

The European Left after Recession and Representation: Social Democracy or Bust?

Written by David Bailey

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DAVID BAILEY, JUN 14 2015

The prospects of European Left Parties appear to have begun improving. Syriza won the Greek general election in January of this year. Podemos won five of the Spanish seats in last year's European Parliament elections, and has since gone on to rise in the opinion polls. The Spanish regional elections in May witnessed unprecedented success for left parties – including Podemos, but also including a range of new, more independent, 'citizen's initiatives'. This includes the election in Barcelona of one of the leading activists associated with the Spanish *indignados* and Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) – Ada Colau – at the head of the citizen platform, *Barcelona en Comú*. For many this might seem like the delayed realisation of what was hoped for immediately after the onset of the Global Economic Crisis in 2008. Indeed, the Great Recession prompted a wave of calls for a move away from the neoliberal obsession with market discipline, and a return to a progressive and stabilising role for the state (Krugman 2008). The problem, however, was that the pendulum-like swing, from neoliberalism back to Keynesianism, prompted by economic crisis, never occurred.

Despite a brief period following the 2008 crisis, during which most advanced industrial democracies increased public spending in an attempt to stave off the absolute collapse of (especially) their financial sectors, the subsequent policy consensus (especially in Europe) has been overwhelmingly one of austerity *both* as a means to balance the public finances *and* as part of a declared attempt (however flawed) to achieve a return to growth (Bermeo and Pontusson 2012; Cameron 2012). The political response to these developments has been two-fold. On the one hand, the level of social mobilisation and protest witnessed in opposition to austerity has been impressive, and represents one of the most significant challenges to the post-1980 neoliberal consensus – most obviously in Southern Europe, but also outside of that context (Tejerina et al. 2013; Bailey 2014). The occupations of European public squares throughout 2011 (and beyond) – be it the *indignados*, 15-M, Syntagma Square, the Occupy Movement, UK Uncut, or Blockupy – have each created hope that Europe's so-called 'precariat' was willing and able to mobilise autonomously and to pose alternatives to the tired institutions of the status quo (Tejerina et al. 2013). On the other hand, Europe's political elite have been largely unable or unwilling to recognise or meet the demands of the anti-austerity movement. Indeed, anti-austerity social movements have been lamented in terms of both how easily dissent has been neutered by an elite discourse propounding the necessity of balancing the books (Stanley 2014) *and* how willing (or unable) the political class has been to ignore (or meet) any articulation of dissent that does occur (Streeck and Mertens 2013).

This failure by Europe's political elite to adequately respond to dissent has perhaps been most visible in the actions of European left parties – especially centre-left European social democratic parties, who in 2008 were perhaps the institutions that people looked to most in the hope that they would pose an alternative to neoliberalism. In contrast, social democratic parties have remained largely unable to develop anything that looks new, electable and/or feasible as a programme of government throughout the post-2008 period (Bailey et al 2014). This includes the recent defeat of 'Red Ed', the U-turn and dramatic fall in popularity that marks Hollande's presidency in France (Bouillaud 2014), and the almost total annihilation of the once-dominant PASOK in Greece (Moschonas 2013). This unresponsiveness of Europe's political class, including those within centre-left parties, is perhaps unsurprising when we consider both how committed social democratic parties were prior to the crisis to a rejection of their earlier, more 'traditional', more worker-friendly, less pro-market programmes (Ryner 2014); *and* the growing influence of anti-state and anti-party ideas within radical social movements, most obviously within the alter-globalization movement (Maackelbergh 2011).

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In this sense, left parties and social movements distanced themselves from each other for much of the period prior to 2008; and as such the post-2008 unresponsiveness of parties to movements should perhaps be unsurprising.

Indeed, the post-crisis distance between parties and social movements is especially unsurprising when we consider that many of the sentiments expressed by European anti-austerity movements explicitly built on lessons learned by the alter-globalization movement – which developed a clear and explicit critique of representative politics (Flesher Fominaya 2015). This move was especially focused on the notion of prefiguration. That is, the need for social mobilisation to incorporate and seek to embody the principles that it aimed to realise. In rejecting the notion that means and ends could be separated – an idea which itself came to be associated with the problems experienced in the twentieth century by both the centre-left and the far left – the alter-globalization movement came to be linked to John Holloway's (2005) rallying cry: *change the world without taking power!* This was clearly echoed in much of the post-2008 anti-austerity movement, which, as Roos and Oikonomakis show, was equally characterised by a commitment to activity that is autonomous of the state, and is committed to horizontalist organisation and prefiguration (Roos and Oikonomakis 2013).

Given this initial trajectory, therefore, it is the recent success of the newer/populist left parties that is perhaps most surprising. Parties such as Syriza and Podemos have arguably sought to adopt what has been referred to as a 'mass connective party' strategy – i.e. an attempt to connect with the social bases outside of the formal party organisation – and in doing so have sought to connect to the groundswell of social mobilisation created by the anti-austerity movement (Spourdalakis 2014; Porcaro 2013; Rehmann 2013). What is surprising, however, is that this strategy appears to have been effective. It is surprising because the anti-austerity movement appeared to be exemplary of the demise of representative politics, replacing representation with prefiguration and 'Real Democracy Now!' (Tormey 2015). Prior to 2008 much left activity had moved away from representative politics (Tormey 2006), and for much of the post-2008 period this distancing from parliamentarism seemed to have been consolidated. From this perspective, therefore, the newly emergent 'new left parties' – epitomised by Syriza and Podemos (although we should of course note that Syriza is not, strictly speaking, a new party) – clearly don't 'fit' with this trajectory. In fact Syriza and Podemos seem to represent the rejection of the rejection of the parliamentary process. So the question, it would seem, is how to interpret the rise of the new left anti-austerity parties from the perspective of prefiguration?

Representation, Contestation, or Co-optation?

There are three potential interpretations of the newer left anti-austerity parties that we might consider. First, the rise of the new left anti-austerity parties can be interpreted as a crystallisation of the anti-austerity movement as a social constituency that is being represented by the institutions and channels of contemporary democracies. According to this perspective, Greek and Spanish society mobilised against austerity; the scale of this opposition was such that it represents a real and genuine force in each of these democracies; and therefore it is only to be expected that they will be represented by political parties seeking to promote their political agenda. Whilst this seems to make sense in terms of the logic of liberal democracy and electoral politics, it is difficult to see how it can be reconciled with the perspective of prefiguration. Indeed, the central claim of the politics of prefiguration is that the parliamentary process is non-representative and acts to deny voice to those who are supposed to be being represented (whilst privileging the voice of those who do the representing) (Tormey 2006). If 'Real Democracy Now' requires the genuine involvement of 'ordinary' people within society's decision-making process, then it is difficult to see how (at least from the perspective of prefiguration) this can be achieved through the electoral channels of representative democracy.

A second interpretation is that the new left anti-austerity parties represent the continuation of the anti-austerity movement but through alternative means. From this perspective, the newer left parties (and their key personnel) were instrumental in initiating, supporting, facilitating and encouraging the mobilisations that have occurred in Southern Europe. The anti-austerity movement's goal has always been to disrupt, obstruct, block, and pose alternatives to what we might call the 'austerity consensus' – i.e. the view that the only way out of the crisis is to reduce public spending in order to recreate the conditions necessary for economic growth and economic recovery (Huke et al., forthcoming). From this perspective, the election of Syriza and the success of Podemos represent an alternative means by which to disrupt the pro-austerity consensus. It highlights the way in which alternative ideas exist, which deny the necessity of austerity, that can be articulated in a defiant way, and which have a groundswell of support.

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The election of Syriza, we might conclude, is simply another form of obstruction, occupation, disruption or collective action; and, in doing so, one which highlights the power of refusal in the face of claims that 'There Is No Alternative'.

Finally, a third interpretation of the rise of the new left anti-austerity parties, and one which is more in keeping with the so-called 'pessimism of the intellect', is that ultimately what we are seeing is the purposive subversion and co-optation of the anti-austerity movement. From this perspective, Syriza and Podemos are capitalising on the success of social mobilisation; using it to their own advantage to gain access to power; diverting the attention of those who would otherwise be focusing on more disruptive, and therefore more effective, forms of social mobilisation; (wrongly) convincing agents of social mobilisation that there is a realistic possibility that austerity will be prevented through the ballot box; and, perhaps of most concern, proving that the logic of parliamentarism is such that 'success' for Syriza will ultimately end with the call for social demobilisation, in order that the implementation of any agreements reached with the institutions of the European Union can be allowed to work their way through the system without social opposition. Indeed, this is certainly one interpretation of what happened to European social democracy (Bailey 2009a), and also the risk associated with the electoral turn of Europe's anti-austerity movement.

The question, then, remains: which of the three interpretations are closest to the truth? Clearly sympathisers hope it's the second, but fear that it might be the third. The answer, however, I would argue depends on how we view the answer to a slightly different question: *is the aim of the new left parties to (a) disrupt European capitalism during its austerity phase, or (b) manage European capitalism so that it is able to successfully recover without austerity?*

It seems that the successful and less austere management of European capitalism would essentially amount to an attempt to revive the spirit of social democracy; despite social democracy already having been well and truly exposed as a dead end (both figuratively and literally) (Lavelle 2008). And that therefore a strategy that seeks to demand-manage European capitalism out of the crisis is both flawed, but also dangerously naïve, in that the conditions that have facilitated the demise of post-war social democracy since the 1970s have been sharpened further still since the onset of the post-2008 Great Recession. It is therefore of concern, I think, that Syriza's Thessaloniki Programme includes statements along the lines: "The second pillar is centered on measures to restart the economy. Priority is given to alleviating tax suppression on the real economy, relieving citizens of financial burdens, injecting liquidity and *enhancing demand*" (Syriza 2014, emphasis added). In contrast, the Syriza strategy might be an attempt to use a combination of brinkmanship, media attention, and democratic rhetoric, in an attempt to disrupt and expose the inconsistencies of the Troika's programme (what Trotsky (1938) might have called 'transitional demands'). This would be closer to a continuation (rather than co-optation) of the post-2008 anti-austerity movement. At present Syriza seem to be oscillating between the two: both seeking a compromise with the European institutions *and* employing a strategy of brinkmanship and refusal. The tendency for refusal, it seems, is largely determined by the extent to which rebellion is fomented and/or contained within Syriza, and in turn within its broader coalition of social support. Certainly the biggest constraint being placed upon Tsipras in reaching a deal with the European Union would seem to be opposition within his party (Hope 2015). The risk is that, having opted for an electoral strategy, Syriza's supporters will now find themselves facing a choice between either acquiescence or political failure. Indeed, this is the dilemma that faced social democratic parties (Bailey 2009b), and it is in this sense that we might ask whether the new left anti-austerity parties will similarly face a choice between social democratic moderation, or bust?

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