

Beyond the Broad Left Party

October 17, 2015



The radical left strategy of working within broad left parties has suffered a major setback after SYRIZA's capitulation. The answer to this crisis lies neither in continuing "business as usual," nor in ignoring the question of political power. SYRIZA's capitulation to the austerity diktat, the ensuing emergence of Popular Unity and the fresh elections looming ahead, have brought the question of organization for the radical left at the forefront of debate. SYRIZA, which used to be the prime example of left unity against austerity, is giving way to an increasingly fragmented political landscape of the Greek left, as Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras declared his will to implement the new memorandum.

Both the paradigm of the broad left party as well as that of coalitions of the revolutionary left are in a deep crisis, and the situation poses critical questions for the international left. The answers will determine its future course, not just in Greece but also in all the other countries where similar broad left parties are well established. It's not the intention of this article to show the right way out of the current impasse, but rather to contribute to the debate about the circumstances in which the Greek people's proud "Oxi" to austerity was transformed in just a matter of days into a mandate for more brutal austerity by a government of the left. I argue that the reasons for this are to be found both in certain structural dynamics of broad left parties, as well as in a particular reductionist mindset, in which overcoming the memoranda-imposed austerity was transformed from a political strategy to an ideology that was never implemented in the end. At the same time, I argue that the current crisis does not necessarily expose the limits of left reformism, but rather the limits of a particular subspecies of it. In understanding these factors lies the key to preventing the mistakes of the past from repeating themselves in the future. Only then can new strategies be developed that are up to the task of rolling back austerity and putting the prospect of socialism firmly on the agenda.

The end of a cycle

Whatever happens next, one thing is certain: we are witnessing the end of a long cycle in the history of the international left, particularly in Europe and North America. The precise origins of this cycle are a matter of debate. Some might name the French public sector strikes of 1995, other the Seattle protests of 1999 as starting points. Preceding the advent of this cycle were more than two decades of defeat upon defeat and neoliberal triumphalism. The collapse of the Soviet Union helped amplify this, as it seemingly discredited all streams of Marxism for good, regardless of how critical they were of the Stalinist regimes. Now, various streams of Marxists and Keynesians, from the *altermondialistes* of Attac in France to refounded left-wing parties elsewhere in Europe, were filling the new political void and giving it a concrete political identity after social democracy's zealous conversion to a particularly cynical form of neoliberalism misnamed "social liberalism." The collapse of SYRIZA and the ensuing fragmentation of Greece's left (which might eventually be replicated elsewhere in Europe) marks the end of this cycle and raises, as it should serious questions about future strategy.

At the heart of this debate is the seemingly eternal question on the pros and cons of the radical left working within broad left reformist formations. In a recent article, Catarina Principe and Dan Russel name a number of problems facing these formations, while at the same time stressing that "these projects remain the only viable path toward an eventual rupture with not just austerity but capitalism itself." Accordingly, they view left reformist parties as "instruments of social intervention." Tad Tietze in another article holds a more pessimistic view, seeing SYRIZA's

spectacular capitulation following a successful popular mobilization before the referendum as “an obituary for the idea that radical left politics seeking governmental power is a viable solution to the growing social contradictions in Europe.”

Of fatalists and optimists

The aforementioned debate can be summarized (very simplistically) as following: On the one hand, there are those (“the fatalists”) who greet the emergence of the parties as societal shift leftwards but nevertheless stress that their electoralism will sooner or later lead them down the way of capitulation. On the other hand there are others (“the optimists”) who maintain that working within broad left formations widens the revolutionary left’s audience and induces critical masses in society to expand their anti-capitalist horizons. Both postulates are entirely correct in principle, and their most sophisticated proponents will be honest enough to admit shortcomings in each of them. However, they do not suffice in articulating a clear preference in favor of any path. The limitations with the first example are obvious. The members of the most representative formations of this path – ANTARSYA in Greece, the NPA in France, the SWP and its successors in the UK – are usually dedicated, highly competent and well-respected activists. Those parties were instrumental in creating principled mass movements against austerity, war and racism in the last ten years. But they have not achieved even the slightest electoral breakthrough before and after the outbreak of the global financial crisis. Bourgeois elections are of course not their prime operating ground, but they nevertheless act as instruments of measuring their appeal as formations trusted to transform society, which is one of the main reasons they participate in them in the first place. Being “right all along” is obviously not a guarantee of success for when left reformism fails to deliver. There are a number of reasons for this, but the inability of these formations to break out from a subaltern status ranks high on the list, next to their failure to cast themselves as useful electoral alternatives. Radical left politics in modern day capitalist democracy – and unlike in pre-1917 Russia or Egypt today for example – are not just a set of ideas or a movement but inevitably a self-reproducing subcultural social milieu, in whose self-assuring confines it is often quite tempting to remain instead of venturing into a broader environment. The definition of a broader environment in this case should not be limited to a picket line, a public meeting or a paper sale during a demonstration, but should equally apply to a common organizational environment where different political approaches in the left are constantly in dialogue with one another and put to the test. It’s an environment where there are equal amounts of talking as well as listening and understanding of how people that were socialized in reformist traditions think and act.

Despite its present state, one of SYRIZA’s major achievements was creating such an environment, arguably at its best before the different radical left organizations composing the original alliance were dissolved for the sake of a more coherent organization based on a “one person, one vote” principle – one that ultimately favored the charisma of Tsipras’s persona at the expense of more radical forces. Broad left parties as collective organizations But there are limits. Yes, it is true that parties like SYRIZA have opened up to the social movements to include various strands of radical ecology and feminism for instance, especially in their youth wings. But so far these moves have yielded little of practical significance, as SYRIZA’s backtracking on various issues while in government demonstrates. Putting a known right-wing nationalist with anti-immigrant views as minister of defence and violently turning against a popular movement protesting the construction of a gold mine in northern Greece, are just a few examples of how shallow the radical left’s influence on SYRIZA’s top brass was, at least since the electoral “openings towards the center” after the 2012 elections. Indeed, the ease with which internal democracy was sidelined in the past three years, as Tsipras began relying more on the media and professional PR-firms, was astonishing. Some reasons for this are structural and typical for all current broad left parties. Left reformist parties are sophisticated collective organizations. They are institutions with an internal life of their own. The

right wing of these parties is usually clever enough to take control of what party sociologists call “zones of uncertainty”, sensitive areas of operation – the party press, funding distribution, a media-savvy charismatic figure, control over the parliamentary caucus and others. They are generally at ease with the left taking charge of writing party manifestos, doing the recruiting and generating mobilizing myths for strengthening the party’s collective identity. Even in times of flux in a society like in Greece from 2010 onwards, this structural embeddedness of left reformist parties produces situations where the left can easily be outmaneuvered if need be, by blackmailing those indecisive members with abstract appeals for “unity” and painting dissidents as wreckers. Just consider the many SYRIZA MPs who reiterated their opposition to the new memorandum but voted for it “for the sake of unity.” Clearly, they live in a world of their own, the world of the party, and this is not a moral judgement.

Uniformity on the other hand, need not always be shifting a broad left party rightwards. In the German context, the dwindling significance of organized factions within DIE LINKE since the announcement of the party manifesto in 2011 has benefited a much stronger anti-capitalist identity that relies less on a charismatic figure as in Greece, even as the right retains key functions in the apparatus. This can of course drastically change with the deepening of social crisis, during which ideological manifestos become less significant compared to the pressing matters of strategy and transitional demands. But it goes to show that “going broad” is not a “one size fits all” recipe but a strategy whose effects may produce different results depending on various circumstances involved. All in all, broad left parties can be very hospitable environments for the radical left, but we should not overlook the fact that other forces within them have quite different agendas than our own, which often prevent us from simply utilizing these parties as instruments of social intervention. Politicians like Alexis Tsipras are not naïve believers in the power of parliaments to transform society, who can be convinced of the advantages of a more radical approach. They are skilled gamblers with a significant degree of autonomy, who will balance between different social and political forces in order to promote their own specific version of reformism. And in doing this, they will happily dispose of those that disagree with them from the left, when the need arises.

The danger of anti-austerity politics as an end in itself

Nevertheless, other flaws that can be held accountable for SYRIZA’s capitulation have less to do with organizational structure and more with a certain mindset that were followed in the last years. SYRIZA rode the giant wave of massive social struggles against the memorandum-imposed austerity measures enforced by Greece’s traditional establishment parties. While correctly seeing this struggle as the main task of the day, it did not integrate other important political fields such as foreign policy or the struggle against the Nazis of Golden Dawn into this strategy in a coherent way or in any way at all. Instead, for the wing currently heading the remains of SYRIZA, the “memorandum/anti-memorandum” contradiction was elevated from a strategy arising from the conjuncture, to an ideology (in the sense of never being implemented fully). This transformation became visible after 2012 and the abandoning of the slogan of a “government of the left.” Hence the significance attributed by the Tsipras government to the symbolic abolition of the term “troika,” or its insistence that “in contrast to previous governments,” it just doesn’t accept everything imposed on it by the lenders without a murmur. Even as the Tsipras government began imposing harsh austerity on the Greek people, its current election rhetoric is be targeted mainly against the “rotten parties of the old days.” But more importantly, the predominance of the memorandum/anti-memorandum cleavage was reflected in the alliance with the right-wing anti-austerity “Independent Greeks” (AN.ELL), which was not merely born out of necessity but was also facilitated by the good working relationship between Tsipras and AN.ELL leader Panos Kammenos in the last few years.

What followed January 25 was a situation, where everything was subordinated to the futile task of convincing the lenders of their supposed interest in restructuring Greek debt. As Tsipras and

Varoufakis were negotiating in Brussels and Berlin, the “left patriot” foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias was signing agreements with Tel Aviv, expanding military cooperation and granting Israeli military officials immunity from prosecution on Greek soil (becoming the second country to do so after the United States). Kammenos on the other hand, now the defence minister, was echoing the known slogans of Greek irredentism on his inaugural visit to Cyprus, proclaiming the Greek military contingent there to be “not just a force of deterrence but also a force of attack.” Tsipras’s willingness to enter a “tripartite alliance” with Cyprus and Egypt’s totalitarian regime was only the natural conclusion of a general “pragmatism” and a quest for respectability on the international level that set in after the lost elections of 2012. Too much attention was paid to the themes of austerity, precarity and the question of political power, and very little to the importance of a truly independent and principled foreign policy in triggering vital international solidarity from below. As if remaining within the confines of NATO and U.S.-led alliances in the region is compatible with breaking with an austerity partly imposed by the IMF, an institution acting as multilateral cover for U.S. efforts to “promote free markets” worldwide.

Even more ironic for a left government fighting austerity was the retention of bloated military budgets, whose sole purpose is maintaining the “balance of power” in the sub-imperialist rivalry with Turkey. On the antifascist front, SYRIZA missed the opportunity created by the double momentum of the left’s electoral victory and the incarceration of the Golden Dawn leadership, to finish off the Nazis politically by isolating them further. Instead, its attitude to Golden Dawn was a part of a classic game of “divide and rule” towards the right in general. Relying on the dynamics of electoralism as it was, the government tried to weaken the right by nominating a rival of former Prime Minister Samaras from within New Democracy for the ceremonial title of the presidency, by entering a coalition with AN.ELL and by being alarmingly tolerant towards the presence of the Nazis in parliament. This attitude was not even reflective of the left-right split inside the party, for even president of parliament Zoe Konstantopoulou, who has since then joined Popular Unity – and who can by no means be accused of harboring any Nazi sympathies; on the contrary, she is an advocate for migrant and LGBTQ rights – has taken a narrow legalistic approach to the issue reminiscent of the attitude of German social democracy before 1933. This can be summed up as treating the Nazis as a legitimate party, “since the people voted them into parliament.” This policy was not just questionable from a moral point of view; it was also shortsighted, given how obvious the synergies between the Nazis on the one hand and big capital, especially the ship owners were on the other. In the last years, the Golden Dawn has voted for tax breaks for the rich in parliament, and helped create scab unions at Piraeus’s ship repair zone to counter traditional communist dominance of the labor movement there. Even as they officially supported “Oxi,” they reportedly instructed members to vote for the lenders’ measures. Never before since the rise of the German Nazis has the narrative of fascism as an “antisystemic” force of the underclasses against the supposedly liberal elite seemed as preposterous as in Greece today. Add to this the known connections of Golden Dawn with the “deep state” and it is not hard to see it being used by capital in the case of a drastic rupture with austerity that would threaten the vital interests of the ruling classes.

But of course, SYRIZA never intended to antagonize those classes in the first place. It is often said that SYRIZA’s government never had a “Plan B.” This is only partly true. SYRIZA tried in its first days to truly be a different government than all the previous ones. Its first announcements by decree included halting the privatization of the port of Piraeus (a decision later reversed), granting citizenships to children of immigrants and announcing measures to combat the humanitarian disaster caused by the crisis. Yianis Varoufakis did an excellent job in exposing the shallowness, intellectual incompetence and deeply authoritarian nature of institutions like the Eurogroup. His legacy in this regard will not be forgotten easily. But as SYRIZA’s strategy ran its course, its Plan B was not a rupture with the Eurozone or the EU, but initiating a process of modernizing the political system, combating corruption and moving the party’s social base to the center and the middle

classes. The contours of this Plan B of an entirely different type were visible for the last three years. Left reformism in the age of TINA can be broadly defined as a strategy of reforming a status quo perceived as unacceptable in a progressive direction. But this direction can vary. It might be geared towards socialist transformation, but it can alternately also be a return to and expansion of the welfare state, simply liberating the political system from feudal vestiges of clientelism (especially in the European south) or even managing austerity more “humanely”.

What’s left?

It’s very easy to claim that SYRIZA’s capitulation generally exposes the limits of reformism. However, if this is the case, why have thousands flocking to Jeremy Corbyn’s campaign for the leadership of the Labour party in the UK? And why – albeit a very different context – is income inequality currently an issue in light of Bernie Sanders’ campaign for the Democratic nomination in the U.S.? Shouldn’t SYRIZA’s capitulation have created a “collapse of the Soviet Union”-moment, relegating reformism to some “dustbin of history”? Clearly, this is the end of the road for a certain type of left populism that bases its strategy on the assumption that all the players in the game are rational actors who have an interest in rolling back austerity and promoting growth. This is the ideology that has recently collapsed. For all its limitations, the reformism of Oskar Lafontaine, Zoe Konstantopoulou and Jeremy Corbyn, is different from the one of Tsipras, Pablo Iglesias and Gregor Gysi, who emphasize compromise through the power of “better arguments” in their rhetoric, rather than confrontation. Indeed, the biggest contradiction within the forces challenging neoliberalism today is not the one between those who want socialism by smashing the state and those who want socialism by using it to implement radical reforms that will put the current economic system into question. It is the one between those who talk about socialism at all, and those who want to “save capitalism from itself,” to make it more redistributive and less speculative, or greener and more sustainable. If one believes in the theory of permanent revolution or in winning over the state in a Poulantzian strategy is currently not the pressing dilemma of the day. What is now needed is realignment of all forces who won’t settle for an “austerity with a human face” in the name of some hollow idea of socially transforming the European Union. We don’t know yet what form this realignment will take, but it will vary depending on the country involved. Ideally, it should involve constant dialogue, interaction and experimentation between different currents of the organized revolutionary and radical-reformist left. If the experience of Greece teaches us something valuable, it’s that, there are no magical recipes and that the answer lies neither exclusively in going broad or “populist”, nor in the abstract movement, nor in formations that are ideologically more coherent but have a limited influence on the electoral level.

The need for a concrete set of demands

Does this mean that the question of reform versus revolution, which was so well formulated by Rosa Luxemburg, is not relevant anymore? Certainly not. And neither is the question of organization in the terms posed by Lenin and Gramsci. There is clearly a need for those parts of the working class that are most class-conscious to organize in a circle whose aim will be to expand, both in quantity and quality. But what the current conjuncture also desperately begs for are demands with the capacity to function as transitional demands if the need arises; that will go beyond simply rolling back austerity and promoting growth, while at the same appearing practically plausible to great parts of society beyond the confines of the anti-capitalist left. The key demand of exiting the Eurozone, as it is expressed now by Popular Unity, Lafontaine and possibly Mélenchon is one such demand. There is no use in left parties seeking office in the first place if the states they seek to govern are dependent on politicized neoliberal institutions for their liquidity. Its subversive nature, especially for Greece now, lies in the fact that its left-wing version (not Wolfgang Schäuble’s “Grexit + austerity”) can only be implemented through a direct confrontation with local and international capital, through capital controls and nationalization of key industries and the banks. However, like

the demand of abolishing the memoranda, this demand also runs the risk of turning into an ideology, filled with illusions about economic growth through soaring exports and alliances with the equally neoliberally minded BRICS states. To prevent this strategy from meeting the same fate as the one of reforming the Eurozone from within, it must be accompanied by other, equally important demands that will prevent other vital aspects from being subordinated to it. Just as the Bolshevik slogan was “peace, bread and land” and not “peace, and maybe later bread and land”, the left’s current set of proposals cannot be reduced to a break with the neoliberal EU institutions. They must equally include putting an end to the inhumanity currently underway throughout the continent, the thousands of refugees treated in the most disgraceful way by institutions that profess to constitute a “normative power” and their enforcing instruments such as FRONTEX. These must include the dissolution of NATO against the backdrop of resurgent Cold War rivalries over the Ukraine. And they must finally include the Europe-wide struggle against all forms of racism and fascism. Any strategy that focuses exclusively on just one of those demands (for instance demanding the abolition of FRONTEX but viewing Grexit as a “regression” to the national state) is bound to fail, even in its own terms – the realization of one is contingent on the realization of the rest.

Leandros Fischer is a member of DIE LINKE in Germany. He wrote his doctoral thesis on DIE LINKE’s position on Israel and Palestine.