

Crisis of the European Left: Towards a New Form of Popular Unity

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The combination of economic crisis, social devastation and open political crisis in 'weak links' of the European Project such as Greece has raised the possibility of social and political change. In Greece we have witnessed a sequence of social and political developments that are based on an extreme case of economic and consequently social crisis (and open economic aggression by the EU and IMF) have led to an open political crisis, to a realignment of social alliances and relations of representation, to a huge electoral loss for systemic political forces, to the de-legitimization of aspects of the neoliberal orthodoxy, and to the rise of the Left, a development that for the first time in many decades has opened the possibility (but not certainty...) of a government organized around the Left.



To me this brings a huge challenge for the Left. This forces us to think again in terms of revolutionary strategy, not in the sense of an abstract theoretical justification of radical political and social change, nor in the sense of simple anticapitalist rhetoric and verbalism, but in the sense of a set of highly original and necessarily uneven steps that will lead from the break with 'actually existing neoliberalism' to a new socialist alternative.

This is in sharp contrast to most Left wing politics since the 1980s. For a whole period, talking about Left-wing politics meant mainly organizing resistances (and gaining concessions from) a dominant neoliberalism and making sure the reproduction of communist (or communist oriented politics...) as some form of ideological interpellation. Besides, in the past decades the question of power, at least in Europe, meant participating or supporting mildly neoliberal 'centre-left' governments, usually with catastrophic results, exemplified in the experiences of France and Italy. Now the question of power, of affecting the actual balance of forces, of initiating sequences of radical social and political change comes again to the forefront. It catches us unprepared perhaps, but – contrary to the metaphysics of a certain Marxism – historical surprise always comes when conditions are unripe.

The Question and The Challenge

However, the question remains. In what terms should we think about this challenge? Should we think about it in terms of traditional electoral politics and alliance building with the aim of a parliamentary majority and then using whatever possibilities are left within the current institutional – both national and international (EU etc) – configuration? Alternatively, should we think about it with the renewal of an insurrectionary strategy, aiming at getting political power outside traditional political means? Should we simply say that because the situation is still far from ripe, since the party or the bloc of the working-class is not big enough, and

therefore resistance and building the party is the norm of the day?

The aim of this paper is to suggest a different framework in order to rethink revolutionary strategy. To this end, it is necessary to return to [Antonio Gramsci](#)'s conception of the 'historical bloc.' Traditionally the concept of the historical bloc has been read as referring simply to the articulation of [base and superstructure](#) or material practice and ideology. Some of Gramsci's own references suggest such a reading, such as the one referring to the historical bloc as "the unity between nature and spirit (structure and superstructure)."[\[1\]](#) But I also think that it would be much better to define it as the description of the social, political and ideological processes and conditions that can lead to a social class – or an alliance of social classes – becoming a historical force of transformation, through the dialectic of ideology, practice and strategy. In this sense it is also a position about the complexity of the social whole as the terrain of political intervention. This is my reading of Gramsci's reference that "[s]tructures and superstructures form a 'historical bloc.' That is to say the complex contradictory and discordant *ensemble* of the superstructures is the reflection of the *ensemble* of the social relations of production."[\[2\]](#)

This possible reading is reinforced in my opinion by Gramsci's insistence that his conception of the historical bloc "material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces."[\[3\]](#) Moreover, the full force of Gramsci's conception of the historical bloc not simply as a reference to the relation between structures and superstructures, but – and mainly – to the processes, practices and conditions (in terms of economics, politics, ideology and mass intellectuality) that make possible hegemony and consequently social transformation, comes forwards in extracts like the following:

"If the relationship between intellectuals and people-nation, between the leaders and the led ... is provided by an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive), then and only then is the relation one of representation. Only then ... can the shared life be realized, which alone is a social force – with the creation of the 'historical bloc'."[\[4\]](#)

To this, we must add [Christine Buci-Glucksmann](#)'s reading of the concept and the distinction she makes between a passive historical bloc (associated with Gramsci's concept of the passive revolution as the form of bourgeois dominance in later capitalism) and an expansive historical bloc as the agent of socialist transformation and her insistence that it offers a strategic conception different to both the Second and Third Internationals' definitions of revolutionary strategy.[\[5\]](#)

Social Transformation?

Why it is necessary to start thinking in terms of historical blocs in countries such as Greece? First of all, because some of the necessary conditions are already here: a deepening political crisis that nearing the limits of hegemonic crisis, exemplified in the explosive rejection of austerity policies and the whole power configuration associated with them, shifts in social alliances and relations of representation, at least in the short run, with not only labouring class but also very important segments of traditional and new petty-bourgeois strata massively distancing themselves from systemic parties and policies, and a re-politicization of society that includes the open discussion of radical alternatives.

However, what I mainly want to stress is not the conditions that enable us to talk about potential historical blocs, but more the fact that we can use it as a strategy concept. In this reading, the politics of forging historical blocs refer to the articulation and combination of political strategy, transformative project, ideology and forms of organizing, it comprises all the practices and forms of politics that can lead to the subaltern classes becoming a historical force and initiating a process of social transformation.

Thinking about radical politics in terms of a 'historical block,' implies that we need to move from resistance to constructing an alternative. This cannot be simply a 'progressive government' that will attempt to avoid austerity while remaining within the embedded neoliberalism of the Eurozone and the systemic violence of debt. It refers to the possibility of forming a broad anticapitalist social alliance, through building, in a parallel but also inter-related, process both a social front of struggle and a political front, to the necessity of an anticapitalist program as a concrete alternative, to fighting power not only at the level of government but also from below aiming not only at left-wing governance but also hegemony and a complex and uneven process of transformation.

The Program

Such a process cannot be based simply on the rejection of extreme neoliberalism, but to a radical program that will include all the necessary immediate steps that can guaranty avoiding complete social devastation and breaking away from the vicious circle of austerity-recession-unemployment in order to start a process of social transformation. This program should include immediate stoppage of debt payments, exit from the Eurozone and regaining monetary sovereignty, nationalization of banks and strategic infrastructure, income redistribution and productive reconstruction.

In light of the above, a strategy for a new 'historical bloc' requires not simply demands for the elaboration of an alternative productive paradigm, in a non-market and non profit-oriented direction, an alternative non-capitalist developmental path (as an aspect of the dialectics of economy and politics within the historical bloc). I do not speak about a developmental paradigm in the sense of quantitative growth, nor do I suggest propositions for an alternative capitalist development, but in the sense of a collective confidence that in countries such as Greece, collective material and social conditions for a better life. This must include a new conception of democratic social planning along with a new emphasis on self-management, reclaiming currently idle productive facilities creating non commercial networks of distribution, regaining the common character of goods and service that are currently under the threat of the 'new enclosures' tendency. In a way, it means taking hold of the 'traces of communism' in actual movements and social resistances to the violence of capital and the markets.

Without a strong labour movement, without radical social movements, without the full development of all forms of popular power and self-organization, any government of the Left will not manage to stand up to the immense pressure it will get from the forces of capital, the EU and the IMF.

Such a 'historical bloc' aims at political power, not only in the sense of a left-wing government but also and mainly in the sense of a change in actual social power configuration. Without a strong labour movement, without radical social movements, without the full development of all forms of popular power and self-organization, any

government of the Left will not manage to stand up to the immense pressure it will get from the forces of capital, the EU and the IMF. That is why it is necessary to experiment with new forms of social and political power from below and creating new forms of social practice and interaction based on solidarity and common work, new forms of direct democracy and of course the need to continue and intensify the struggle in both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary ways. Besides, without a society in struggle, without a strong and organized movement, without forms of popular democratic self-organization, solidarity and even self-defense, any progressive government will be in the end too weak to proceed with the necessary ruptures.

Provided that we are fully aware that it will be part of a long and contradictory process of transition and transformation, struggle 'from above' and 'from below,' making use of both governmental power (radicalization current institutional and constitutional framework) and forms of 'popular power,' seeking ways to transform or counter coercive apparatuses, not underestimating the constant power with the forces of capital, then yes a 'government of the Left' can be part of a modern revolutionary strategy. It as an open question, always open in the communist movement, from the "[Workers' Government](#)" described in the 4th Congress of the Communist International, to Gramsci's proposal for a "Constituent Assembly" of the anti-fascist forces, to [Poulantzas](#)' confrontation with a possible "[democratic road to socialism](#)," to current experiments in left governance such as the one in Bolivia.

Moreover, it is exactly this combination of popular power from below and new forms of self-management and non-commercial distribution that can create the conditions for a modern form of 'dual power,' namely the actual emergence of new, non capitalist social and political forms. Both Lenin and Gramsci thought that there can be no process of social transformation without a vast social and political experimentation, both before and after the revolution, which will guaranty that within the struggles we can already witness the emergence of new social forms and new ways to organize production and social life.

It is not going to be an 'easy road.' On the contrary it is going to be hard and it would require a struggling society actually changing values, priorities, narratives, exactly the 'ethico-political' element Gramsci always referred to. In this sense the promise of Left-wing politic cannot be a simple return to 2009, not least because it is materially impossible, but mainly we want to go beyond confidence to the markers and debt-ridden consumerism. In such a 'world-view' public education, public health, public transport, environmental protection and quality of everyday sociality, are more important than imported consumer goods and cheap credit.

New Form of Popular Unity

Also useful to this is Gramsci's concept of the 'national - popular.' I do not suggest a return to traditional left-wing flirting with a 'national' rhetoric that can blur class antagonism, but to the complex process, political, ideological and social, through which the *people* can re-emerge in a situation of struggle, not as the abstract subject of the bourgeois polity, but as the potentially anti-capitalist alliance of all those social strata that one way or the other depend upon their labour power in order to make ends meet. This also means a new form of popular unity, especially against the dividing results of racism, an urgent task in a country also facing the rise of the neo-fascists.

Such a process can (and should...) also be a knowledge process, both in the sense of using

the knowledge accumulated by people in social movements (who can run better a hospital or a school – appointed technocrats or the people actually working and struggling there) and also in the sense of struggle, solidarity and common practices being forms that help people acquire knowledge, learn how to do things differently and collectively re-invent new forms of mass intellectuality and a new cultural hegemony. This is the way one can think the “organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge” and also transformative social and political practice.

Such a strategy (and dialectic of strategy and tactics) can transform current emerging alliances, changes to the relations of representation, struggles, resistances and proposals for ‘concrete utopias,’ into a new and highly original ‘historical block,’ the necessary condition for an open-ended process of social transformation. It is an attempt to actually rethink revolutionary strategy, not as fantasy but as an open-ended sequence of transformation and experimentation.

In light of the above the criticism raised by some of us against for example SYRIZA’s ‘realism’ has nothing to do with traditional leftist sectarian denouncement of ‘reformist betrayal.’ Nor is it a reproduction of the left government as ‘class betrayal’ criticism or an endorsement of a millenarian conception of revolution as ‘momentary’ insurrection (although attention must be paid to the acceleration of historical time in revolutionary situation). It is exactly the need to rethink how the participation of the Left in government power can indeed be turned into radical left governance, as an aspect of revolutionary political and social sequence suitable for the 21st Century.

Finally, all these also require a fresh thinking of the collective political subject. All recent developments have shown the importance of front politics. Contrary to the metaphysics of the Party as a guarantor of truth and the correct line, we need a more broad conception of the left political front that is not only unity but also dialectical process, a terrain of struggle itself, a collective democratic process, and a laboratory of ideas, projects and sensitivities. Contrary to a traditional instrumental conception of the political organization that is based on a distinction between ends and means, a revolutionary strategy must be based on the identity of means and ends, and this means that the democratic form of this front must also reflect the social relations of an emancipated society.

For the first time, in many decades, we are not discussing all these theoretically but as urgent political exigencies. The times are indeed unripe, but only under such conditions can genuine social change occur! •

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Notes:

[1.](#) A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, p. 137. [A selection of Gramsci’s writings are freely available on marxists.org/archive/gramsci website.]

[2.](#) Ibid, p. 366.

[3.](#) Ibid, p. 378.

[4.](#) Ibid, p. 418.

[5.](#) Christine Buci-Glucksmann, 'Bloc Historique,' in G. Bensussan and G. Labica (eds.), *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme*, Paris, PUF, 1982.

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