

What about the Left?

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Hardly any of the innumerable comments now being published on the outcome of the election of a new European Parliament (EP) even mention the radical, as distinguished from the social-democratic, Left. This is an expression of contempt, and it is well-deserved. Five years ago the Left, under the clumsy label of GUE/NGL (Confederal Group of the European Left/Nordic Green Left), was led by none other than Alexis Tsipras, later, as Greek Prime Minister, he became Angela Merkel's favorite disciple in the art of treason. With time, after collecting various splinter groups, the GUE/NGL cobbled together a total of 52 seats, a little less than seven percent of the EP's 751 seats. Now, in 2019, it ended up with 38, a loss of more than a quarter.

The near-death experience of the European Left, or more precisely: its European parliamentary representation, came at a time when the old parties of the center, left and right, suffered dramatic setbacks, together winning only 329 seats, 44 percent of the total, a combined loss of 75 seats that put an end to their Grand Coalition parliamentary majority. It also coincided with a steep rise of the vote for a variety of parties of a new, if not always entirely new, nationalist Right (114 seats, a plus of 36), and a similarly impressive gain of the Greens, from 52 to 70 seats, making them now almost twice as strong as the Left. When, if not in times like these of rapidly shifting political allegiances, should the Left expect to make electoral progress with European workers and reformist sections of the European middle-class? There is an urgent need to explain its disastrous failure to do so. Four reasons come to mind; certainly there are more.

The first and most basic one is the total absence, as far as I can see, of a realistic anti-capitalist, or at least anti-neoliberal, Left political strategy related to the European Union (EU). There is not even a debate on the crucial issue of whether the EU can at all be a vehicle for anti-capitalist politics. Instead there is a naïve or opportunistic acceptance – hard to say which is worse – of the feel-good “Europeanism” so popular among young people and so useful for both Green electioneering and European technocrats seeking legitimacy for their neoliberal regime. No mention, in particular, of the way in which the EU’s *de facto* constitution limits the political space for any anti-capitalist and even laborist program, with its safely enshrined free markets (the “four freedoms”), the *de facto* dictatorship of the European Court, and the balanced budget austerity provisions under European Monetary Union. In particular, any critical discussion of the EU’s central social policy, the free movement of labor between the now economically extremely different member countries, is strictly avoided, combined with hints of sympathy for open borders generally, including those with the outside world. This does nothing but validate the image spread by the Greens and the center-left middle-class parties of Europe being mainly about young people traveling without border controls and not needing to change money. It also comes with entirely illusory policy projects, for example a European minimum wage, which only after insistent questioning is admitted would have to be differentiated by countries. Predictably, that project has drawn no water whatsoever either in the poor countries of the Union, where people find it too good to be true, or in the rich countries where workers in particular fear that somehow it would be them who would have to pay the bill for the Left’s “European solidarity”.

Second, in most if not all countries the Left found it irresistible to join the old and new center parties – Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, the Greens – in declaring the new nationalist Right an imminent threat to democracy, to be defended against by voting

“for Europe”. In fact, often enough the Left raised the stake by suggesting that the new Right was in fact a very old Right, and not voting for it was a contemporary version of the anti-fascist struggle of the interwar years. This dangerously blurred the difference between legal opposition parties in a democracy, ugly as their speech and thought may be, and private armies aiming to replace a democratic with a dictatorial state. Such historical confusion played into the hands especially of the Greens, in several ways. Exaggerating the threat from the new Tigh was certain to drive voters into the arms of liberal establishment parties promising “stability” in hard times. If fascism was something to be defeated by voting for “more Europe”, there was no need to go as far as vote for the radical Left; voting for the new darlings of the middle-class would suffice. If democracy is parliaments without neo-nationalist “populists”, voting every five years for a “non-populist” party will do. One should have thought that a Left worth its name and ambition should know that democracy may be under threat even if there are no “fascists” around at all, alleged or real. The very center parties, the same on whose side the European Left has fought its electoral phony war against rising fascism in Europe, are perfectly enough to undermine democracy as they submit their countries to a neoliberal political-economic order that imposes on them an untouchable free trade regime, a gold standard-like monetary policy, austerity public finances, and a union-free labor market with an unlimited labor supply. While defending democracy is always a good thing, in joining the fight the Left could at least have pointed out that democracy is not just getting the vote for a powerless parliament right but also needs to provide for local government autonomy, collective bargaining and trade union representation, worker voice on the shopfloor and on the boards of large firms, a public property regime conducive to high public investment, a truly pluralist mass media etc. It appears unlikely that here the Greens could be reliable allies.

Third, the radical Left had no idea how to handle the issue of climate change, which came up in time to play into the hands of the Greens. In this the Left did not differ at all from the established center parties. That the theme was always difficult for it is easy to understand. Calls for higher taxes on gasoline or less consumption of cheap meat, or meat in general, are easier to live with, and sometimes to heed, for the middle class than for the lower and working class. Appeals to individual virtue reach the bad conscience of the environmentally woke, but not those who feel a need to catch up in consumption with their betters. Rather than chiming in when the Greens and their bourgeois elders sing their siren songs, what should matter for the Left is that voluntary changes in lifestyle are vastly inadequate anyway for stopping global warming or the long ongoing decline of biodiversity. A Left that limits itself to reciting the Greens' scary stories about an impending end of life on the planet drives many of its potential voters into denial, and from there into the arms of the New Right. To leave behind the white lies of green environmentalism the Left needs a realistic program, not just to stop environmental deterioration – for this it may be too late – but also to repair its results. This would require significant increases in public spending, to be funded at least in part by public debt beyond austerity debt limits, partly replacing private with public consumption to adapt social and economic life to a changed physical environment. A Green New Deal of this kind would create jobs in addition to raising taxes and would on balance benefit rather than burden the working class.

Fourth and finally, although the writing had long been on the wall, the Left has badly underestimated what early socialists called the “national question” and its importance for its core constituency. For them “Europe” is a far-away technocracy, a world outside of their life experience. This is not much different from the middle class – which, however, has learned, and prefers, to pretend it knows who is doing what in Brussels, which of nobody outside of a

narrow circle of specialists does. Details, however, do not really matter for it as “Europe” has become a mood, a feeling rather than an institution, a symbol of a happy, hip “cosmopolitan” consumerist life, if with a few environmentalist corrections, where “pro-Europeanism” is essential for admission to an urban social milieu to which the leaders and activists of radical left parties belong but only very few of their members and voters. For the latter, political and administrative centralization means a diminished voice for the little man and the little woman who feel no affinity with and no need for a supranational identity and who feel disenfranchised as their nation-state is de-legitimized and disempowered in the name of “European” supranationalism. In the eyes of contemporary lifestyle internationalists, this makes them, the social heirs of traditional working-class internationalism, appear hopelessly backward culturally, which makes it impossible for their parties, even if they conspicuously join in the middle class’s Europeanist enthusiasm, to attract any sizeable fraction of the neoliberal internationalist community. Nor can they, in their modernized appearance, attract those who do not share in, and are at the receiving end of, the consumerist optimism of the urban cosmopolitans. Especially among the German Left, the concept of the nation-state as a vital democratic institution is deeply discredited today, an attitude that the *Linkspartei* bought into wholesale when it mobbed Sahra Wagenknecht out of its leadership. Now just as the Greens, all major political problems are relegated in Left political speech to a European level of democratic politics that doesn’t exist outside of the party’s imagination and won’t exist for any foreseeable future; “Europe”, and the European Parliament in particular, as a depository of pious hopes, until it will be discovered that the Europeanists have overplayed their cards and, busy with trying to re-educate their voters in the cosmopolitan spirit, forgotten the political toolkit that was waiting for them at the national level.

To conclude with a personal view. An institution like the EU, deliberately designed to immunize capitalism against anti-capitalist politics, is useless for anti-capitalist politics; it must be bypassed or fought where it stands in the way of a revival of socialism. (Socialism is for me the substantive core of any radical Leftism.) Socialist internationalism is different from liberal supranationalism, including the “pro-Europeanism” of the old and new center parties. Among other things this means that “European solutions” cannot make national action expendable, if only because they tend not to come forward at all or will be too little too late. A revitalization of a socialist politics, as I believe is essential for our future as modern societies (and if one didn’t believe this, there would be no need at all to care about the puny handful of parties and MEPs that have been so thoroughly defeated in this strange election), would have to defend really existing democracy, which happens to be nation-state democracy, against its “cosmopolitan” replacement with castle-in-the-air supranational democracy. Democratic socialism begins at the bottom; it must grow from below where conditions are vastly different from country to country, as the varied national election outcomes have once again documented. EU-type international institutions must not be allowed to prevent national progress; this is the major and perhaps only reason why they need to be considered in left radical politics, electoral or practical.

International solidarity on the Left, then, must above all mean helping other countries defend their democratic institutions against the arrogance of international technocracy and oligarchy, with their once-size-fits-all social and economic prescriptions. Socialism today means and requires the freedom for people, and the peoples they form, to determine their collective life under as little capitalist market pressure as possible; to build an inclusive collective infrastructure in public rather than private ownership, reversing the devastations of privatization during the neoliberal era; inventing and trying out new forms of participatory

communal government, in trade unions and local chambers of commerce, in enterprises and universities, different in different places, in Manchester different from Vienna, in Gelsenkirchen different from Copenhagen, but always in need of protection from “European” competition law and the constitutional constraints that come with the “four freedoms” and the Euro austerity regime. This can only be a long-drawn battle, and one difficult to win. Too many are today willing to give up before the struggle has really begun, and are joining the new liberal-Green middle-class for a happy liberal-Green middle-class life. Unlike their good conscience, however, reconciliation with nature and among people does not fall from any European sky. In particular, change for the socially better won’t arrive as a gift from a bunch of what will shortly after their election have become 751 like-minded lobbyists for supranational centralization pretending to be democratic representatives of a European people that does not yet exist.