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The Left of the future: a sociology of emergences

The future of the left is no more difficult to predict than any other social fact. The best way to address it is by way of what I term the sociology of emergences, which consists in paying special attention to signs from the present that can be read as trends or the harbinger of whatever will be decisive in the future. At present I propose to draw special attention to a fact that, given its uncommon nature, could portend something new and important. I allude to recent pacts signed by various parties on the left.

The Pacts

Pacts do not have a strong tradition in the “left family”. Historically some branches of the family have established more pacts with the right than with other family members. Judging from their persistence over the last two hundred years, one might say that the differences within the left are part of its DNA. For obvious reasons, those differences have been either more pronounced or more noticeable in democracy. Sometimes the polarisation is such that one branch of the family does not even acknowledge the other branch as part of the same family. Conversely, in times of dictatorship such agreements are a lot more common, although they tend to end as soon as the dictatorship comes to an end. In light of this history, it is worth reflecting on the fact that of late we have witnessed a pactist movement on the part of various branches of the left in democratic countries. Southern Europe is the perfect illustration of what I’m referring to: see the unity around Syriza in Greece, all vicissitudes and difficulties notwithstanding; Portugal’s new government formed in the aftermath of the 4 October elections in 2015, under the leadership of the Socialist Party and supported by the Communist Party and the Left Bloc; a number of autonomous governments resulting from the 2015 elections in Spain, and, at the time of writing, the discussion of the possibility of a nationwide pact between the Socialist Party, Podemos and other left-wing parties in the wake of the Spanish parliamentary elections of 6 December 2015. There are signs that similar pacts could come into being in the near future in other parts of Europe and Latin America. Two questions are in order. How do we account for this pactist drive in a democratic context? How sustainable is it?

There is a plausible answer to the first question. As far as Southern Europe is concerned, the aggressiveness of the ruling right (both the domestic right and the one in “European institutions” trappings) in these last five years was so devastating to citizenship rights and to the credibility of the democratic regime that the forces on the left are now becoming convinced that the new dictatorships of the twenty-first century will come as very low-intensity democracies. In fact, these dictatorships will take the shape of political hybrids of democracy/dictatorship – *i.e.*, governability in the alleged imminence of chaos in these "difficult times" of ours; or the technical outcome of market imperatives and of the crisis that explains everything while seeming to need no explanation itself. The pact is the result of a political reading that says that what is at stake is the very survival of a democracy worthy of the name, and that the differences about what this means are now less pressing than to salvage that which the right has not yet been able to destroy.

The second question is harder to answer. According to Spinoza, people (and I should add, societies as well) are governed by two basic emotions: fear and hope. There is a complex balance between the two, but we need them both if we wish to survive. Fear is the dominant emotion when one’s expectations about the future are negative (“this is bad, but the future could be worse”); in turn, hope has the upper hand when future expectations are positive or, in any event, when refusal of the alleged inevitability of negative expectations is widely shared. Thirty years after the global assault on workers’ rights; after all the proclamations of social inequality and egotism as the ultimate social virtues; after the unprecedented plunder of natural resources and the expulsion of whole populations from their land, as well as the environmental destruction caused by it; after the fostering of war and terrorism to create failed states and make societies defenseless in the face of spoliation; after the more or less negotiated imposition of free trade agreements that are entirely controlled by the interests of multinational companies; after the absolute supremacy of finance capital over productive capital and the lives of peoples and communities – after all this, in combination with the hypocritical defense of liberal democracy, it is plausible to conclude that neoliberalism is a huge machine for producing negative expectations aimed at keeping the popular classes from finding out about the true reasons for their suffering and thus make them not only conform with what little they still have but also remain paralysed by the fear of losing even that.

The pactist movement currently under way within the lefts is the product of a time – our time – marked by the absolute predominance of fear over hope. Does this mean that the governments resulting from the pacts will be victims of their own success? The success of the governments derived from agreements on the part of the left will lead to less fear and to a little more hope being restored to the popular classes, as it will prove, through pragmatic and intelligent government, that the right to have rights is an irreversible civilisational achievement. Can it be that just when there is a new glimmer of hope, disagreement will resurface and the pacts will be thrown overboard? Were that to happen, it would be fatal to the popular classes, who will promptly return to their muted hopelessness in the face of cruel fatalism, a fatalism, moreover, that is as violent for the vast majorities as it is generous to the tiny minorities. But that would also be fatal to the lefts as a whole, because for decades to come it would show that the lefts are good at mending the past but not at building the future. To prevent that from happening, two types of measures will have to be taken while the pacts are in force. The two measures I speak of are not dictated by the urgency of everyday government, but rather must emanate from a sharply focused political will. I term these two measures “Constitution” and “hegemony”.

Constitution and Hegemony

The Constitution is the set of constitutional or sub-constitutional reforms for restructuring the political system and the institutions in order to prepare them for any confrontations with the hybrid democracy/dictatorship and with the very low-intensity type of democracy it entails. The reforms and the mechanisms to attain them will vary from one country to another. Thus while in some cases it is possible to reform the Constitution on the basis of existing parliaments, in others it will be necessary to convene new Constituent Assemblies, as parliaments would eventually prove the most serious barrier to constitutional reform. It may also happen that, in a given context, “reform” is the most important active defence of the existing Constitution, exerted through a renewed constitutional pedagogy in all areas of government. But all reforms should share one common concern: to make the electoral system both more representative and more transparent; to strengthen representative democracy through participatory democracy. The most influential liberal theoreticians of representative democracy have recognised (and recommended) the ambiguous coexistence of two (contradictory) ideas for ensuring democratic stability: on the one hand the belief, on the

part of citizens, in their own capacity and competence to actively intervene and participate in politics; on the other hand, a passive exercise of this competence and capacity through trust in the ruling elites. In recent times – as shown by the protests that shook so many countries after 2011 – trust in the elites has been undermined, even if the political system (either by design or through its own practice) has not allowed citizens to regain the capacity and competence to actively intervene and participate in political life. Biased electoral systems, *partidocracia*, corruption, manipulated financial crises – these are some of the reasons for the double crisis of representation (“they do not represent us”) and participation (“it is not worth voting, they are all the same and no one ever delivers on their promises”). The constitutional reforms have two separate objectives: to make representative democracy more representative, and to supplement representative democracy with participatory democracy. As a result of such reforms, the definition of the political agenda and the control over public policy performance cease to be a monopoly of the political parties and begin to be shared by the parties and by independent citizens who organise democratically for that purpose.

The second set of reforms is what I term hegemony. Hegemony is the set of ideas about society as well as interpretations of the world and life that, by reason of being widely shared – including by those very social groups who are harmed by them –, make it possible for political elites, through their use of such ideas and interpretations, to rule by consensus rather than by coercion, even when their rule goes against the objective interests of majority social groups. The idea that the poor happen to be poor through their own fault is a hegemonic idea whenever it is advocated not just by the rich but also by the poor and the popular classes in general. When that happens, the political costs of the measures for abolishing or drastically reducing income support allowance, for example, are lower. The struggle for the hegemony of the ideas of society underlying the pact established by the lefts is crucial to the survival and consistency of the pact. The struggle in question is being waged both in formal education and in the promotion of popular education, in the media and in the support to the alternative media, in scientific research and in the changes to the university curriculum, in the social networks and in cultural activities, in social movements and organisations, and in public as well as published opinion. That struggle leads to new meanings and to criteria for assessing social life and political action (to expose the immorality inherent in privilege, in the concentration of wealth, and in racial and sexual discrimination; to promote

solidarity, the common goods, as well as cultural, social and economic diversity; to uphold sovereignty and the coherence of political alliances; to protect nature) that curtail the chances of a counter-reform on the part of the reactionary branches of the right, surely the first to sprout in the pact's first moment of weakness. For the struggle to succeed one has to press for policies that may seem less urgent and rewarding to the naked eye. If that fails to happen, hope shall not outlive fear.

Global lessons

If there is one thing that can be said with a degree of certainty about the difficulties currently experienced by the progressive forces in Latin America, it is that those difficulties stem from the fact that their governments have tackled neither the Constitution issue nor the hegemony issue. This fact is especially striking in the case of Brazil. To a certain extent, it explains why the huge social progress achieved by the governments of the Lula era are now being easily reduced to nothing but populist, opportunistic schemes, including by those who benefited from it. It also explains why many of the mistakes made during that time (there were many such mistakes, starting with the shelving of political reform measures and media regulation, which left open wounds among such important and diverse social groups as peasants deprived of land and land reform, young blacks being victims of racist police brutality, indigenous peoples illegally expelled from their ancestral territories, indigenous peoples and quilombolos whose reservations remain shelved long after being formally approved, whole sections under militarised rule in the peripheries of big cities, rural populations poisoned by pesticides, etc.) not only are not seen as mistakes but actually go unnoticed and are even turned into political virtues, or at least accepted as the inevitable outcome of realist, developmental governance. Those two unfulfilled tasks, the Constitution and hegemony, also help explain why the condemnation of capitalism by left-wing governments tends to focus on corruption, and therefore on the immorality and illegality of capitalism, rather than on the systematic injustice of a system of domination that is perfectly capable of functioning in strict adherence to capitalism's legality and morality.

An analysis of the consequences of not addressing the issues of the Constitution and hegemony is in order if one is to predict and prevent what lies ahead in the coming decades, not only in Latin America but also in Europe and other world regions. A number of important channels of communication still awaiting to be analysed in all their

multiple dimensions have been established over the last twenty years between the lefts of Latin America and Southern Europe. Since the start of Porto Alegre's participatory budget in 1989, several left-wing parties and organisations in Europe, Canada and India (that I know of) began to pay great attention to the political innovations originating in the left in various countries of Latin America. Since the late 1990s and with the upsurge of social struggles, the rise to power of progressive governments and the struggles for the establishment of Constituent Assemblies, particularly in Ecuador and Bolivia, it became clear that a profound renewal of the left was underway, from which much was to be learned. The renovation was characterised by the following main traits: a mutually reinforcing combination of participatory democracy and representative democracy; the eminent role played by the social movements, as eloquently illustrated by the 2001 World Social Forum; a whole new relationship between parties and social movements; the bursting onto the political scene of social groups hitherto regarded as residual, namely the landless peasants, the indigenous peoples, and the Afro-descendant populations; the celebration of cultural diversity, the acknowledgment of the plurinational nature of countries and the determination to stand up against the insidious, ever-present colonial legacies. The above list should suffice to show the extent to which the two struggles I have been referring to (the Constitution and hegemony) were a factor in this vast movement that appeared forever to re-found both the thinking and practice of the left, not just in Latin America but in the world at large.

The financial and political crisis – especially after 2011 – and the *indignados* movement were the triggers for new, left-wing political emergences in Southern Europe, in which the lessons from Latin America were very much present. That was especially the case with regard to the new party-movement relationship, the new connection between representative democracy and participatory democracy, constitutional reform and, in the Spanish case, the issue of plurinationality. More than any other party, Spain's Podemos is the embodiment of this lesson, although all along its leaders have been well aware of the substantial differences between the political and geopolitical contexts of Europe and Latin America.

There is no way of knowing what shape the new political cycle that is now emerging in Southern Europe will take, but this much we can speculate at this point: While it is true that the European lefts have learned from the many innovations of the Latin American lefts, it is no less true (and tragic) that the latter have “forgotten” about

their own innovations and thus somehow fallen into the traps of the old politics-as-usual, where, given their long-accumulated experience, right-wing forces have no difficulty in displaying their superiority.

If the lines of communication remain in operation these days, perhaps it is time – always with due regard to existing differences – for the Latin American lefts to learn from the innovations now emerging among the lefts of Southern Europe, of which I would single out the following: The need to keep participatory democracy alive *within* the left-wing parties themselves as a precondition for its adoption by the national political system, in close connection with representative democracy; pacts between the forces (not necessarily parties alone) on the left, but never with those on the right; pragmatic pacts that are neither clientelistic (where government policies and measures, rather than individual names and cabinet posts, are discussed) nor surrendering pacts (where uncrossable red lines have to be balanced with the notion of priorities – *i.e.*, where you have to tell primary from secondary struggles, as one used to say); a greater emphasis on constitutional reform so as to shield social rights and bring more transparency to the political system as well as bring the system closer to citizens and make it more dependent on their decisions without having to wait for new elections every four years (a strengthening of the referendum); and, in the Spanish case, to address the issue of plurinationality in a democratic manner.

Neoliberalism's deadly machine keeps on producing fear on a massive scale. And whenever it runs short of raw materials, it hacks off whatever hope it can find in the innermost recesses of the popular classes' political and social life, grinding it, processing it and turning it into fear of fear. The lefts are the grain of sand that alone can stop these gigantic wheels, making space for the sociology of emergences to do its work of formulating and amplifying the trends, the "not yet's" that portend a decent future for the vast majorities of people. It is therefore imperative that the lefts know how to feel fear, but not fear of fear. It is imperative that they know how to poach seeds of hope from the neoliberal grind and plant them in fertile soil where more and more citizens feel that they can live well, protected both from the hell of impending chaos and the sirenic heaven of obsessive consumption. The basic precondition for that to happen is that the lefts remain steadfast in their two crucial struggles, the Constitution and hegemony.