism and anti-racism are rarely forgotten. Eco-socialism hasn’t had it so easy – but the affirmation of an organization’s feminist profile is a rare occurrence indeed. In fact, for one current of political anti-racism, anti-sexism deserves (at best) second billing; and those who seek to combine the two are viewed rather uncharitably.

Lastly, sexist behaviour within radical organizations – especially when it comes to leadership bodies – is still rife and continues to wreak major havoc, as recently seen in the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP). So we have to be mindful of the fragile nature of “gains” around these types of questions and enact specific measures to shore them up.

Women members of far-Left organizations played a key role in the rise of the second wave of feminism. One important spark was the way their experience in these organizations had convinced them of the need for an autonomous women’s movement. We are now paying the price for the weakening of this movement in a large number of countries.

Mutual recognition of autonomy. The explicit critique of the hierarchical relationship between parties and social movements was a vitally important source of clarification (Crémieux 2003). Our “line of march” is mass self-emancipation and not top-down “commandism” from the self-proclaimed vanguard, government party or parliamentary group (see the case of the British Labour Party).

There have been key periods in history where the sociological creation of a first generation of workers, the formation of trade unions and the building of a communist party have all gone hand in hand (southern China in the mid-1920s is a classic example). But even in such cases, the process of self-organization in the context of a revolutionary crisis and that of party formation are of a different nature. The class does not represent itself in a revolutionary party; women do not represent themselves in a feminist party; “racialized” communities do not represent themselves in a “racialized” party; the nation doesn’t represent itself in a national party, whether communist or not (for the case of Vietnam, see Rousset 1982); and so forth and so on. When parties claim otherwise, it is a case of manipulation and a demonstration of their propensity to substitute themselves for others. Parties are not a framework for self-organization (unlike genuinely local committees and similar bodies).

As for parties and movements, they are “side by side” and not “above and below”. Social movements are no strangers to politics as such and their struggles are political in that they take on capitalist domination. That provides the underpinnings for a possible and necessary dialogue between radical parties and movements, and the basis for common struggles and initiatives. The main condition for this dialogue is as much a mutual recognition of autonomy as it is one of common aims. These common interests and aims grow with each passing day. It’s not just a matter of defending social and environmental rights tooth and nail. We are living in an era of environmental crisis, the twilight of political democracy and legal rights, and the establishment of a security state and permanent state of emergency. An era of worsening oppression. In such a situation, the time has come to rebuild a bloc of resistance and alternatives that includes parties of struggle and radical mass movements.

Translation Nathan Rao.

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