

Left / right : unusable political categories

In 1998, the Italian Marxist philosopher Costanzo Preve published a book called *Destra e Sinistra. La natura inservibile di due categorie tradizionali* ("Right and left. The unusable nature of two traditional categories", Editrice Petite Plaisance). This book was an (indirect) response to that of Norberto Bobbio, *Destra e sinistra*, published in 1994 which defended the relevance of this distinction. Perry Anderson, in the *New Left Review*, had criticized Bobbio, pointing out that labels often last long after they have lost all political significance. In Rome, the racing supporters of the different chariot racing teams wore distinct colors. The Greens were supported by the people and the aristocracy supported the Blues. These divisions between greens and blues survived Byzantium, but they had lost their original social significance.

The categories in which we have become accustomed to thinking politics for more than two centuries must be seriously reconsidered. In order to think we need categories just as in speaking we need nouns, verbs, adjectives, and other grammatical terms. And to think politics, we need political categories. They still have to be useful, that is to say they help to clarify what we are talking about. Obviously, this is no longer the case with the words 'right' and 'left'.

Historical overview

Right and left, as has often been said, refer to a parliamentary geography which dates from the French Revolution : in 1789 the partisans of the right of royal veto were lined up and on the left their opponents. Authority against freedom, royal power against democracy, the scene is being set up.

- The right was authoritarian and the left liberal.
- The right defended the altar and the throne and the left was rather republican and often free-thinker.

But right and left were in agreement in defending the private property of the means of production and the freedom of the market. This is the most important! This is what we should never forget!

The workers' movement, from its first steps, was outside this division which ultimately only concerned the dominant classes. Regardless of the form of government, it was always only one form of domination of the ruling class - the common affairs board of the bourgeoisie. During this time, the rights remain abstract rights. Rich and poor alike have the right to sleep under bridges, ironically Anatole France.

Still need to qualify. The Marxists, quite quickly, understood the interest of democratic and parliamentary forms in advancing the cause of socialism. The last elaborations of Marx and Engels envisaged the possibility of a peaceful passage to socialism by the parliamentary way.

When Clemenceau presented in 1880 his program for the radical transformation of the republic, Marx and Engels thought that the French socialists should support him, because 'a republic à la Clemenceau' would have been a big step forward for socialism. But it should be noted that there was no question of a sort of government bloc between socialists and radicals.

Things changed with the Dreyfus affair. After some hesitation, the Socialists decide to join the 'Dreyfusards' camp. If the Socialists hesitated, it is because they saw in the Dreyfus affair a settlement within the ruling class ... So the Socialists, who are Republicans for the most part, allied themselves with the radicals who claim to be also 'socialist radicals', partisans of private ownership of the means of production, but ready to introduce numerous corrective measures to prevent class antagonisms from tearing the country apart. The alliance was sealed in 1899, at the turn of the century, and in 1902 it led to the first government in which 'independent' socialists like Millerand participated. In this government also participates General Gallifet, one of the massacrators of the Paris Commune. Here is the birth certificate of the left : from the Commune to Gallifet.

It is this true birth certificate of this reformist left that will play such a big role during the 20th century. It was at this time that the notion of 'Republican discipline' began to take shape, that is to say the idea that, facing the right, the candidates of the left had always to unite. The radicals were all the more favorable to this discipline as they were often the first beneficiaries : the left bloc was the bloc of the radical rider and the socialist horse!

Until the end of the 1980s, the right / left division also partially overlapped with a double class division : the working classes and the 'enlightened' bourgeoisie against finance capital and reaction.

We will find similar processes in most of the great developed capitalist nations. The *Labor party* was created in 1893 to send a union delegation to Parliament. Ramsay MacDonald will become the first British Prime Minister in 1924. German social democracy, worked since before 1914 by strong reformist tendencies, will rally to the Sacred Union in the First War just as the SFIO will do for its part. Each in his trenches, the comrades of the socialist congresses will kill each other joyfully. In short, almost everywhere the same processes are at work which see a 'gentrification' of workers' parties and alliances between these parties and the 'progressive' right. This is what will form the 'left'. In the United States, the socialist and communist parties will never succeed in making an election electorally, because the system is well locked for power remains in the hands of the two major parties and, because, if necessary, the so-called American democracy never hesitates to bring down the socialists or the communists with ruthless repression. The left will therefore be entirely absorbed by the 'democrats', who unite old southerners and progressive bourgeois who find it useful to forge alliances with the union leaders, when the unions are on the rise (we will think here of the great strike Teamsters of 1934 and the formation of a powerful industrial union, the CIO, replacing the trade unions).

Faced with the threats of a workers' movement which has continued to grow stronger, part of the bourgeoisie is ready to give up ballast, all the more so as it understands that social reforms

can also be useful for long-term development. end of the capitalist mode of production. As long as the base remains capitalist, important social laws introduce 'socialist' principles into the very same of bourgeois society. An example is well known : that of paid holidays, the great conquest of the general strike of June 1936, had already been considered by the employers, especially in the automobile sector, which noted the need to stop the chains once a year to allow overhaul and maintenance work. We can go back in time and recall that Bismarck had set up a very broad social protection, both as a means of cutting the grass under the feet of the socialists, against whom he had taken numerous laws, but also as a stabilizing element. of capitalism. The function of Roosevelt's *New Deal* was to save the capitalist mode of production after the great crisis of 1929 ...

Today

How to understand the condition of possibility of this 'left' of the twentieth century, at the same time working and bourgeois, socialist and capitalist? I see two main causes :

- 1) The development of the capitalist mode of production can use social reforms as a stabilizing, 'countercyclical' element and as a means of opening up new fields of capital accumulation (leisure has developed with paid holidays, as has the labor market. health is developed with social insurance).
- 2) It is also a matter of facing up to the class struggle and the threats that socialism and communism pose to capitalist domination. Reforms are thus by-products of potentially revolutionary social movements.

But this is what ends at the end of the twentieth century with the end of the USSR, of 'really existing socialism' and of the communist parties, the decomposition of the social democratic parties and the creation of new centrist magmas like the New Tony Blair's Labor or the Italian PD. A new phase of the capitalist mode of production is opening up , baptized neoliberalism, globalization, etc., in which it is first a question of seeking the ways and means of a new development of the accumulation of capital and therefore of breaking down all the political and social barriers that could hinder it. In this new phase, it is not a question of suppressing the State or of implementing the libertarian reveries of the 'minimal State'. It is a question of destroying the nations as a framework of the possible political action for the peoples in general, for the working class in particular, by relying on the power of the States which remain alone able to face the popular movements, everything by hiding this power behind the so-called supranational 'governance'.

Far from resisting this new course of capital on a world scale, the 'left' will very quickly become one of the essential engines, relieving it of its popular component, workers in particular, to become the political organization of the small- cosmopolitan intellectual bourgeoisie, of what Jean-Pierre Chevènement called the 'globalized elites'. How was this possible?

We must first come back to what was the nucleus of this left, that is to say the social democracy, the great workers' party, which the communist parties could only compete with

by becoming themselves. even kinds of social democratic parties if we stick to the French and Italian cases.

- (1) In my book *Le cauchemar de Marx*, published in 2009, I gave a general explanation. In a chapter entitled “Social democracy or the myth of the workers' party”, I explained : “The reality of international social democracy is that it was never the organization of the proletariat with a view to the abolition of wage labor. and employers, but on the contrary the organization of the integration of the working class into the functioning of the capitalist mode of production. Far from stimulating the self-organization, the autonomous activity of the workers, it was above all an instrument for framing workers' protest. Let us insist : it is that from the start, even if the initiators of the company were not aware of it and delivered high-sounding revolutionary speeches at banquets and meetings. A workers' organization, social democracy linked its destiny to the maintenance of a strong and disciplined working class, and therefore, whether we like it or not, to the maintenance and development of the capitalist mode of production”. The ‘reformist’ development, that is to say ‘on the left’, of social democracy is therefore perfectly understandable. It is useless to speak of ‘betrayal’ as did the friends of Lenin, then the Trotskyists.
- (2) I continue my reading on the fundamental conservatism of social democracy : “And yet, one could already sense how much this Marxism was only the spiritual aroma which enveloped the rise of a new bourgeois or petty-bourgeois elite arguing its rights by its capacity to move the workers' battalions like an army in the field. Rosa Luxemburg saw very early on what this German social democracy was, which Lenin took for a model to emulate. Georges Sorel, closely linked to French anarcho-syndicalism, theoretician of the general strike and workers' violence, immediately understands the deeply conservative character of social democracy and announces ‘the decomposition of Marxism’ in an eponymous work dated 1908. Sorel violently attacks the ‘disciples’ of Marx who especially stood out for ‘so many fantasies’, notably Paul Lafargue.” The evocation of the ‘right to laziness’ among the Marxist ‘fantasies’ reminds us of how many are the ‘Marxist’ ‘thinkers’ who have devoted themselves to the fabrication of reassuring illusions to help the workers to accept their fate - according to the same methods as the religions which sell eternal blessed life in compensation for the tears that are shed in the world below.
- (3) Social democracy has never been revolutionary, not because it was not a ‘workers' party’, or because it would have become a ‘bourgeois workers' party’ or a party of ‘working class lieutenants of the bourgeois class’ (to use the classic expressions of Leninists and Trotskyists here), but precisely because it was a pure workers' party, a party founded first and foremost on the defense of the living conditions of the working class. But to defend the condition of the workers is to defend the condition of the working class in capitalist society and nothing else. And the idea

that such a party is naturally in some way the center of a movement for the revolutionary transformation of society is an illusion, the constitutive illusion of real Marxism, of that orthodox Marxism which has largely dominated political life and intellectual for a century.

This is what is the backbone of the classic left. Now let's see how it all collapses at the end of the 20th century.

There is first of all the same dynamics of social democracy (a generic term which must include unions where there is no social democratic party like the United States. The parties of the Second International depend on the existence of a social state, basic political freedoms and a minimum of workers' rights, but they also depend on the existence of a capitalism strong enough to accept these general conditions. make these socialist and social democratic parties workers' parties are also the ones that explain why they can take up the cause for their own capitalist class, even for the capitalist class of the dominant capitalist country - as is the case of social parties - European democrats often much more Americanophile than the various European capitalist classes.

This explains the penetration of Europeanism at the very heart of social democracy. It is neither its 'social-patriotism', its Americanophilia, nor its support for imperialism and colonialism that discredit social-democracy as a workers' party. Each socialist party defends 'its' workers, 'its' working class, the one it more or less completely supervises, in the face of competition. Better living conditions and social benefits can only be negotiated with a capitalism powerful enough and rich enough to concede them. And so the class struggle within a national capitalist formation is reconcilable with the support of workers' parties and unions for their capitalism in the face of other capitalisms, just as the workers of a company always prefer their company to be in good shape. health in the face of competition. Not only is this 'national' policy reconcilable with the class struggle, but it can even take a turn Marx did not foresee that the development of the workers' movement follow this path, but it is a fact which finds a perfectly 'Marxian' explanation, that is to say without appealing to the wickedness or the goodness of individuals and without suspecting malicious plots, by keeping to the field of the dynamics of social relations of production and exchange.

Once we understand this, we understand at the same time the sequence of events. Gradually, social democracy relies more and more only on the upper layers of the working class (those which are the best integrated), then especially on the state intellectual professions and it gradually loses all links with the mass of workers. The more socially successful it is, the more social democracy prepares for its own political death. Note that we can follow the same processes within the PCF. He had tied his fate to the Soviet Union and he followed it in its downfall. But things were set in motion long before 1989. Workers' party, through its cadres and its social composition, the PCF began to become at the beginning of the 1970s a party of intellectuals. They are the ones who seize power and begin the party's long decline. The case of PCI is still different. The PCI is a powerful party which rules de facto part of Italy, particularly in the red regions of Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany. It is an economic power

through cooperatives and the banking network. In a country where the state is traditionally weak, the ICH is a factor of order. But as in the Soviet Union, the ruling stratum is beginning to find the constraints of formal membership in communism too burdensome. Like the Soviet bureaucrats, there comes a time when the Italian Stalinist bureaucrats adopt the slogan 'take the sorrel and shoot!' This explains why the decomposition of the PCI goes faster and further than that of the PCF. As early as 1991, at the Bologna Congress, it dissolved itself to become a social-democratic party then a centrist bourgeois party almost like the others.

If I stick to the French case, but here again it would be necessary to make a more complete inventory at European level and beyond, then we will see that not only social democracy has accompanied the evolution of the mode of production capitalist, but that it was even the vanguard. That a considerable fraction of the PS apparatus has ended its race in Macron's arms, it makes perfect sense. Macron is indeed a 'man of the left', but a man of the left in line with what the left has become.

Let us recall some facts :

- In 1982, the PS in power gave up its 'socialist' program to preserve its Europeanism. Leaders call it a 'parenthesis', but the parenthesis has never been closed. She is a complete change of direction.
- The PS will assume the industrial restructuring plans that it had fought against. It is the liquidation of the steel industry and of one of the great strongholds of the working class. Fabius assumes : he does "the dirty work" and, with Mitterrand, speaks out for "France which wins. This is the launch of the "nightmare of the 80s" (see F. Cusset's book : *The decade. The nightmare of the 80s*, La Découverte).
- In 1989, after the re-election of Mitterrand, the left will have the 'Single European Act' adopted and organize the deregulation of the banking system. It is wrong and archival to paint the left as 'chained to Europe'. It is not 'chained', it is the driving force, it anticipates German demands - for example, it was Mitterrand who invented the 3 % deficit clause for the state budget. All this was crowned by Maastricht (1992) who saw the "yes" barely pass. And there we have a clue and even more than a clue : the popular classes voted 'no'; the 'socialist' departments (Nièvre, Pas-de-Calais, etc. voted "no." Maastricht was the first major crack which quickly became a fracture.
- 1991 : Mitterrand and the left engage behind US imperialism in the first Iraq war. Then the 'plural left' inadvertently returned to power in 1997, took part in the operation against Serbia and in the 'humanitarian' bombings on Belgrade. She is involved up to her neck in spraying the Balkans and gives her full support to the Kosovar mafia organization of the UCK. In 2001, it was again the left that left behind Bush Jr. in Afghanistan. Likewise, it will support [Mélenchon included]

Sarkozy's operation against Libya [2011], then we will have Syrian policy with support for AlQaida (“the Al Nosra front does a good job” said Fabius, 2016).

- No need to rewrite the history of Holland's five-year term, which was Macron's orbiting and the first experiment of his policy with ‘labor law’!

This is what the left is today. A pure bourgeois party, an avant-garde of the bourgeoisie. Of course, it is not the old patrimonial, Catholic and nationalist bourgeoisie of yesterday. It is the French fraction of the ‘transnational capitalist class’ - I refer here to Leslie Sklair’s analyzes on ‘CBT’. The left is more suited to welcoming the most modern elements of the bourgeois class, those linked to the media, entertainment, commodified culture, ‘high tech’ circles. This is also why the left is very welcoming to all ‘societal reforms’ (same-sex marriage, pro-trans action, denouncing ‘discrimination’ of all kinds, provided that we do not attack ‘social discrimination’.). In a famous text, the Terra Nova club proposed a theorization of this new course : to abandon the popular masses, irremediably moved to the right, to take an interest in what Mélenchon calls ‘the urbanized people’ and the populations resulting from immigration.

Where are we

The left still exists and there is indeed a right-left cleavage, but it is a cleavage between two wings of capital, no more and no less. And it is not certain that the left of capital is less harmful than the right. In some respects, it is even more so : it is at the forefront of the dislocation of any national community and at the same time of any possibility of resistance action by the working class. It nourishes reactions which will necessarily be violent against the follies of the time. Apart from the mindless semi-educated university movements, the ‘straight white males’ are not necessarily willing to let themselves be ‘deconstructed’! and nations are unwilling to be creolized. Mélenchon can tell all the nonsense he likes to tell so much by claiming that the most popular dish in France is couscous and that we are therefore already ‘creolized’ without knowing it. This silly claim is furthermore factually untrue, as experience and surveys show abundantly.

The people know, intimately, that the only place of redistribution, the only social protection available to them, is that offered by the nation-state. And it is for this reason that he is overwhelmingly hostile to immigration in which he sees a factor in the dissolution of the nation and the social protection that goes with it. And it is for this reason that he deserted the left and overwhelmingly votes [who he votes] for the so-called ‘populist’ right-wing parties. In electoral terms, the RN has indeed become the ‘first workers’ party in France’. In reality, the dominated classes, deprived of their traditional political frameworks, instrumentalize what they find within their reach, thinking that it can shake up the system. I refer here to the stimulating works of Christophe Guilluy or to the last two books of Jérôme Sainte-Marie on the ‘popular block’. The same changes have been observed in Great Britain where Boris Johnson brought down the Labor “red wall”, but also in Italy with the ephemeral ‘gialloverde’ government uniting the ‘5 stars’ and Salvini’s Lega. We will also notice that the attempts to create ‘populist left’ protest movements all came to nothing, since these movements retreated

before the obstacle of a radical break with the bourgeois left : this is the case of LFI, from Podemos, 5 stars.

There is an urgent need to pour new wine into new wineskins and to re-examine all this in the light of the evolution of social classes. Because it is to the fundamentals that we must return : how, in what relations and under what conditions do men produce their material conditions of existence and therefore produce their own life. The site is immense : there is knowledge to be produced - while sociological research is swallowed up by 'gender studies', 'post-colonial studies', and other puns of the same flour. It is just as necessary to sweep away this 'buonismo', this benevolent 'bonnism' which is only a bad drink intended to blur our view.