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The Radical Reconfiguration of Southern European Politics:

The Rise of the Non Leftist Left

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Introduction

Over the past decade fundamental changes have taken place in Southern Europe, which have broken with previous political alignments, resulting in the virtual disappearance of traditional leftist 'parties, the decline of trade unions and the emergence of 'middle class radicalism'.

New political movements, purportedly on the left, no longer are based on class conscious workers nor are they embedded in the class struggle. Likewise on the right, greater attention is paid to escalating the repressive capacity of the state instead of state intervention in pursuit of economic markets.

Radicalization of the right, including massive cutbacks in social spending, has demolished welfare programs. The dispossession of households has uprooted cohesive neighborhood-based social organizations.

In place of the class based traditional left, 'non-leftist left' movements have emerged. Their leaders embrace 'participatory democracy' but engage in vertical political practice.

On the right, politics no longer revolve around conserving national economic privileges. Rightwing leaders willingly subordinate their economies and society to imperial led crusades, which empty national sovereignty of any meaning while pillaging the national treasury.

This essay will proceed to discuss these complex changes and their meaning.

The 'Non-Leftist Left' in Southern Europe

The economic crisis, in particular the imposition of severe cuts in wages, pensions and other social welfare programs by rightwing and social democratic governments have led to widespread discontent, which the traditional workplace based leftist parties have been unable to address and mobilize the people. Prolonged and deepening unemployment and the growth of temporary employment have affected over 50% of the labor force.

Union representation has declined precipitously, further weakening the presence of traditional leftist parties in factories.

Large-scale evictions, foreclosure of mortgages and accompanying job losses have led to neighborhood-based anti-eviction movements and struggles. Millions of young workers now

depend on their grandparents' pensions and remain with two older generations in their parents' home. For the young workers, the degradation of everyday life, the loss of personal autonomy and the inability to live independently have led to revolts for 'dignity'.

The traditional left parties and trade unions have failed (or not attempted) to organize the unemployed. They have failed to attract the young and the downwardly mobile temporary workers in anything resembling class-based, class struggle-oriented movements.

Paradoxically despite the deepening crisis among most workers, the traditional left has declined. Its workplace orientation and its language of class struggle do not resonate with those without jobs or prospects. For the radicalized middle class the traditional left is too radical in seeking to overturn capitalism and too distant from power to realize changes.

The radicalized middle class includes public employees, professionals and self-employed private contractors who aspire to, and until recently, experienced upward mobility but have now found their path blocked by the austerity programs imposed by rightwing, as well as, social democratic parties.

Frustrated by the social democrats' betrayal and facing downward mobility, the radicalized middle class are disoriented and fragmented. Many have joined amorphous street protests; some have even embraced, temporarily in most cases, the alternative traditional rightwing parties only to encounter even more brutal job cuts, insecurity and downward mobility.

The middle classes deeply resent being denied the opportunity for upward mobility for themselves and their children. They resent their formerly 'moderately progressive' Social Democratic leaders' betrayal of their interests. Their radicalism is directed toward restoring their past access to social advancement. Their deep-seated hostility to the authorities is rooted in the loss of their previous status as a result of the crisis.

Middle class radicalism is tempered by nostalgia for the past. This radicalism is rooted in the struggle to restore the European Union's social subsidies and growth policies. They remember a recent past of rising living standards and "social inclusion", now denied their own children. This vision guides the rhetoric that the progressive middle class had earned and enjoyed their rising incomes as a result of their own 'merit'.

Today the radicalized middle class looks for practical, specifically defined and government-sponsored policies that can restore their past prosperity. They do not aim to 'level the playing field' for everyone but to prevent their proletarianization. They reject the politics of the traditional left parties because class struggle and worker-centered ideologies do not promote their own social aspirations.

For most radicalized middle class activists the culprits are 'austerity', the mega-bank swindlers and the political kleptocrats. They seek parties that can reform or moralize capitalism and restore 'individual dignity'. They want to kick out corrupt officials. They demand 'participatory democracy' rather than the traditional left's goal of public ownership under worker control.

Under the specific conditions generated by the current social crisis, a non-leftist left (NLL) has emerged throughout Europe. Spontaneous, amorphous, ‘anarchic’, extra-institutional and ‘street-centered’, the NLL has adopted an irreverent style. The NLL, in its origins, rejected political parties, well-defined programs and disciplined cadres in favor of spontaneity and irreverence toward institutions.

As the appeal of the NLL grew, the unemployed, the temporary workers, the insecure and unprotected non-unionized workers and the radicalized middle class joined demonstrations and found safety in the crowds. They were attracted by the appeals from ‘the street’ to oust the incumbent kleptocrats.

Emerging from this movement aimed at the downwardly mobile middle class’ anger, Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece and Five Stars in Italy have appealed to all the people disconnected from power, by promising a restoration of ‘dignity and respect.’ They made amorphous appeals to ‘end austerity’ with only a vague promise that they would create jobs.

The NLL leadership, however, is most clearly influenced by the non-radical resentments of the downwardly mobile middle class.

They never engaged in class struggles and have rejected class ideology. For the NLL leaders, social polarization is mostly a vehicle for building an electoral base. Their participation in small-scale local struggles was presented as ‘proof’ that the NLL leaders spoke to authentic popular aspirations.

The Non-Leftist Left’s Transition: From Street to Public Office

From the street, the NLL moved swiftly to elections and from elections they proceeded to form coalitions with traditional parties. Strategic decisions were taken by a small coterie of personalistic leaders: They redefined ‘participatory democracy’ to refer only to local neighborhood activism and issues – not national issues, which were the realm of ‘experts’.

Syriza, the first NLL to reach power, reflected the immense gap between the radical posturing of its leaders in opposition and their cringing conformity before Established Power (the Troika: IMF, European Commission, Central Bank) once elected to government.

Syriza embodied middle class resentment toward the Euro-technocratic elite in Brussels whom they blamed for their loss of past prosperity and job security and for the ongoing degradation of everyday life. Syriza denounced the Troika while it remained under its tutelage. It excoriated the EU elite in the highest moral tones for doing what its elite class interests dictated, that is, defend the EU bankers, extract debt payments and threaten their underlings. In practice, Syriza never applied any class analysis to the Troika’s policy as it continued to refer to their ‘EU partners’. ...even as they imposed brutal demands.

Once in power the Syriza leaders never mobilized a single mass protest and never even threatened a general strike in the face of EU colonial dictates.

Syriza's personalist leader, Alexis Tsipras, appointed right wingers from former regimes to key posts. He negotiated with the Troika and caved on all strategic issues dealing with debt payments, austerity and privatizations. Syriza never considered 'going to the people'. Syriza's 'moral crusade' against capitalism ended by their embracing capitalism and the colonial Eurozone system.

Syriza's lack of class analysis, class struggle and class mobilization and its total commitment to working within a moralized capitalism and the Eurozone to restore middle class status and security has resulted in the most abject conformity and surrender – punctuated by shameless buffoonery on the part of some leaders.

In the end, Syriza surrendered to the dictates of higher powers of the Troika and their Eurozone acolytes, but not until it had emptied the Greek Treasury. The leaders have combined the worst of all worlds: a bankrupt national economy, a 'protesting' but fundamentally colonial regime and a disenfranchised electorate.

Where Syriza wildly succeeded was in marginalizing the traditional left (the Greek Communist Party). It reaffirmed the historic pattern: free floating movements of the moment end up being run by personalistic leaders who presume to speak for "the people" while bending over to their overseas overlords.

NLL in Spain and Italy: Podemos and Five Stars

Podemos in Spain and Five Stars in Italy are ready to follow Syriza's path of colonial subservience. They rejected and successfully marginalized the traditional left. They have gained mass support, organized mass protests and loudly rejected austerity and the dictates of the Troika.

While Podemos leaders talk of 'participatory democracy', a handful of leaders make all policy pronouncements, decide which candidates to support in the elections and determine what kind of post-election coalition governments they will join.

What gives Podemos and Five Stars their radical appearance is their opposition to the governing parties, their rejection of 'austerity', their criticism of neoliberalism – and their support for 'micro-politics' of local grassroots direct-action.

At no time or place have they counterpoised an alternative to capitalism. Nor have they repudiated illicit debts or supported the expropriation of the banks responsible for the pillage of their economies.

Podemos and Five Stars deliberately obscure their politics: They are whatever any of their affiliates' claim to be...

The leaders raise populist demands and speak about 'dignity', employment and punishment of corrupt officials. They call for an end to authoritarian measures, but avoid any

real commitments to institutional change, especially of the repressive courts, police or armed forces.

Podemos and Five Stars criticize the EU's austerity programs while staying in the EU as subordinate members of an organization dominated by German bankers. They promote popular mobilizations which they have turned into vote-gathering machines for electing their members to office.

The NLLs contradictory politics of populist gestures and institutional commitments reflect the politics of a frustrated and blocked middle class demanding a restoration of its past status and security. Podemos and Five Stars leaders put on the grand show of thumbing their noses at the establishment to promote limited middle class demands. On a much broader front, the leaders of the NLL have not organized any mass protests – let alone formed a mass movement which would seriously challenge the imperialist powers, NATO, the Middle East wars and US-EU sanctions against Russia.

Since most of their supporters are anti NATO, in favor of Palestinian independence and critical of the Kiev regime the popular base of the NLL will act on their own but will have no real impact on the current national leadership.

The reason for the disparity between leaders and followers is clear: The NLL leaders intend to form post-electoral coalitions with the corrupt and reactionary 'center left' parties so despised and rejected by their own electorate.

Following the nationwide Spanish municipal and regional elections, Podemos allied with corrupt Socialist Party (PSOE). In the municipality of Madrid, Podemos supported the left-center coalition Ahora Madrid (Madrid Now), which in turn has allied with the center-right Socialists to elect the 'progressive' mayoral candidate, Manuela Carmena.

While the entire 'progressive camp' celebrates the defeat of the hard-right Popular Party candidate – little has been said about consequential changes in the municipal and regional budgets, structures of economic power and class relations.

'Five Stars', (Movimento Cinque Stelle or M5S), Italy's non-leftist left is dominated by a single 'anti-leader', Beppe Grillo, he defines the party's programs and affiliations. He is known for making clownish, provocative gestures against the authorities, calling for a "Fuck the Parliament Day".

It is Beppe who selects the candidates to run for Parliament. While in opposition, M5S loudly opposed all NATO wars in the Middle East, US military interventions in Latin America and free trade agreements. But now ensconced in the European Parliament, Beppe has aligned with the Libertarian Right.

Five Stars (M5S) central demands revolve around 'direct democracy' and 'sustainable development'. It has captured the electoral support of the majority of the lower middle class gaining 26% of the vote (9 million voters) in the 2013 general elections.

While Beppe and his colleagues engage in fist fights within the Parliament, make radical gestures and spout belligerent rhetoric, 'M5S' has not supported a workers general strike. It participates in each and every election, but has stayed away from factory struggles.

Radicalism, as grand 'gesture politics', is an entertaining, non-threatening response to capitalism since there is no concerted effort to form class alliances with workers engaged in workplace struggles.

'M5S', like Podemos and Syriza, expresses the disorganized radicalism of the young, frustrated lower middle class raging against their downward mobility, while refusing to break with the EU. They rail against the concentration of power in the hands of the banks, but refuse to pursue their nationalization. M5S mobilized 800,000 people in Rome recently but led them nowhere. 'Five Stars' convokes crowds to meet and cheer its leaders and to ridicule the power brokers. Afterwards they all go home.

Conclusion

While the 'NLL' movements capture the support of the 'indignant', the mass of unemployed workers and the evicted householders, their leaders do not articulate a serious plan of action capable of challenging the economic power structures: they raise popular expectations via demands for 'change'. However, these vague and deceptive slogans allow the NLL leaders to join in a medley of opportunist electoral coalitions and governmental alliances, with decidedly establishment personalities and parties.

In Greece, Italy and Spain the traditional left has either disappeared, or shrunk to a marginal force. With little or no base outside of the workplace and trade unions, they barely secure five percent of the votes.

The NLL has deepened the isolation of the traditional left and has even attracted a part of its social base. NLL's rejection of the traditional left's tight organization and top down leadership and its pluralistic rhetoric appeals to the young. Moreover, as the left trade unions have sought compromises with the bosses to save the jobs of employed workers and ignored the unemployed, the latter has looked to the 'open and spontaneous' NLL to express their opposition. In Spain's municipal elections, the United Left, a Communist-led electoral formation, joined with Podemos to elect Manuela Carmena, the 'insurgent mayor' of Madrid.

While the Euro-US academic left has rightly celebrated the emergence of mass opposition to the rightist regimes in Southern Europe, they have failed to understand the internal dynamics within the NLL movements: the limitations of middle class radicalism and their conformists' goals.

The example of Syriza in Greece is a warning of the fatal consequences of middle class leaders trying to realize radical changes, within the neo-liberal framework imposed by the EU.

Epilogue

Currently, the best example of the opportunism and bankruptcy of the NLL is found in the successful Mayor-elect of Madrid, Manuela Carmena, whose victory was hailed by Podemos as the 'great victory for the people' at recent celebration.

For her part, Mayor-elect Carmena has wasted no time repudiating all 'five basic emergency reforms' promised during the elections. In a press conference, the so-called 'progressive Mayor of Madrid' announced (with a cynical grin) that 'promise number one' - a public bank - was no longer needed because she was satisfied to work with the private banking oligarchy. She refused to pursue 'promise number two' - to provide subsidies for electricity, water and gas for poor families cut off from those services, claiming such support was too early and could wait until winter

Regarding Podemos 'promise number three' - a debt moratorium, Carmena insisted that "we will keep paying, for now". On 'promise number four' favoring public over private contractors for municipal contracts, Carmena reversed the position: "We can't change right away".

Carmena even repudiated 'promise number five' - to immediately implement a summer meals program for poor children, insisting that she would rely on the inadequate programs of far right predecessor.

Moreover, Mayor-elect Carmena went even further, staffing her administration with far-right holdovers from the previous government to strategic policy-making positions. For example, she appointed Carmen Roman, a former Director General of the far right Prime Minister Aznar, as Senior Executive of Madrid. She defended these reactionary decisions claiming that she was looking for "technocrats who are the best professional administrations". Indeed, Carmen Roman had implemented mass firing of public workers and the dismantling of social programs in the 'best professional' manner possible!

Carmena further betrayed her Podemos electorate by insisting she looked forward to working with the hard right Prime Minister Rajoy and flatly rejected the idea of promoting a progressive alternative!

In less than one week, the euphoria over the victory of Podemos backed candidates has been dissipated by these acts of cynical opportunism: the non-leftist left has betrayed its electorate, from the very start!