THE DILEMMAS AND POTENTIALS OF THE LEFT: LEARNING FROM SYRIZA

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Is there any room for manoeuvre towards emancipatory politics in the current global context? It is true that today things are pretty tight when it comes to the implementation of non-neoliberal policies. Especially in Europe, today’s neoliberal configuration is ever harsher towards other political orientations. A huge bureaucratic apparatus of processes and mechanisms, a vast network of regulations, norms, and directives, discards without the need for political argumentation any attempt to follow an alternative economic and social path. We see here the institutional instantiation of the famous phrase ‘TINA’.

There is absolutely no reason to argue over whether the current battlefield is negative or not for emancipatory politics. It is obvious that it is. But it has always been negative; it will always be negative. We are talking about overthrowing a dominant, brutal, exploitative and disastrous system with a dominated, fragmented and feeble conception of emancipation. Successful emancipatory politics in a hostile and toxic environment is our task: our ‘job description’.

It is extremely valuable in this context to specify the exact nature of present-day modes and techniques of power in order to engage with them effectively. And at the same time, we must radically transform our political imagination, which – at least from my experience – is fixed within coordinates that prevent us from accessing the only resource we really have at our disposal: people’s embodied capacities.

So is there any room for manoeuvre? It depends. No, if we seek quick and easy ways to implement alternative policies. Ways that presuppose the respect of elites for the democratic will of the people. Ways that will not disturb the naïve and comforting conception that we do not really need to engage profoundly in collective practices that go beyond singular moments of participation. As if we can somehow solve the urgent problems of our
societies with such orthodox means as demonstrating and voting, relying on states and governments to respond to our demands.

I do not mean that representative democracy has no value. On the contrary, I think it is a crucial dimension of a mature society. But we often ask too much from it, and its failure to deliver on our expectations generates a misguided devaluation. Neither do I mean that governments sensitive to people’s needs are not crucial factors in this battle. I am just stressing the fact that we must have a broader view of the agents and processes needed if we want to change things.

So again, is there any room for manoeuvre? Yes, if we are determined and systematic enough to work under the radar of the neoliberal configuration, inventive enough to formally coincide with it while at the same time acting to empower people against it, and decisive enough not to give in to threats and blackmail.

In order to respond adequately in these suffocating conditions, new organizational standards and methods are needed for engaging thousands of people in this day-to-day and multi-level fight. Negatively put, without people who possess the necessary knowledge aligned into collaborative groups embedded in a vast network of democratic decision-making that produces policies of our own logic, no government will be in a position to wage this battle.

Are we moving in this direction in Greece? Not wholeheartedly. However, the everyday inability to implement alternative policies through traditional governmental means has created the conditions for the emergence of a new awareness inside Syriza: that this requires a qualitative shift in our organizational and methodological principles. But in order to engage in such a shift we must abandon the tendency to think that things will change easily and quickly through the revival of the institutional and political configuration of post-war liberal capitalism. We must finally confront the reality that neoliberals are burning the bridges to the past behind them.

IN AND OUT OF THE STATE

Syriza’s severe dilemmas since it formed a government at the beginning of 2015 sharply pose the question of whether the state is the suitable place for emancipatory politics. Of course, there is no theoretical reason why one should actually choose between working within or outside the state. We have known for quite some time that transforming the state and the social practices beyond it are both crucial aspects of emancipatory politics. Although they are autonomous in the sense that they have their own temporalities, different organizational and methodological requirements, etc., they stand or fall together in the end.
There is no way to transform the state in a meaningful and durable way without forging a strong interrelation between processes of expansion of alternative social practices, including democratically organized productive units, respective non-commodified circuits of distribution, a different civic mentality, etc. And alternatively, there is no way to promote seriously and in a non-marginal way alternative social practices – which are feeble and hard to sustain in a hostile environment – without the support, the protection, or at least the concession by the state of free space to develop the roots and scale that would allow for quasi-sustainable reproduction and expansion.

However, in politics choosing between these two is often a real question: in practice, we have limited resources at our disposal and we must allocate them according to the criterion of efficiency. Then the question is not whether we should work within the spheres of state power or not, but is rather about the optimal allocation of resources and time between working within the state and outside it. And secondly, in practice we are engaged in a brutal war, and sometimes you must focus on seizing state power or other forms of power just to wrest them from the hands of your opponents. For example, in Greece, we couldn’t afford to leave state power to the neoliberals.

On the other hand, the present-day situation of the state and the intensity of the neoliberal attack on societies attribute an existential twist to the theoretical claim that we must work both within the state and outside it. A bundle of important policies and powers that once belonged to the state have been transferred either to external (European or domestic, but ‘independent’) authorities or directly to elites – in both cases out of the reach of the people. At the same time, a vast number of neoliberal regulations and norms increasingly govern the state and social life. These two conditions combined render state power not the political power, but just one pole of such a power, shaping a hostile environment in which considerable effort is needed just to open some space for the implementation of a different policy.

In other words, as I mentioned previously, state power – as it is traditionally conceived in isolation from social movements and bureaucratic in nature – is not enough to wage the battle we are engaged in. More than ever, we need the expansion of democracy and cooperation in social practices, and new social institutions. We need social innovation for new forms of popular empowerment. The fate of any left government depends on our ability to build new social and institutional structures that empower people. And the duty of a left government is not just to exercise diminished power, but also to function as a facilitator for such popular empowerment to take place.

But such a duty requires a new political imagination that transcends the
established view of being in the government. The traditional methodology dictates that people through demonstrating and voting express their will, and then the government uses the state to respond to them. This is no longer viable even if we wanted to do it. Instead, we need a different conception of the state and a new model of leadership. Being in the government is a way to use the remaining resources of the state (by transforming them accordingly) to facilitate (by organizing efficient democratic decision making and productive processes) the planning, implementation, and monitoring of the policies and projects of an alternative political orientation by social agents. And this is not a path our ideology forces us to follow; there is no other way to implement a different policy today than to liberate and use the embodied capacities of the people.

THE SYRIZA GOVERNMENT AND THE MOVEMENTS

This obviously raises the question of the relation between the Syriza government and the social movements in Greece. It is not easy to answer this question. We are in a vague, fragile and transitory situation in Greece. The government was not fully allowed to govern so long as the negotiations between it and the EU and IMF were going on with no significant movement, and the social movements were also on hold – although there were of course demonstrations for a variety of reasons.

The relation between the government and the movements seemed to be very close for the first six months, but it was not easy to decode the growing tendencies in various domains since the relation was overdetermined by the unique situation of the crucial negotiations. It seemed the political function was suspended and the various agents were waiting to situate themselves in the new context that the outcome of the negotiations would create, with it being reasonably assumed on all sides that in the case of an agreement that embodied the austerity demands of the lenders, there would be tension between various movements and the government.

But whatever the outcome of the negotiations, the most important question is how are we going to transform the established relation between the movements and activists, and the state and government? The institutional framework of representative democracy marks the traditional relation; people vote and movements demand. This is not viable anymore. The state cannot deliver what people need and want if we do not change the mentality both of the people in public administration and the government, and the people that participate in the movements.

We need a new mentality that promotes cooperation and joint effort between the state and the movements. In order to move towards this new mentality the government must ensure the state transfers decisions and
allocates resources to those social agents who can maintain a coordinating role and safeguard the political orientation that brought this left government into the state, in terms of democratic decision making, multi-dimensional planning of priorities and goals, long term sustainability, etc. And for their part, the social agents must overcome a corporatist mentality, a partial view on the issues, and share with the government and as much of the state as it controls the responsibility for results that serve the public good. Instead of acting solely to secure from the state the satisfaction of the demands of the groups of people the movements represent, these social agents must think of their role as contributing to the broader public interest.

This involves the gradual transformation of the state and the movements towards an institutional and social configuration based on a new ideology and logic. It involves widening the logic of cooperation and democracy within the state and society, both in terms of their scope and their functioning, even building new institutions shaped by this new logic and these new principles. This is our duty, especially in a period when traditional means and tools are not available anymore.

One of the major problems in moving in this direction is the traditional left’s limited political imagination, which reflects its own commitment to the previous social and institutional configuration. Any suggestion, proposal or innovation regarding a different role for the state and social agents (like trade unions) is considered dangerous and suspicious. However, we are perhaps lucky in Greece, since the difficulty of implementing a different policy in traditional ways has created the conditions for a new methodology to emerge.

Another problem is that Syriza is very traditional when it comes to the idea of ‘development’. The implicit dominant view is the classical one: we must develop the productive forces and capacities of the country based on a growth-oriented pattern in order to recover. We are sensitive to labor and environmental issues, we might even want to create productive activity through public means so that the benefits will return to society, but we do not conceptualize a different framework in which economic growth is not its cornerstone.

Of course, there are many of us who understand deeply that we need a strategy of transforming the productive matrix. The question is how we can shape an economic recovery based on merging efficiently today’s and future social needs by transforming our patterns of producing and consuming. Even though there are voices inside Syriza that posit these considerations, including through specific policy projects that actually promote different models, priorities, and organizational principles, we largely continue to
think and act according to the established coordinates of development.

At the rhetorical level, the economic and social disaster in Greece is considered to be a political condition that does not allow the exploration of an alternative productive framework, which is thought of as a luxury we cannot afford. At the same time, and for the same reason, the economic and social disaster, taken together with the economic pressure on Greece by the lenders and economic elites, in practice cancels out any prospect of economic recovery in a traditional way. So we are caught in a situation in which the dominant traditional conception of development is not working, but we do not have an overall alternative framework to replace it. There is a window of opportunity for a different path here. But we need a clear and unified strategy that points in a different direction.

A HISTORIC CROSSROAD

We stand in this respect at a historic crossroad in Greece. The lenders have refused to make a mutually beneficial agreement, that is, refused to acknowledge the possibility that the Eurozone should allow economic pluralism, or at least tolerate different economic orientations based on democratic choices of the people. This has left us with two painful choices: either a bad agreement that traps Syriza in a neoliberal austerity framework or a non-agreement that sets in motion a series of events that will radically change the coordinates of the Greek political, social and economic context.

The first scenario inevitably entails hitting Syriza badly and society even more so, crashing the last democratic hope for Greece. The hit could only be a decisive one in a society that is already collapsing. Gradually, but faster than one might expect, rationality, civic mentality and the notion of respect for community and society would be compromised. No one could feel obliged to follow any kind of rule, since the government itself would be following the orders of the powerful elites despite the fact that the government and the majority of the people disagreed with them, a clear violation of the rules of democracy. The ‘rule of the powerful’ would remain in this scenario the only social norm in people’s minds and behaviour.

Without Syriza articulating and bearing hopes for substantial change, Golden Dawn – or something similar – will definitely rise as the dominant political power. Needless to say, this would be the successful outcome of the memorandum period: transforming a developed society (with many, many problems) into a social desert in which barbarism and fascism would prevail.

Apart from social decline and its consequences for everyday life, the continuation of austerity and recession could only further shake the administrative capacity of Greek authorities, and even threatens the integrity of the country in a region already destabilizing rapidly, with maritime
boundaries as well as the conditions for peace being severely challenged in
the southeast part of Mediterranean, while the Balkans are plainly affected by
the confrontation between the West and Russia over Ukraine.

All this said, it must be recognized that the second scenario entails
immediate political, social and economic turmoil. Syriza can maintain its
unity and its popular support, especially from those who have been pushed
into poverty. On the other hand, when it comes to the reaction of the
elites, we know they lack any sense of respect for democracy, or even much
wisdom (in the deep sense of the term) or sense of social responsibility.
Moreover, we know that neoliberals actually want the emergence of chaotic
situations, for they believe that the disorientation of the population and the
collapse of the existing institutions and modes of social functioning create
favourable conditions for deepening and extending the neoliberal order.

We are living in a period in which no one can actually assess the dynamics
of the situation. Who would have thought two years ago that war would
again take place in Europe, as it is in Ukraine, and that the EU and US would
openly support neo-Nazis! So, we are talking about a turbulent situation.

Of course, there is always the possibility that the lenders will still find a
way to postpone the clear choice between scenarios one and two, waiting to
see whether broader changes will take place in Europe. Spanish elections are
critical in this scenario, and perhaps other events could take place that might
change the current balance of forces.

But this only underlines the difficulty for a society to accept that its future
is so severely compromised, that ordinary life as we have known it is no
longer available. This is difficult to digest. It is not easy to accept that you
cannot control or influence the situation you are in. It’s not easy to accept
the fact that you cannot escape from what is going to happen. This is a
delicate issue both within Syriza and in Greek society in general. Strong
psychological defence mechanisms are involved, and arguments are not
convincing as people prefer to dream of transforming their desperate hopes
into reality, overlooking at the same time the clear signs that are in front of
them.

We are entering a period that will be marked by economic, social and
political turmoil. Political action in this new environment will challenge
the political imagination of previous decades. The sooner we overcome
the perfectly normal feeling of denying reality when it becomes harsh, the
better. We must adapt ourselves quickly into the new conditions in order
to be effective.

So, ahead of such a crucial moment, we cannot prepare ourselves for the
mid- or long-term future. The fundamental parameters of today’s situation