

DAVID PARKER

THE RESURGENCE OF THE RADICAL LEFT IN EUROPE: LESSONS FOR AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND?

There has been a huge resurgence of the radical left in Europe since 2008. It has been enormously inspiring at times, even for those of us as far away as Aotearoa/New Zealand.

So are there any lessons for the radical left here that can be taken from the movements and parties of the left that have emerged or come to prominence in Europe in that time? I do appreciate context is hugely important.¹ I do not suggest for a moment that in some neo-colonialist fashion we can simply impose a European template here in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Indeed, that is why it is important to reflect with care on any possible lessons. In fact, as I will discuss, there are reasons why some of the approaches that have been successful in Europe cannot be applicable here. In this article I will discuss four issues: (1) dealing with the centre left, (2) left populism, (3) front politics, and (4) the idea of the connective party.

THE RADICAL LEFT AND ITS DEALINGS WITH THE CENTRE LEFT

I begin with Podemos in Spain. In many ways Podemos has been a huge success. Founded in early 2014, by a group of political scientists from Complutense University in Madrid, and drawing on the energy of a series of large scale

anti-austerity occupations of public squares known as the 15-M movement, or the *indignadas*, it now has around 350,000 members.² In coalition with Izquierda Unida, the United Left, it now holds 71 seats in the 350 seat Congress of Deputies.³

Podemos's primary goal since its inception has been to replace the PSOE (the Spanish centre left) as the principal left party in Spanish politics.⁴ Leading figures in Podemos have been implacable in this goal and, following general elections in December 2015 and June 2016, have refused to do any deal with the PSOE to form a government. At the time it seemed this hard line position was failing, contributing to the nervousness and disunity that started to emerge within Podemos.⁵

Then, in September 2016, in two regional government elections in Galicia and Euskadi, Podemos-led coalitions polled better than the PSOE.⁶ Pedro Sánchez, leader of the PSOE, was forced to resign. Subsequently, most

PSOE deputies abstained in a parliamentary vote, permitting the formation of a minority conservative PP government led by Mariano Rajoy, thereby further alienating the PSOE from any remaining left base it held.⁷ The divisions these moves have caused could shatter the PSOE, just as Podemos intended. It's a huge victory. In opposition, Podemos continues to put huge pressure on the PSOE, and its confusion was demonstrated again in May 2017 when Sánchez was re-elected leader of the PSOE.⁸

This unfolding story is reminiscent of the situation in Greece, where Syriza (the Coalition of the Radical Left) was able to replace Pasok (the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement).⁹ Nonetheless, despite its magnificent achievement in bringing the radical left to political power, Syriza has proved no more capable of facing down the demands of the bankers who run the European Union than its forerunners in government in Greece (or elsewhere) and austerity remains firmly in place.

The situation in Spain contrasts sharply with events in the UK. There, following an inspirational call from the film director Ken Loach, the Left Unity party was founded in 2013 with similar aspirations to Podemos and Syriza... until Jeremy Corbyn happened to the British Labour Party.¹¹ Suddenly it seemed a credible left force was taking shape through the centre left rather than against it. Left Unity was in crisis as members flocked to Labour (and some to the Greens), and the affiliated Communists departed in the opposite direction; in late 2015, Left Unity was reduced to debating its own dissolution, although it decided against that step and in October 2016 recommitted itself to radical socialist principles.¹³ Former General Secretary of Left Unity, Kate Hudson, made it clear how the positioning of

Left Unity must be read against what Labour is doing in the UK:

in addition to the struggle to restore the Labour Party to its original remit and ethos, it is also crucial for an alternative left politics to be expressed [that is] anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist... The hopes and dreams of so many of those who support Corbyn – and many more across society who don't articulate their aspirations in party political terms – can only ultimately be fulfilled by a radical transformation of society.

In her speech in late 2016 Hudson also noted that nowhere has a nominally social democratic party that has embraced neoliberalism subsequently repudiated it. But in the run up to the 2017 UK general election, the impossible happened: Corbyn broke with a quarter-century or more of centre left sell-out by issuing a Labour Party election manifesto that does indeed repudiate neoliberalism and the politics of austerity, presenting an agenda I would largely describe as 'old school' social democracy – it does not once mention capitalism.¹⁴ These policies, along with Corbyn's own compassionate integrity, have delivered a success that took Labour to the brink of a return to government in the election of 8 June 2017.¹⁵ At the same time (and one must remember, in the context of a nineteenth century first-past-the-post electoral system), Labour has completely marginalised the voices of the more radical left that a few years ago were threatening it so loudly.

A consideration of all the examples above indicates that, in any context, the radical left requires a coherent strategy to deal with the centre left. Podemos's patience and implacable position against the PSOE is instructive. So is Jeremy Corbyn's resurgent Labour Party. And

most importantly, in light of the neoliberal agendas still expressed or implied by many on the so-called centre left in Aotearoa/New Zealand, it tells us that there is absolutely no room for sentimentality on the radical left here, whatever our own personal historical attachments might be to parties of the past.

LEFT POPULISM: 'CONSTRUCTING THE PEOPLE'

At a meeting in London in June 2016, which I was fortunate to be able to attend, Sirio Canos Donnay from the Podemos international committee stated that in order to understand Podemos it was necessary to understand left populism.¹⁶ Podemos recognises that politics is a ground of struggle and antagonism, a struggle for hegemony not consensus. This antagonism is something that Podemos has attempted to generate consciously and deliberately by connecting individuals, initially in local 'circles', into a popular struggle against the elite – because "they" (*La Casta*, the Caste) don't represent "us" (*El Pueblo*, the People).

For Podemos this course of action is nothing less than the thoroughly populist process of 'constructing the people'. This desire to construct a new 'us' has led Podemos to avoid all the signs and symbols of the 'traditional left': (1) there are no revolutionary songs – instead, *Guardian* writer Owen Jones reported at the London meeting, Podemos election rallies opened to the tune of 'Ghostbusters', (2) there are no red flags, stars or hammer-and-sickles – the party's 2016 election manifesto (which sold out) was styled on an Ikea catalogue, (3) the 2016 election slogan for Unidos Podemos (the electoral coalition of Podemos and Izquierda Unida) was 'the smile of a country'.

Donnay argued that the *indignadas* had no articulation to politics and people from the

right related to the movement as well, so what attracted these people to Podemos meetings was a change of vocabulary, avoiding the terms 'Left' and 'Right'. The people are being constructed with entirely new symbols, in a complete break with the political past, in order to shape a new party and a new 'us'. Ultimately, Canos Donnay insisted, centrality means winning the struggle not winning the political centre.

That sounds like mere word play to me.

More fundamentally, I find the whole idea of 'constructing the people' to be rather problematic. In the case of Podemos there seems to be something profoundly elitist about a group of university professors determining the subjectivity of 'the people'. Furthermore, Benjamin McKean, writing in the US context, argues that 'because some subjects are constituted with a racial identity that prevents their unmediated identification with the people as a whole, [populism] locates marginalized identities as outside politics and unrepresentable'.¹⁷

The outcome of this for a populism that seeks to be inclusive is indeed problematic, to say the least: 'the populist identification of equality with homogeneity is the source of the racial resentment that characterizes many populist movements'.¹⁸ I would go beyond that and suggest that this false identification of equality with homogeneity also taps into existing racism and legitimises it.

For Aotearoa/New Zealand, we might therefore ask how 'constructing the people' could play out for tangata whenua, for hapū and iwi that each emphasise their own particular collective identity over Western notions of the individual or the nation state? In the context of the

relationship between tangata whenua and tauwiwi, ‘constructing a people’ by marginalising or, potentially, even erasing the lived experience of colonisation for Māori seems like nothing more than a very right-wing sort of populism.¹⁹ In Aotearoa/New Zealand we must reject populism of any sort.

Concluding his critical analysis of left populism, McKean usefully directs us towards the work of Stuart Hall, who emphasises the possibilities inherent in a politics ‘which works with and through difference, which is able to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible’.²⁰ The significant practical question which follows from this is one which frequently seems to vex the centre left. It is a question the radical left too must seek to answer: how might we organise ourselves in common struggle and resistance ‘without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities’?²¹

In seeking to avoid the traps of populism by actively encouraging a diversity of interests and identities, two organisational forms have been explored by the radical left in Europe: front politics and the connective party. I want to look at the possibilities suggested by each of these structures.

FRONT POLITICS: ENCOURAGING DIVERSITY, NOT SUPPRESSING IT

The academics who initiated Podemos are very familiar with a book by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe titled *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.²² In this book, Laclau and Mouffe reject the call that some on the left have made to abandon identity-based or ‘cultural’ struggles and ‘return to the class struggle’. One of the central tenets of their book is ‘the need to create a chain of equivalence among the various

democratic struggles against different forms of subordination’.²³ By this they mean that indigenous struggles, queer struggles, struggles against sexism and racism, and the defence of the natural environment must be articulated with each other and with the struggles of workers. A new hegemonic project of the left must ‘tackle issues of both “redistribution” and “recognition”’.²⁴

The key question, of course, is how can this ‘chain of equivalence’ be created, if we are not to go down the Podemos road and attempt to ‘construct the people’ anew? Rather than obliterating the political past and the political formations built on that history, as Podemos seems to desire, many of the new organisations of the radical left in Europe recognise the need to create a broad front among diverse existing formations to challenge the hegemony of neoliberal capital. A number of ways to construct this broad front, and to handle difference within it, have been devised.

The Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc) in Portugal, for example, functions with multiple platforms which openly debate programmes and contest positions within the party. Die Linke in Germany operates similarly. At the June 2016 Bloco de Esquerda party conference, three different programmes were published, debated and voted upon; and although one particular platform is dominant, each platform is represented on important committees.²⁵

Some left parties in Greece, such as Antarysa (and Syriza in the past), operate as coalitions of smaller parties. Antarsya, the Front of the Anti-Capitalist Revolutionary Communist Left and Radical Ecology, is a formation of seven left parties. It came together in early 2009 in the aftermath of an intense youth rebellion in

December 2008. Panagiotis Sotiris describes the ‘front politics’ of Antarsya as opening up ‘actual dialogue... actual ideological battle, but also synthesis and experimentation’.²⁶

Antarsya has around 3,000 members, and operates through local committees. The national conferences are attended by 1,000 delegates who elect a national coordinating committee of 101 members who meet every 2-3 months and a central committee which meets weekly.²⁷ Clearly this level of participation speaks of a highly democratised party of committed activists, and the party has been highly successful. The impact it has in social movements far outweighs its small size, and this level of commitment bears fruit in the electoral arena too: Antarsya has nine regional councillors, elected in 2014 across thirteen regions in Greece.

These platforms, tendencies or parties operating within a greater whole use mechanisms that are respectful of difference, and build a democratic left politics that avoids the pitfalls of populism. Sotiris expresses this well:

Front politics necessarily means that militants’ opinions are influenced not only by the group or organization they belong to, but also by the discussion within the fronts. In Antarsya you can see a more open discussion, questions traversing organizations. I think that by all means this is positive and trying to express or force monolithic unity to a group is a mistake.²⁸

However, it is not clear how these various types of front politics enable the expression of diversity of identity in all its forms, beyond acceptance. It would seem that the focus is primarily on managing the political, programmatic and theoretical differences

deriving from radical left traditions, while harnessing the energy of the various memberships for co-ordinated action. Stuart Hall’s concern for the ‘real heterogeneity of interests and identities’ seems to be absorbed within that goal, and not given equal importance to it.

Secondly, it appears that radical left front politics thrives in circumstances (Portugal, Germany, Greece) where a historically strong but now fragmented radical left tradition is attempting to recompose itself in order to recover meaning and relevance. I don’t think anyone would claim such a historically strong tradition exists in Aotearoa New Zealand.

As I have indicated, there is a second approach that might also be considered in creating a broad front of the radical left. In seeking a way to be inclusive of groups and organisations which might be regarded as philosophically of the radical left, but are operating beyond party forms, I now turn to the idea of the connective party.

THE CONNECTIVE PARTY: BUILDING A REAL ‘CHAIN OF EQUIVALENCE’

The connective party has been discussed in detail by Mimmo Porcaro, a theorist of the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PRC, the Communist Refoundation Party) in Italy.²⁹ With the idea of the mass workers’ party in crisis in the 1990s, Porcaro explains, the PRC determined that the roles and functions of the traditional mass party could no longer be carried by a ‘single political entity’. They had to be spread across ‘movement organisations, trade unions, civil society associations, independent media, and online networks’ as well as more ‘traditional parties’.³⁰

The idea was therefore to create a political

connection made up of several autonomous institutions. Each would be empowered to continue their own specific activity as well as, at the appropriate time, leading the overall direction of the wider connection. Porcaro describes such a political connection as ‘the material existence of an idea of socialism (or democratic society) as a network of self-organisations transforming society from below’.³¹ The flexibility of a connection like this is a strength and a resource which allows the connective party to operate in social contexts previously closed off to ‘traditional’ parties.

Porcaro identifies several problems in the execution of the PRC’s plan, the first of which was the dominance of rhetoric over practice – the party was unable to carry out the basic task of connection it had set itself. Secondly, many of the civil society associations which the PRC attempted to connect with were too close to the state and too reliant on the state for funding. They were unwilling to jeopardise that position to create the connective party with the PRC. Thirdly, the party was unable to organize among the precariat, i.e. people in casual, temporary, low-wage precarious jobs. It is also possible that the PRC’s strategy failed in part because the social media tools necessary to the task simply did not exist at the time. Now they do.

It has to be said that another significant factor has been the powerful appeal of charismatic populism which once again swept through Italy, this time in the guise of Beppe Grillo’s Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S, the Five Star Movement). Growing out of meet-ups begun by Grillo in 2005 and formally engaging in electoral politics from 2009, this environmentalist, anti-EU, anti-establishment, ‘neither-left-nor-right’ party swept up all the attention of the disillusioned and disempowered in Italy, first

blindsiding and then marginalising small parties like the PRC. In combination with the failings Porcaro identifies, this led to the PRC being hammered at the polls. While in 2006 it had 41 Deputies and 27 Senators in the national parliament, it now has none.

Nonetheless, I do not believe that the unfortunate timing and botched execution of the PRC’s plan means the underlying idea should be abandoned. So what does the idea have to offer us?

One of the issues Porcaro addresses in his writing is the importance of connecting the energy of horizontalism to contemporary answers to the strategic questions raised by Lenin (but not the embalmed corpus of ‘Leninism’).³² For example:

The fundamental demand of Lenin...is to always differentiate between two modalities of popular and class struggle: one that remains within the logic of the reproduction of capital and the other which builds the organizational, cultural and political conditions to get out of it.

The goal of a connective party must be to build such conditions, and first of all it must build the organisational conditions. The connective party can achieve this by providing a more explicit focus for what might otherwise be an energetic but unfocused array of radical networks, groups and individuals. A party that emphasises network and connection will be – and must be – consciously developing a new and newly relevant organisational form. Rather than trying to build the mid-twentieth century style mass party, this new connective party form must incorporate ways of working that fit with ‘the new social operating system’ of the twenty-first century, intelligently combining the tools of social

media with the traditional modes of community organising.³⁴

The patient building of reciprocal relationships and trust with like-minded groups and individuals can contribute to the cultural and political conditions for change through ‘networks of outrage and hope’.³⁵ With its focus on escaping from the logic of the reproduction of capital, the connective party can supply the hope (in ideas and in action) to go with the outrage and distress felt so very strongly by so many.

CONCLUSION

In reviewing aspects of the resurgence of the European left in recent years, I have emphasised what I perceive to be some valuable lessons, both in terms of what the radical left in Aotearoa/New Zealand might do (such as taking an implacable stance towards the centre-left) and

what it might avoid doing (such as the populist politics favoured by Podemos).

Laclau and Mouffe’s idea of a ‘chain of equivalence’ provides a useful starting point for thinking about organisational formations – though it seems clear to me that we must avoid reproducing Podemos’ attempt to ‘construct a people’ anew. For Aotearoa/New Zealand, in the absence of overtly political organisations that might form a broad front or formal political coalition of the radical left, it is reasonable to suggest that a chain of equivalence could be built across a variety of radical organisations through the active facilitation of a connective party. While much remains to be explored, and much remains to be said on these matters, and on the practicalities in particular, the idea of the connective party has relevant and durable insights for the radical left here in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

NOTES

1. My grateful thanks to the reviewers whose generous comments have helped considerably in improving this paper. Any remaining gaps in the arguments and ideas are entirely down to me.
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14. The Labour Party. 'For the many not the few: The Labour Party manifesto 2017'. Last accessed 20 July 2017. <http://www.labour.org.uk/index.php/manifesto2017>
15. Corbyn has been a Labour MP for 34 years and throughout he has resolutely fought racism, opposed war and challenged neoliberal policies, and as part of the Campaign Group of MPs he has articulated a clear socialist position through the years of the Blairite Third Way in the British Labour Party. I am not aware of any NZ Labour Party MP who could make a similar claim.
16. Exchanges on Democratic Politics, June 18, 2016, at the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster, London. See: <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/events/csd-exchanges-on-democratic-politics>

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David Parker is co-chair of the Kotare Trust, a community organisation committed to radical education for Tiriti-based social change in Aotearoa.