

Learning from Syriza

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The government experience of Syriza provides us with valuable insights regarding the implications for the Left's diminished power and the neoliberal transformation of the State within national and international networks of power. Furthermore, we are able to identify and examine inadequacies of the approach of the traditional Left. It seems that the strategy of building social alliances in terms of representing beliefs and demands at the political level is not enough. It is not sufficient to engage effectively with the State and the government in order to effect a coherent transition strategy to a new political economy and a robust democratic social and institutional configuration. Less ambitiously, it is not sufficient to check the imposition of austerity policies and neoliberal transformation. It is not enough to pave the way for the restoration of democracy and popular sovereignty.

If this is our current predicament, then I argue that we need to redesign the "Operating System" of the Left. The Left needs to initiate a process of adaptation in order to respond effectively to the new conditions shaped by the neoliberal national and international financial and political architecture. I argue that the urgent question is not whether we should do politics within the State, or not as it is traditionally conceived, but to set up a new conceptual and organisational framework of *doing politics*, both within the State, and outside of it, such as it is relevant today.

Time lag

The Left – but not only the Left – in Western societies of a robust democratic constitution, has been trained to do politics within the coordinates of a post-war institutional configuration. According to this, the elites are

committed to accepting the democratically shaped mandate of an elected government. If they do not like the policies that it promotes, they have to engage in a political fight; opposition parties must push the government, through their political activity, towards more moderate directions, they must convince the people that this policy is not desirable nor successful, and use democratic processes for a new government of their preference to be elected¹.

According to this conception, the post-war global balance of forces inscribed in State institutions has a considerable amount of popular power, rendering them quasi-democratic. This amounts to tolerating the fact that people without considerable economic power have some level of access to crucial decisions. Of course, the quality and the range of the access has been a constant issue of class struggle. The elites have been obliged to fight according to the rules (or at least to appear to do so), and at the same time they have worked deliberately to diffuse any kind of institutional configuration contaminated by popular power. In the last decades (not accidentally, after the fall of the Soviet Union), they made decisive steps towards diffusing this kind of power and hence limiting the ability of the popular classes to influence crucial decisions. Today the elites feel confident to openly defy democracy. Democracy is not a taboo any more.

The strategy of Syriza was implicitly based on the premise that the institutionalised popular power of the past is not exhausted; the elites will respect at least a shred of the democratic mandate of the new government, and provide it with some degrees of freedom required in order to, at least, heal social wounds and restore economic activity. We could say that the implicit idea was that by winning the elections, remaining institutional powers would somehow be enough, and it would be used to stop austerity. And then, in a relatively stable environment, we could enhance people's power using the State institutions. We all know the results of such a

1 | It could be argued that this was not truly the case even for the so-called Western societies after the Great War. This is surely a debatable issue. However, for the argument I present here, it is sufficient to assume that this was at least the dominant conception of the political functioning that shaped the methodology and strategy of the political agents, even if it does not correspond fully to reality. I would like to thank Leo Panitch for the clarification of this point.

strategy, now. The outcome was totally different. There was virtually no change of policy. The elites are no longer committed to the post-war democratic rules of the political and social fight².

Avoid oscillation

It seems that the traditional strategy of building social alliances in terms of representing beliefs and demands at the political level is not enough. The *traditional* strategy may give us access to *traditional* institutional power. But, we know from the Greek experience of the last years that the popular power, once inscribed in the traditional institutional configuration, is seriously depleted, if not exhausted. We do not have enough power to make the elites accept and tolerate our participation in crucial decisions. The amount of power we can reach through traditional political practice is not enough to pave the way for the restoration of democracy and popular sovereignty in Europe.

But in order to overcome our impotence to challenge financial despotism in Europe, we must avoid an unproductive oscillation. Usually, in the Left, there is a hot debate regarding the nature and the place of the State within our strategy: should we intervene in State institutions, or not?³ However, in my opinion, the pressing question is not whether we should do politics within the State or not, as it is traditionally conceived. We usually articulate Left strategies that either include the State, or exclude it, and then we compare them and debate over their comparative pros and cons. Our strategies implicitly presuppose that *doing politics* in both cases is 'a given', and it remains only a matter of articulation: what is our priority, and in cases of non-exclusionary approaches, what are the best ways of connecting them. I argue that we must reformulate these kinds of debates, taking into consideration that there is a deeper issue that needs to be addressed: our know-how of *doing politics* is seriously outdated, undermining all our strategies, from the outset.

2 | We can see the same attitude in other areas of current politics as well. The elites have developed ways to avoid taxation that render any political decision of a government to increase their taxes extremely difficult to implement. Elites gradually detach themselves from societies, shifting the ground and the nature of class struggle in ways that need to be specified and analysed.

We must reformulate the point of view from which we are approaching our current situation, otherwise we may trap ourselves in an oscillation: every time a state-oriented Left strategy fails, a movement-oriented strategy will prevail, and vice-versa. There is the danger of constant oscillation between irrelevant and feeble strategies that are failing *by design*. It leaves us always blaming our impotence on the last decision to intervene with State institutions or the last decision to abstain from doing so. According to my experience and understanding, we must initiate a somewhat daunting process of setting up a new conceptual and organisational framework; of *doing politics both within the State and outside of it*, which indeed would be relevant to the current situation.

Redesign the 'Operating System' of the left

We know that the popular power once inscribed in various democratic institutions is exhausted. We do not have enough power to make the elites accept and tolerate our participation in crucial decisions. More of the same just will not do. If the ground of the battle has shifted, undermining our strategy, then it is not enough to simply be more competent on the shaky battleground; we need to reshape the ground. And to do that, we have to expand the solution space by shifting priorities: from political representation, to setting up an autonomous network of production of economic and social power (NESP).

We must modify the balance between representing people's beliefs and demands, and coordinating, facilitating, connecting, supporting and nurturing people's actions. Instead of being political representatives of the popular classes in a toxic, anti-democratic European political environment, designed to be intolerant to people's needs, we must contribute in a meaningful way to the formation of a strong 'backbone' for: resilient and dynamic networks of social economy and co-operative productive activities, alternative financial tools, local cells of self-governance, democratically functioning digital communities, community control over functions such as infrastructure facilities, energy systems and distribution networks. These are ways of gaining the degree of autonomy necessary to defy the control of elites over the basic functions of our society.

It is not only in Greece that there is a growing exclusion of people from employment or from opening a bank account, from having a 'normal life'. Modern society in general is in decline. From history we know that

societies in decline tend to react in certain ways in order to survive. It is up to us to grasp this and start building networks that can perform basic social functions in a different way – one that is democratic, decentralised and based on the liberation of people’s capacities.

For example, exploring ways, models and methods of building the NESP requires evaluation and the use of concepts such as the ‘commons’. Expanding this notion even further and putting forward a project of shaping political representation as ‘commons’ could give us valuable insights into new ways of performing vital functions like political representation, transcending the traditional, institutional framework of representative democracy.

Redesigning the “operating system” of the Left also means the elaboration of a multi-level democratic transformation strategy of the State, and its effective interconnection with the NESP. The Left talks too much about the democratic transformation of the State. In practice, the driving concept is the restoration of State functions, as they were before the neoliberal transformation. The expansion of a network of economic and social power under the people’s control would further unlock our imagination, facilitating the targeted reforms of State institutions that are needed in order to connect them with the NESP. In theory, this is an old idea: the transformation of the State is a complementary move to the self-organised collectivities of the people outside of it, driven by these forms of self-governance.

First, this would allow people, who are being excluded today, to survive. Second, this could begin a transition towards a better and more mature society. And last but not least, there are no empty spaces in history, so if we do not do this, the nationalists and the fascists – with their own militarised ways of performing these basic functions – may well step in to conclude the decline.

Shifting the battlefield

The elites have already spotted the shifting nature of the battlefield and have moved to new unclassified ways of organising and acting. They have developed new kinds of institutions (a Greek example of successful

clustering³) compatible with the emerging environment of fast flows of information, digital frameworks of action and production etc. They are also exploring new methods and models; for example, “open innovation” models have emerged in the last few years to enable the R&D departments of big multinational companies to cope with today’s distributed nature of knowledge and expertise, which exceeds past means of control and usurpation of human intellectual creativity and innovation. These new ways of organising, and acting, infuse values like collaboration, sharing, exchange of knowledge and expertise, decentralisation and distribution, diversity and inclusion, and common goals, into the private sector in order to boost the production of value, which we know to be seriously undermined by the corrosive effects of competition. This strategy shows that our values are not only desirable but also effective, as long as we find ways to make them the operational core of our collective mobilisation, instead of being just part of our rhetoric.

We have to create new popular power if we want to bring about substantial change, or make ourselves resilient instead of just handling the remaining, seriously depleted, if not already exhausted, popular power inscribed in traditional institutions. The question is what does it look like, to do politics in order to produce popular power, without presupposing traditional democratic functioning – to restore it by transforming it anew? In other words, what are the modifications needed in our political practice for the constitution and expansion of NESPs?

These modifications may be classified in three categories: political imagination, methodology and organising principles. From my experience, the very same people who energetically claim that we need to be more innovative, better adapted and more efficient, when they actually do politics, reproduce priorities, mental pictures, methods and organisational habits that they already know are insufficient or inadequate. There are ingrained norms, in terms of methodological guidelines that decisively shape the range of our collective actions, rhetoric, decisions and ultimately strategy. In the same vein, we believe in and fight for the promotion of the logic of cooperation and democracy, against the logic of competition, but in practice our organisations suffer severely in terms of cooperation and

3 | Corallia. “Corallia’s vision is “A Greek environment with the right framework conditions to allow sciences, innovation and entrepreneurship to flourish (again)”. (<http://www.corallia.org/en/>).

democracy on the operational/organisational level. We need to recognise these blind spots and set up a process of identifying best practices, methods and regulations – both from the experience of our collectivities and from expertise in management, leadership, organisational complexity and network systems theory etc. – in order to operationally upgrade our forces.

Furthermore, our actions and initiatives are not connected up properly, but are fragmented and isolated, destined to face the same difficulties again and again. We need to upgrade our operational capacities through appropriate nodes of connection, facilitating smooth flows of know-how and information, transferring best practices, building databases and accumulating knowledge and expertise in an easily retrievable and useful way. Actually, this is the advantage of multinational and large corporations in general, in comparison to others: they have a vast social network, and powerful databases, that give them the necessary tools to plan and pursue their goals, while their smaller competitors seem in disarray in a global environment of rapid changes. We need these qualities if we want to be really useful today.

It's the implementation stupid⁴!

Having been in the Syriza leadership during the period of preparation for assuming governmental power, I came to the conclusion that Foucault was right when he argued that one major lacking of the Left is that it misses a mode of governmentality stemming from its own logic and values. We miss a modality of administrating populations and running basic social functions in a democratic, participatory and cooperative way. One aspect of this lacking today – based on the Syriza experience – is the total ignorance and indifference towards issues that are related to the *implementation process*. The prevailing rhetoric within Syriza was that the

4 | German Finance Minister Schäuble used this phrase in a public discussion with the Greek Prime Minister Tsipras in order to point out that the implementation of the agreement must move on, giving real results in terms of measurable fiscal aims and structural reforms. Seen differently, this phrase indicates why we ended up in a situation in which the neoliberals are the true 'revolutionaries', dramatically changing the basic coordinates of modern societies whilst the Left seems unstable and feeble.

issues are political and not technical.⁵ So, all we had to do was to decide what we wanted to do, not to explore the ways in which we were going to implement them. The implicit premise was that the crucial point was to be in the government and the ministries, making political decisions, and subsequently, somehow, these decisions would be implemented by the ‘technical’ nature of State mechanisms.

Apart from the fact that this attitude contradicted what we wanted to say regarding the corrosive effect of the neoliberal transformation of the State and the complexity of being in the EU and the Eurozone, it also revealed a greatly superficial understanding by the traditional political Left of the notion of the “transformation of the State”. The fact that we are talking about a current in the Left, which includes governmental power within its strategy, the low level of awareness regarding the importance of implementation processes reflects the degree of obsolescence of Leftist organisations. To me this justifies exactly why there is the need for a radical redesign of the “Operating System” of the Left.

The major problem is that a mentality like this ignores the obvious fact that the range of one’s political potential in being in the government is determined by what one knows one can do with the State. The implementation process is not a ‘technicality’, but the material basis of political strategy. What the traditional Left takes to be the political essence, namely the general, strategic discussion and decision (what to do with the debt, privatisations etc.) is just the ‘tip of the iceberg’ of State-politics. The implementation process is the ‘iceberg’ of State-politics *beneath* the surface. Instead of just being a ‘technicality’, it is the biggest portion of State-politics. Actually, it is where the political struggle within the State becomes hard, and where class opponents battle to prevail over implementation, which is, after all, a battle over shaping reality. The tip is not going to move the iceberg by itself, as long as it is not supported by a multi-level and multi-personal implementation process with clear orientation, functional methods and high-level coordination. This is the integrated concept of State-politics that we have forgotten in practice and by doing so we tend to fail miserably whenever we approach the tip of the iceberg. So, the question is not whether we should fight for the tip or not,

5 | A similar rhetoric appeared publicly during the negotiation process with the lenders.

but whether we have any clue what to do with the iceberg beneath it, or not.

One of the results, in the case of Syriza, was that the Programme Committee, the highest political organs, and the departments of the Central Committee, did not work deliberately on managerial issues regarding steps, methods and difficulties of implementing our own policies and organisational issues, like restructuring processes in the various State institutions we would have access to, but rather, they were sites of political argumentation in the most general and abstract terms. The quality of governmentality, and the capacity of transforming the State-politics of the Syriza government, is just the natural outcome of this kind of preparation.

It is a matter of debate whether the Syriza experience in this respect is generalisable or not for the Left today, on a global scale. But it seems to me that there is also a lack of literature on these issues as well. There is Left-oriented literature, regarding geopolitics, economics, social movements, political science (political representation, alliances etc.). There are also Left-oriented debates regarding strategic questions, the nature of rupture, modern subjectivities. But, what about management, leadership, organisational theories, complexity, system and network theories? I hope I am wrong and it is just me, the Greek Left, or the traditional political Left, that is not familiar with the debates regarding these issues, triggered by current scientific production or practical experiences of our collectivities. In any case, I am sure that there are plenty of useful materials in these domains that the Left should recognise as being extremely crucial for our cause. And for as long as we have not explored such important areas of human activity and creativity, we can be optimistic that we may well discover some truly powerful 'weapons' in giving us stronger operational capacities in the future.