

Opening the left door wide

November 27, 2013

This essay is inspired by the recent article by Denis Godard titled: "The NPA in crisis: We have to explain because we have to start again." His article is a review of the strategic orientation of the historically Trotskyist-originated tendencies that prioritize building independent class formations and which see electoral vehicles as expressions of anti-capitalist cum revolutionary socialist movements "from below" (that is, based in and directly responsive to grassroots and rank-and-file formations).

There is no dispute here with this strategic orientation, on the contrary. But while Godard sees a need for recreating a "new strategy" for the left, its "newness" pertains mainly to the "sameness" between the old LCR [French Revolutionary Communist League] and the new NPA [New Anti-Capitalist Party] (into which the LCR dissolved as its largest component). It is a critique in part of what Godard sees as the fixation on the electoral and on the programmatic differences that define the LCR or NPA vis a vis the rest of the left, and the failure to re-invent itself in response to the new ("novel") conditions thrown up by the systemic crisis of capitalism and the resulting mass revolts with even more explosive conditions expected to come.

He argues further that the organized left needs to move beyond the propagandistic terrain defined by these programmatic definitions - alluding to a propensity for a "top down" ready-made electoral program for the masses, rather than the active refounding of left organizations that would develop a political expression organically while attached and integral to the social movements. He contends that the NPA was too quick to prioritize the electoral, as if compelled to compete with the upstart Front de Gauche (FdG, or Left Front) in the impending 2012 presidential contest. He does not mention that failure to achieve the modest threshold of votes needed to ensure the state subsidy of approximately \$1 million would cripple the party. So, why the rush after the election? And is base-building within the current capacity of the left? Despite the differences, there are some important parallels for us to consider.

It is certainly true that the European left has a longer and steadier tradition, a historical strength, that is inconceivable in the US. The cultural and structural advantages accrued by even very modest electoral successes of parties like the NPA, FdG, (or, eg, Die Linke in Germany whose think tank, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, recently opened a branch in Manhattan), is indisputable. As for membership cadre, at the NPA's current estimated membership of 3,000, the size of a comparable party in the US would be about 15,000 (more than 50 times the size of Solidarity). At its founding, before the split over support for the FdG candidate Melenchon, the numbers were triple those (9K in France = approx. 45K in US). The numbers for the French CP are even more challenging for us to conceive of here, unheard of since at least 75 years ago, if then: 134K in France = approx. 650K in US. So, perhaps, it is not completely outlandish to call for base-building with the urgency Godard does, considering the relatively far greater capacity of the French left, despite, and one could say because of, the decline in the NPA membership and its poll results (2002: far left 10.44% [LCR: 4.25%]; 2007: 7.07% [LCR: 4.08%]; 2012: NPA 1.15%/FdG 11.1%).

Godard does not suggest that the revolutionary left's traditional "values" - class independence and the co-development of a movement from below along with and as a prerequisite for its electoral expression, and to forge its own institutions to replace those of the existing capitalist system - is incorrect. Instead he argues that the existing NPA is stuck in the mud of programmatic divisions as a consequence of its electoral preoccupation. He defends the orientation of the NPA, as against an alliance or regroupment of some kind with the FdG, and calls urgently for re-booting the NPA, this time getting the strategy (action plan) right. His argument rests on what I believe are two errors of

analysis: an exaggerated assessment of the depth and breadth of “mass revolts” and a mistaken conflation of the capitalist crisis as equivalent to a crisis of capitalist hegemony.

These errors of analysis lead Godard to the flawed conclusion that the crisis of the NPA – and we can extrapolate that to say of the left generally in the advanced capitalist countries – is a crisis of the *will* of the left in a period of important new opportunities. I would argue that yearning for a “new strategy” in this period really still amounts to wishing for improved social conditions that could make a more advanced strategy viable, but that the reality confirms the prevailing orientation albeit within the limits of the shrunken capacity of the left and the constraints imposed by the ever-increasing dominance of the capitalist class. This is not to say that the left is doomed to marginalization, but neither is it reasonable to re-orient on the basis of a mistaken analysis of the movements and of the agency of the organized left to “lead” (drag us out of the mud, so to speak) as a matter of will. To be sure, a “re-boot” of some sort is in order, but on what basis is not so clear.

Godard begins by casting aside the temptation to blame the failure of the NPA to lead the French left in recent national elections on “the period we’re in” or on the FdG which usurped part of the NPA’s “space”. Godard states: “The opposite is true: the inability of the NPA to show its usefulness in this period of crisis of the system and of mass revolts was the reason for its internal crisis.” He asserts that the “times we live in have seen no less than the start of a systemic crisis of capitalism, quantitatively the largest social revolt in France since 1968 (the movement for pensions), the Arab revolutions, the Indignados movement in Spain and Greece, the Occupy movement in the United States. How can you make such a period the reason for the failure of an anti-capitalist party?” But the reality is much more complex.

Is the deep global financial and economic crisis, which most of the left believes to be true, really equivalent to a massive social crisis in play, or put another way, to a crisis of the hegemony of capital?

In the first place, all of the “mass revolts” he cites are not equivalent. There is certainly more maturity and massiveness to the Arab Spring, although that comparison should be carefully qualified by local particularities of relationships of forces, degree of unanimity of the working class, not to mention the effectiveness or not of existing and sometimes evolving leftist forces. It is one thing to recognize the revolutionary potential in Egypt when a genuinely massive popular uprising combines with a hitherto critically repressed labor movement to shut down the economy and force the overthrow of the head of the regime (the “capo dei capi” as it were. Nevertheless, the “revolution” is obviously far from finished and beset by social divisions and political sectarianism.) It is quite another to compare it in the same thought with the overstated impact of the Occupy movement in the US, which despite its contribution to making visible an undercurrent of dissatisfaction and giving new voice to the grievances of the 99%, does not represent a transformational agency, nor even a convincing expression of the class. The class is too polarized and confused to be able to form an expression of mass discontent or to compel a movement for social change. Despite much worse conditions generally (cf. the US) for the working class in the Spanish state, the Indignados seem to be no further along. Even in France, for which Godard claims the largest social revolt since 1968, it is a dubious “success” that mobilized perhaps millions and for the first time since 1968 was unable to prevent austerity measures from implementation by the government. It is much more important at this point to eliminate the confusion that besets and discourages the class, essentially the present orientation for most of the revolutionary socialist left.

The nearsightedness of a focus on the “mass revolts” as indicators also blinds us to what we are loath to recognize in our daily lives: the entrenched consolidation of capital and its functionaries. Each day we read in Labor Notes and elsewhere of the occasional victories both small and large, from Republic Windows and Doors to the Chicago Teachers. But as inspirational as these are, they

are exceptional. The broad truth is well known and unavoidable: union representation at the lowest levels for generations and having lost any advantage it once had at the bargaining table (more and more often a result of lost leverage as much as treacherous union leaders); the division of wealth is at historic levels abetted by a corporate class able to plunder abroad and loot at home virtually at will; a political system in the lands of the “free” that stands for “free market” more than the producers of wealth, that disenfranchises and enslaves its subjects, able to set aside legal and ethical constraints with ease as the needs arise; raping the world’s resources both material and human at will. The impotence of the working class is never more apparent or certain than today, not just to the left but to the masses who would be in revolt.

In the second place, Godard criticizes those within the NPA who blame their poor electoral showing on the FdG taking advantage of the NPA’s weakness, defined as the inability to build its base among the communities and institutions of the working class it aims to represent. This is not so clear. In fact, the LCR had been out-polling the PCF (Communist Party) in the last elections, despite the far greater saturation of PCF members in union and municipal government officialdom. The implication is that, in a period of growing revolts and social upheaval, the masses were ready but the NPA was not; presumably, therefore, the left jumped to the FdG in a fit of desperation. In other words, the left and the working class, having little confidence in the “same old” NPA, were enchanted by the prospects of the new FdG, presumably an illusory and temporary deviation. The flat performance of the FdG can be seen to substantiate the view that the left was vacillating between its own, but the unaffiliated not so much: the far left polled about the same as in previous presidential elections, but badly underperformed the far right National Front’s gain from 10.44% to 17.9%. Whether or not the left vote for the FdG was transitory, clearly “space was occupied” by the far right instead.

While the particulars of the French electoral scene must be respected, the arguments Godard raises are relevant to the left in the US. Godard argues that the “new” NPA was really only superficially different from the “old” LCR from which it formed. The idea is that with the crisis of the Communist and Social Democratic parties after the fall of the eastern bloc, the revolutionary left would be able to “regroup” and broaden its appeal and enhance its effect. A similar trajectory was seen for the left in the US by Solidarity and some others. The disappointment according to Godard was that opening wider the programmatic door to estranged communists and social democrats was limited to and by its organizational definition, still leaving the left in place as “revolutionaries without a revolution.” The insinuation is that there was and is a revolution to be had, on the horizon, as it were, and that the left is – capacity aside – unwilling to accept the challenge.

Godard explains: “In this analysis of the novelty of the period two elements remained marginal: the systemic crisis of capitalism and above all the return of mass struggles and of an anti-capitalist consciousness.” Again, Godard subordinates the hegemony of capital – which, in my view, is not in crisis – to the systemic crisis of capitalism, as if the crisis can “be solved through a succession of political crises and large-scale confrontations.” This suggests the possibility that theoretically a revolutionary transformation can be posed at least in substantial part by contesting for economic and political reforms compelled by such confrontations. From and through these confrontations, as the left has long maintained, “our class (broadly defined) may, on a mass scale, acquire levels of consciousness and organization making it suitable for a revolutionary transformation.” Perhaps feeling a twinge of doubt, Godard uses the example of how in Egypt those who early on dared to criticize the army were few and a year later are many more. He is remarkably silent, however, on the effects of the police state in Egypt and virtually everywhere else where capital rules, in constraining the effects of such confrontations. Even more, the crisis of confidence in the working class is arguably more severe as the traditional social institutions lose their potency, aggravated by workers’ fear of falling into the same plainly visible abyss as their less fortunate peers. And it is here, at the nexus of these demonstrable fears and demoralization of the working class with the

invisibility of capitalist hegemony (the forest we don't see for the trees), where the class war plays out.

In Godard's analysis, the crisis of capitalism provides the opportunity for the left that must find the will to take it on by way of fighting for reforms and ameliorations of the hardships of the class it would lead, at the same time that it fails to confront the impotence of the class and its fighters in the face of overwhelming state power. Not only is his view of the "novelty of the period" limited to the inherent crisis of capitalism at the exclusion of consideration for the most entrenched hegemony of capital perhaps ever seen, but his assessment of the capacity of the class to wage massive revolts is exaggerated. The hegemony of capital takes many and various forms, not simply the disenfranchisement of the working class or the unstoppable power of the state apparatus. It is also evident in the social divisions and sectarian factionalism within the working class itself. It is the always feared rise of the right that we see operating perpetually as a counter to the left in the electoral arena (eg, Le Pen/NF in France) and ever more freely in the streets as the effects of austerity embolden the right (eg, Golden Dawn in Greece). Not only do these right wing alternatives intimidate the left, they also capture substantial segments of the working class consciousness, further diminishing the potency and potential of the working class to defend, let alone assert itself.

Whether or not the rise of the right and the hegemonic power of the capitalist states raises the stakes for the left, it should be clear that Godard's argument that the left is missing an opportunity is an overstatement. So he says: "What makes a new party both necessary and possible is the conjunction of a period which can set in motion millions of people with the emergence of tens of thousands of activists within various fronts of the movement, who are their practical leaders on a day to day basis." If his statement is true, it is also only half the truth. Re-booting the left to take advantage of a new opportunity without consideration for the overwhelming power of capital is a set up for a repeated failure. Even if the confidence of the class were awakened and organized into massive uprisings, the question of challenging state power is still grievously misunderstood, especially having the benefit of knowing the subsequent events in Egypt where the case has been offered that the uprising has been most advanced. (Another notable example of the constraints on social transformation is seen in Venezuela, which, with all its particularities, is a more or less open experiment for all to see.) And the challenge is not a static one: each confrontation, although of value experientially for the left, is also instructive to the state. Each "advance" by the working class is met with an equal or greater force from the state; and each innovation is understood and overcome. So, the novelty of Occupy is unseated at its source: the "place" that gave Occupiers their visibility and a common voice that the entire class could hear, was summarily emptied and its sense of autonomy disoriented by the state, able to apply concerted and decisive action that confirms its power and the continued impotency of the working class.

This assessment, however, should not be construed as a litany of hopelessness. The argument is not with the fight back and the struggle in the face of overwhelming odds, nor with the imperative to build the movements based in the working class. It is with the notion put forward by Godard that we face a new period of social explosions that requires recreating organically new agencies of transformation (ie, working class institutions and the parties that express its ambitions), that insists on starting over - *alone*. The opportunities are not in doubt; whether or not the left responds well or inspires confidence in the class, the potential for struggle is as real as the human nature to be free. What is in doubt is whether the left will reverse its trajectory toward extinction. The call for new formations of struggle is permanently a truism without exceptional meaning. Is this another incantation of the need for the left to rise to the latest signs of revolutionary upsurge? Are we seeing another example of the exuberance of optimism that is the life blood of the revolutionary left? Or is this an excess we can attribute to a sectarian resistance to regroupment and a demonstration of irrelevance of the self-proclaimed vanguard of the class? Because there is no certainty that the

increasingly desperate working class will stand by for long waiting for the bickering left to sort out its differences and win over the masses to its program. An ascendant right will have captured the imagination of the masses long before then.

The subjective insularity of the extant left organizations, each beset by the fear that dilution of the program by which it has so far survived will hasten its demise, is recognized by Godard: "Any structure, any organization creates its own conservatism in ideas as well as in practice. This is what gives an organization the stability needed to hold out in difficult times and to withstand the pressures of the dominant ideology. But this conservatism, which always involves dangers, becomes a real obstacle when the situation changes.... The LCR only opened the doors to its house.... But it was the LCR's house, the one the members of the LCR knew, and they knew how it worked. Others could only be guests. It turned out that that house was actually not suited to the tasks of the new period." While Godard describes the expansion of the LCR into the somewhat broader NPA, he does not admit to shutting the door once again.

He is willing to capture all of the likeminded on the far left, in order to re-try building the class vehicle that will fit the new times. At the same time he is unwilling to engage with the broader left which he writes off (too transitory or fanciful?). He is apparently unwilling to admit that others - like the FdG - also believe a revolutionary transformation is necessary, and might be willing to discuss new and creative ways to engage workers and oppressed as the conditions worsen. Godard complains that the electoral fixation of the NPA was defined by the programmatic differences among the far left, but is unwilling (with about 3,000 more party members) to engage with those others on the far left to rebuild new formations, to demonstrate a readiness to reshape and reinvigorate the left so that it might inspire the confidence of the even broader left he hopes to lead. He does not address the glaring contradiction that building a movement is not simply a matter of getting one's soldiers lined up in the proper direction, but also of persuading those who are accustomed to taking what they can get from whoever has something to offer them. If the trajectory of the beleaguered class is tending to the right, then the organizations that struggle in their name will need to reach out to their right, not to their left, to engage with them.

Godard's argument that the times are propitious and demand a restart of the NPA project is in itself appropriate; but a misreading of the depth and breadth of the movements engenders an exuberance of the will of the revolutionary socialist left to build its influence among the ranks of increasingly desperate and discouraged workers and their beleaguered institutions. There is indeed a crisis, a crisis of the credibility of the left that can only be addressed by reconciliation. The experiments of organization and openness to the organic development of the left's program applies not only to the NPA and left groups internally, but is fundamental to a renewal of the left influence for the entire class. The relatively short history of left regroupment has been hampered by the sectarian imperative of self-preservation: in a dwindling set of organizational players, the survivors remain convinced that the correctness of their program has ensured their survival, and must continue to do so. The sum of our experience so far may be that effective regroupment will only come about by necessity: only when faced with final extinction will the extant organized left be compelled to combine its forces, and perhaps it will then be too late.

Godard is not unaware of the necessity for renewal: "The nature of the times makes the construction of an anti-capitalist force not just possible; it makes it more necessary than ever. Without the coordination of movement activists and the progressive development of an anti-capitalist strategy, victories become increasingly difficult to gain for specific struggles, as demonstrated by the movement on pensions, the anti-racist struggle or the anti-war movement." Indeed, he admits the limits of what has been accomplished. Still, he miscalculates. The "mass revolts" and the "crisis of capitalism" cited by Godard have not propelled the left to self-preservation, only decline; the failure of the left to credibly cohere has only emboldened the far right. His reliance on the will of the left

places the responsibility for renewal squarely within the house of the revolutionary left alone.

The decline of the organized left, beset with internecine programmatic disputes, reveals both a reduced capacity to build a base and a loss of influence beyond its diminished numbers. Advocacy for class independence is not a bargaining chip the far left must give up when it regroups, nor is cohabitation in bourgeois governments a precondition. It may not be a matter of the will of the far left to forge a regrouped or rebooted left; it may come down to *a matter of necessity* with social conditions at a tipping point (cf. Syriza in Greece), of the basic survival of the broad left. What is certainly clear is that the left must be able to accomplish a regroupment in order to inspire confidence in the class. The class is mostly to our right, and being tugged even farther. It is where we will struggle for the hearts and minds of the builders of a just future. But we have little prospect of persuading the class if we can't forge a united left. These are the immediate concurrent tasks for the far left everywhere that capital reigns, and is the strategy we must continue to employ. The renewal that Godard prescribes for the NPA is not a new strategy. The regroupment that is Syriza, as contradictory and unfinished as it is, is not only an electoral formation, but aims to build a base and organize a movement at the same time. This is an advance that has paid off for the regroupment strategy with an astounding poll result to show for it as well. It shows a method for growth, experimental and with more questions than answers – but one which has inspired the broad left and is for now what stands in the way of the ascendant right.

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