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MOVEMENTS, PARTY, STATE

A successful left politics requires a party capable of responding to popular grievances while also fostering hopeful visions for the future. Such a party should be informed by and work with social movements, and have a critical but sustained engagement with the state.

The opening decades of the twenty-first century have been marked by crisis. With no collective challenge to capital underway, complete ecological collapse looks close to certain when taking a long view. The medium term prospects for the vast majority of people are set by the recurrent, cyclical crises of capital. The repercussions of the 2008 global financial crisis are still being felt, is the left sufficiently prepared to proactively respond to the next when it inevitably arrives? The more immediate perspective is set by the deepening crisis of poverty and inequality, of which the housing crisis in Aotearoa/New Zealand is a spectacular manifestation. It is hard for many people to think beyond this crisis, due to its crushing, monotonous weight.

Further compounding these issues is the crisis of democracy, features of this being widespread cynicism and disengagement. Think of the 'missing million' voters in Aotearoa/ New Zealand elections. The non-existent membership of mainstream political parties, down from close to a quarter of the population in the

1950s to around 2% in recent years.¹ The late political-scientist Peter Mair characterised the exercise of government in most developed democracies today as tantamount to 'ruling the void'.² The recent US elections that delivered President Trump witnessed a 42% rate of voter abstention, with only 27% of the eligible voting public signing up for Trump's post-truth right-populism. Electoral politics appears to be exhausted in the current conjuncture.

The resurgence of far-right politics in the US and Europe signals that the liberal project itself is foundering. Its capital-centric values have fuelled the political-economic trends that are responsible for dissolving much of the material and civic infrastructure on which its citizenry depends. Discontent is widespread, resistance scattered and ineffective. No serious political alternatives are on the table, and the spectre of fascism, emboldened, is emerging from the shadows and becoming flesh. Why, in this time of crisis, does the radical left remain so weak? A total reimagining of what might be possible is called for, and new forms of political

organisation are needed.

In what follows, the historical trajectory of social movements will be considered as a means of appreciating some of the challenges the left faces today. One of these challenges concerns how the left positions itself relative to the state, which, as will be explored below, is a site rejected by many contemporary struggles. Through a return to questions of the party, it will be argued, the radical left can become, once again, a force able to effectively and productively challenge entrenched power systems. Any such project, however, will need to embrace tensions and paradoxes as a means of maintaining dynamism and integrity.³ While much ground must be covered by any such project in the years to come, thinking about movements, the state, and party in relation to social contestation is an important starting point.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS OLD AND NEW

A broad overview of social movement contestation offers a means of understanding the current conjuncture. While the picture presented here is international in scope, the same trends are, for the most part, present in Aotearoa/New Zealand. From the nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth, there was the rise and entrenchment of the 'old left'. Generally speaking, this was state-focussed, vertically organised, grounded in class politics, and oriented around robust critiques and challenges to capital. While countervailing organisational tendencies were present, most notably with anarchism and council communism, the state-focussed currents prevailed. This took a revolutionary turn in the East, as seen with Russia and China, and a social democratic one in the West.

From the mid-twentieth century the old left

came to increasingly be seen as 'part of the problem' by those struggling for egalitarian social change.⁴ A 'new left' arose, and for the most part it rejected the statism and authoritarianism associated with the old left. There was an explosion of new social movements, many of which took contestation onto a cultural terrain, shifting the emphasis of struggle from the economic dimension towards sustained critiques of dominant identities. The liberation of previously marginalised and repressed identities was an important dimension of these struggles, encompassing feminism, LGBTQI+ rights, black liberation, indigenous resistance, and so on.

In fighting these immediate, pressing, urgent battles, a broader vision of what might be possible faded from view. Indeed, utopian thinking, envisioning the future, which was once so important for the left, was maligned. Many of the movements emerging from this period tended, over time, toward horizontal, spontaneous and fluid forms of organisation. Struggles became more localised and immediate, an approach aptly named 'folk politics' by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams.⁵ After 40 years of such politics important advances have been made on the cultural terrain, we live in societies far more respectful of difference than previously, although there is still far to go.

On the economic/material side of the ledger, however, things look much worse than they did 40 years ago. Here in Aotearoa/New Zealand inequality has been steadily deepening, personal indebtedness is rising, and public services declining.⁶ In rejecting the state the radical left has left it in the hands of a capital-focussed elite. With the downplaying of the economic as an important site of struggle the country has found itself in a period of dramatic inequality. With the

abandoning of bold visions for a better future the country has become mired in a miserable present with little hope. How can this impasse be overcome?

EMBRACING TENSIONS: TOWARDS A NEW MODALITY FOR THE LEFT

Rather than seeking to break with the past as a means of overcoming the shortcomings of the left, it is argued here that a dialectical reading of the situation is needed. The 'old left' had successfully organised on a large scale and profoundly influenced the geo-political and economic conditions that prevailed by the middle of the twentieth century. But ultimately its project failed. It was sclerotic, state-centric, class-bound, and its politics were no longer up to the task of extending emancipation. Rather, the old left was becoming an obstacle to effective social change.

Social movements and a more anarchistic radical politics successfully challenged the failings of the old left, and won important victories on the cultural terrain, as well as drawing attention, again, to the importance of 'bottom up politics'. This brand of politics, however, has done little to effectively challenge capital in the contemporary era, even in the wake of a global financial crisis. The most visible wave of recent struggle in the West, the Occupy movement, revealed the impasse of contemporary radical politics: it can effectively highlight a problem but is able to do little by way of addressing it.

A synthesis of these two stages – an awareness of the strengths of the old and the new, and of the shortcomings and failings of each – holds the promise for an effective emancipatory politics of the twenty-first century. A reconceptualisation of the party form is a vital task if such a synthesis is to be reached. To call for the party is to also

position the state as an entity that must, once again, be confronted head-on. To advocate for a synthesis is not to call for some static point of equilibrium, where a perfect, ideal form of organisational and strategic development has been reached. Rather, what is being called for is the positive recognition of an existing field of tensions. It is a call for a left project capable of harnessing contradictions as stimuli for ongoing innovation, instead of seeing them as problems to be solved one way or the other.

By way of example, the following are some possible lines along which the project to found a new party, or other forms of new organisation, might develop. First, it would be an open ended project, free from the dogmatism of the old left, yet simultaneously cognisant of the need for grand visions. Second, it would destabilise the dichotomy of leaders and led, while recognising the need for leadership and clear organisational structures. Third, it would aim to be done with the state as we know it, while seeking to work within and through the state. Fourth, it would recognise a multiplicity of identities and forms of oppression, while also realising that economic exploitation and precarity create the conditions for a collective identity. Fifth, it would be virulently anti-capitalist, but cognisant of dynamics within capitalism that could be constructively tapped into to move through and beyond capitalism. Sixth, the emancipation of the individual would be an important animating ideal, although it is through our collective being, cooperation, and struggle that this is realised.

As a means of fostering a shared conceptual basis for such a broad reaching project, it is useful to situate it within what Álvaro García Linera, the current Vice-President of Bolivia, has termed the 'communist horizon' of our current age.⁷ To call for the possibility of communism is

not to enter into apologia for the fallen Soviet Union, nor identify with the state-capitalism of contemporary China. In each of these cases there is only the name, never the substance. Rather, it is to find oneself in agreement with Marx's famous dictum: from each according to their ability, to each according to their need. It is to struggle for a society in which people are empowered within the context of their everyday lives. It is the view that all humans are productive and creative, that they are formed by their social conditions and in turn produce and reproduce these conditions.

It is to call for a democracy that is not merely formal in nature but is concrete. Instead of a democracy embodied in the passive casting of a vote every three years, it empowers people to make practical decisions with others about their workplaces, communities, schools, and so on. It is to recognise that massive inequalities of wealth – for instance, that 8 men have as much wealth as 50% of the world's population – are not naturally occurring phenomena, but are socially produced and socially contestable.⁸ It is to oppose structurally embedded inequalities and hierarchies in the name of equality.

To call for communism is to make a stand against the reign of cynicism, it is to contest the impoverished view that holds humans to be selfish animals concerned only with their own survival. To call for the possibility of communism is to recognise humans' capacity for cooperation, and to oppose the alienation of this capacity within current economic and political systems. It may be an idealistic call, but ideas shape the world in which we live. While a realist surveys the situation and tells us that all is as it must be, the idealist says that we can do better – that we must do better.

To fight for ideals is to not be naively blind to the material and structural limitations faced, but it does entail fostering a vision that looks beyond what is to see what could be. Indeed, so long as the current logics structuring social life remain and continue to propel us towards complete environmental collapse, perhaps the most realistic position to assume is an idealistic one. There is a need to realise a radically different future than the one currently on offer.

Whether or not one wishes to situate oneself within the communist horizon, what is being proposed here is a radical politics for the twenty-first century that combines actions against state apparatuses, as conducted by social movements, with the actions of a party able to move within these apparatuses. Such a project needs to productively embrace tensions and contradictions, the capacity to do so offers the chance to move beyond the shortcomings of radical politics in the twentieth century.

THE STATE AND PARTY

Despite claims that the state has been eclipsed by the corporation and transnational organisations in the age of globalisation, the state remains a site of concentrated power in the contemporary age. It creates and maintains the conditions favourable for financial capital, and it primarily defends the interests of those with capital. The work of Nicos Poulantzas can be turned to so as to better understand some of the dynamics at play within the state.⁹

Poulantzas argues that state power is always a relational power. The state is not some monolithic block set apart from society. State apparatuses are shot through with contradictions, and house competing class factions. When pressed by popular demands

from below, the state must respond. Power is mobile within the state, moving between different institutions. Factions within state apparatuses will try to insulate sites of power from democratic pressure. The Reserve Bank is an example of such an insulated institution. The capitalist class tends to hold the balance of power, one way or another, in capitalist societies. It will always, at the first opportunity, seek to roll-back previous concessions ceded to popular demands. Aotearoa/New Zealand has been experiencing such a roll-back since 1984 under the auspices of what is commonly called the 'neoliberal' project.

No matter how much one might come to resent the actions of those governing the state, and no matter how frustrated one might be at the rigidity of state institutions, to reject the state altogether is the weakest possible form of politics, argues Poulantzas. He repeatedly emphasises that there is no 'outside' to the state where political action can be undertaken. The 'popular masses' can deploy networks and centres of struggle at a distance from state apparatuses, but never from outside of the state. There can be no simple opposition between 'internal' and 'external' struggles. Rather, Poulantzas maintains, both must be pursued simultaneously. Successful strategy involves maintaining a certain distance from state apparatuses, while also taking action within the state to transform the state.

While not without their problems, recent events in Latin America offer examples of such a strategic approach in action.¹⁰ In Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela there have been attempts to realise state power through democratic elections, so that the composition of the state itself can be changed.

Syriza, in Greece, provides another example. Buoyed by social movements and popular discontent, the party promised much but quickly became detached from its social movement base once it reached government.¹² Once in power it began to ape the very parties its creation had set out to discredit. Podemos in Spain, which shares a similar trajectory to Syriza, looks set to repeat the same pattern. There is a gap opening between those at the centre of the party and the wider membership, and, in turn, the social movement base.¹³ Both of these examples show how the involvement of radical left parties in the parliamentary sphere can quickly lead to the subtraction of 'radical' from the equation. Success requires a strong, mobilised, enduring social base from which the party cannot become detached.

Another recent development has been the surge of support for a return to social democracy. A prime example being the UK Labour Party's strong electoral showing in the 2017 general election under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, buoyed as this was by the Momentum campaign; notable here, also, was the support Bernie Sanders' presidential bid attracted in 2016. In some respects, Momentum is an attempt to create a social movement from above and is probably quite limited, in ways that Syriza and Podemos have been, through its immediate subjection to electoral politics. A further problem as faced by Sanders with the Democratic Party, and which Corbyn will continue to face with Labour, is the power of entrenched party elites to resist the possibility of a popular turn.

Attempts to transform existing political parties involve immense expenditures of energy which, given the small existing membership of these parties, and the inertia that established interests

in these parties can generate, begs the question if efforts might be better spent elsewhere? A possible answer being the creation of a new party able to directly address those currently disengaged from, and ill served by, existing political parties. Despite the limitations, though, the traction that parties like Syriza or the Momentum campaign have been able to achieve shows an appetite for a more stridently left form of political contestation.

But it can also be asked what could happen if a more radical party came into being that did not immediately seek to pitch itself into the parliamentary domain: one that situated itself, for want to a better term, under the communist horizon? Such a party should avoid the immediate temptation of engaging with electoral politics and cycles, as tends to be the case in this country for new parties, as previously seen with New Labour, Alliance and Mana. A new party could instead position itself in a longer temporality. It could make claims against the state in the immediate period, and only engage in electoral politics when it was sure of a large, mobilised social base able to back it.

Effectively connecting with such a social base would involve a long process of organisational work. Social tendencies toward radical change are already present, but tend to be disconnected from one another. They are often reactive, addressing immediate problems, such as our current housing crisis; or they are very localised, and directed towards building autonomous capacities within particular communities, as seen, for instance, in the proliferation of urban gardening initiatives across Aotearoa/New Zealand. To add another dimension here, in the case of tangata whenua, there is a separate yet overlapping field of contestation from which tauwi need to learn and find ways

of productively connecting. A radical politics attuned to indigenous struggles, and with indigenous leadership, has the capacity to seriously challenge embedded social hierarchies and inequalities.

A party aiming at dramatic social change would be grounded in, and informed by, existing struggles. It would also serve as a dense nodal point for connecting diffuse struggles within a shared conceptual space. Through connecting different struggles and transformative projects the party is able to amplify them, making the sum greater than the parts. Further, the party would be able to contribute toward an upward scaling of struggles and contestation, both within the national realm and internationally. The party would aim to support and encourage the flourishing of society's autonomous capacities, while also developing strategy aimed at initiating deep structural shifts in regards to the nation-state, economy, and the relations of power that stem from patriarchal, colonial, and heteronormative social relations.¹⁴

What is being called for is, quite simply, a new common sense, a counter-hegemonic project. To say this is unrealistic is to buy into the fallacy that there is no alternative. Another world is possible, it is already with us, but the conditions of its full flourishing need to be nurtured.

The party provides a space where those seeking to move beyond the inequities of the present can find one another, and develop new means of working together. To aim for more specificity than this, at this moment, as to what the party might be, would be counter to the call. An important element of the party to come is the principle of openness and the pursuit of novel organisational capacities, something the persistent remnants and remainders of previous

communist and radical socialist parties have been unable to achieve in this country. Through embracing the many tensions it will necessarily face as it develops, a new party will remain

supple as it gains momentum and grows in size. The openness such an approach requires will be essential for overcoming the current impasse faced by the left.

NOTES

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