In Search of a Post-Marxist Politics

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Carl Boggs: Social Movements and Political Power.

Either isolation or absorption has been the curse of Marxist parties in advanced capitalist societies. In view of this, the series of electoral triumphs of Left formations in the West since 1980 jolted observers not only because it reveals the general breakdown of bourgeois domination but also because it signals the emergence of an apparent post-Marxist politics defined by social, rather than class, themes. At issue in Carl Bogg's "Social Movements and Political Power" is the radical potential of popular movements as they find expression in three political formations: Mediterranean Eurosocialism, the new populism in the United States, and the Green alternative in West Germany.

New social movements thrive in a crisis of legitimacy where all forms of rule are suspect. They operate outside structures of hierarchy through direct non-violent action and in defense of the "unconquered" space . However, in as much as social movements bypass centers of power, they cannot be transformative agents, that is, unless they are channeled into political formations that work through, and not simply conquer, the state to democratize it. In this sense, social movements acquire meaning only in relation to political formations, while the latter in turn, acquire radical potential only if rooted in social movements.

The ascendancy of Eurosocialism in the Mediterranean occurred in the context of a general crisis of capitalism and at the time when social movements infused it with radicalism -- that is, with a populist form of mobilization, an imaginative membership, a non-bureaucratic organization and leadership, an eclectic ideology and, more important a commitment to a politics distinct from Leninism and social democracy.

Once in power, Eurosocialist parties embarked on the project "democracy first, then socialism" which required, all at once, democratization, economic restructuring and a foreign policy critical of all superpowers. By 1984, however, Eurosocialism retreated from its promise in the face of a global crisis to which it failed to apply an anti-capitalist solution.

Confronted with the need to stabilize their respective economies amidst disruptions in the global market, Eurosocialist parties modified their earlier project into "development first, then socialism". The project required the suspension of democratic initiatives in favor of technological restructuring, austerity and neo-Keynesian economics, all of which had the cumulative effect of consolidating bourgeois domination. Restructuring according to the logic of capital spelled massive unemployment as resources were diverted to technology-intensive sectors of production. Austerity meant budgetary cuts on social services, stiff tax rates, etc.. Neo-Keynesianism implied the rebirth of the corporatist state and the prevalence of a politics of class collaboration in the name of institutional stability. In international politics, moderation, to avoid regional disruptions unfavorable to trade, became the rule.

This adaptation to market pressures signifies the failure of Eurosocialism to offer an anti-capitalist alternative - a failure that is revealing of its stabilizing functions in capitalist society. Boggs explained this retreat as characteristic of structural reformist parties so consumed with electoral politics that they are compelled to mediate rather mobilize discrete interests, and to apply moderation rather than imagination in policy making on the basis of capitalist priorities and premises.

The fiscal crisis and the disruptive effects of bureaucratization in the United States set in motion, since the 1960s,

popular revolts against the shrinkage of the sphere of debate on domestic and foreign policy issues -- against disenfranchisement and the illogic of cold war anti-communism. These movements embody the cause of "economic democracy" or a "new populist" strategy which calls for the extension of new democratic forms into every sphere of life, the socialization of resources as a step toward a more egalitarian and ecologically balanced society.

Since the mid-1970s these movements made enough impact as to revive progressive consciousness at the grassroots-- to provide an opening for progressive politics. Given this and the structure of the American electoral system, new populists moved to control local and municipal governments. With relative successs at the local polls, populist formations then shifted their energies away from autonomous popular struggles toward interest group bargaining. Soon, the tensions between radical vision and conventional strategies that grip every electoral party became more pronounced, specifically in the following areas: the political system, the workplace and internal organization.

Instrumental concerns pushed populist groups to enter the left-wing of the Democratic Party. While this strategy allowed some to win institutional power in local communities, it upset the vision of a democratized political system. Populist presence in the Democratic party restored faith in hallow party politics and reinforced the myth of the two-party system. More important, populist involvement in the Democratic Party meant the triumph of the logic of corporate bargaining over the logic of popular mobilization-- the taming of policy and action to attract votes. The latter consequence became felt also in the workplace and the internal organization of populist groups. Moderation implied the redefinition of the concept "economic democracy" to mean trade-union or consumer involvement in the corporate structure. Populist organizations acquired the features of a "mass-based permanent organization" such as a centralized decision making process and an exclusive circle of electoral engineers -- all these in the name of electoral efficiency.

The new populist experience reiterates that once a popular movement seeks legitimation in bourgeois institutions of power, it becomes deradicalized -- it yields to the tensions between a radical thrust and a conservative politics by recasting its vision according to the requirements of the corporate power structure.

West Germany in late 1970 saw the ideological convergence of its ruling social democratic and christian parties and the consequent closure of the sphere of public debate on key policy issues. This and the disruptions on the economy and community generated a culture of ferment evident in the new movements for disarmament, ecological preservation, women's right, etc. -- radical visions which found expression in the "anti-party party" politics of the Greens.

The Green party sets itself apart from its contemporary models through its subversive approach to state power and domination. Without being abstentionist, the Greens are uncomfortable with electoral politics in that they believe that the mere "conquest" of state power could lead to the reproduction of its bureaucratic features. What they propose, instead, is the transformation of all social and authority relations of which the state bureaucracy is just one layer. This stems from the premise that domination is not the monopoly of a single institution (like the state) but a network of relations, so that social transformation demands dispersed and multifaceted movements accompanied by newly created systems of authority rooted in self-management, direct democracy and decentralized social activity. Thus, the Greens are loathed to exhaust their energies in electoral exercises. In foreign politics, this approach implies an uncompromising opposition to military and economic blocs, the assumption being that the latter would only create hierarchies between rich and poor nations.

The new politics of the Greens requires a radical departure from a state-centered growth economy that is at once destructive and wasteful. The Greens seek to realize their ideals of democratic participation, workers' control, and community renewal on the basis of a new form of production defined by the priorities of ecological balance, grassroots self-management and social concerns. This ideal is embodied in the concept of social conversion -- a process of shifting resources away from a commodified and wasteful form of production to one that is socially useful. This concept militates against the premise of a "permanent war economy" where production is defined by military requirements. It appears, therefore, that the Greens have mounted a generalized revolt that extends to the state, the economy, culture, foreign policy, etc. The latter assault on the war machine presents a point of convergence between social and class struggles insofar as both are being crushed by the requirements of the nuclear mad race. This convergence, however, requires labor struggles to break from the corporate structures.

In theory, therefore, the Green alternative departs from the Leninist and social democratic modes of opposition in that the latter uphold the state as the decisive agent of change. To the Greens, the goal is everything, but without the movement, it is nothing. This belief embodies their approach to the dialectic between social movement and political power, it explains their "anti-party party" ideal.

The strategic translation of social movements through political formations requires a redefinition of politics. What the Eurosocialist and new populist experiences reveal is the consequent deradicalization of social movements once their radical vision is translated through conventional politics. The Green alternative broke this curse by first recognizing the general nature of domination and then employing a transformative strategy that is not exhausted in elections but which challenges other structures of domination. But the challenge is not one of withdrawal; it is one that is creative and therefore destructive -- the Greens challenge all structures of hierarchy not simply by refusing to recognize their legitimacy but also by articulating alternative forms of social relations, thus presenting a counterhegemonic thrust. K