01 2001

The Left Needs a Political Adversary

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One year after it came to power and despites the widespread reaction that it suscitated, it seems likely that the OVP/FPO coalition will be able to finish its term in office. In any case, if something happens to invalidate this prediction, it will probably be caused by a split within the coalition, not by the strenght of the opposition. Indeed, in view of the neo-liberal mesures that the new governement has begun to implement, neither the SPO nor the Green have been able to put forward a credible counter-hegemonic offensive.What are the reasons for this lack of a convincing alternative to "austro-thatcherism"? No doubt it is in part due to the shortcomings of the SPO and of the Greens.But that cannot be the whole answer and the Austrian situation need to be examined within the context of the European Left. Whithout denying their responsibility, it is clear that the incapacity to offer a credible alternative to the neo-liberal onslaught is a weakness that the Austrian Left shares with all the other left-wing parties in Europe. The problem is a general one and its causes need to be scrutinized. To find an explanation for the current incapacity of the Left to challenge the hegemony of neo-liberalism it is necessary to go grasp how deeply the collapse of communism has transformed the dynamics of democratic politics.

As Norberto Bobbio pointed out in an article in La Stampa as early as June 1989, the crisis of Communism represented a real challenge for the affluent democracies. Will they be capable of solving the problems to which that system proved incapable of providing solutions? In his view it was dangerous to imagine that the defeat of Communism had put an end to poverty and the longing for justice. "Democracy, he wrote, has admittedly come out on top in the battle with historical communism. But what ressources and ideals does it possess with which to confront those problems that gave rise to the communist challenge?"

If we examine ten years later what has been democracy answer to that challenge there are not many reasons to be optimistic. Social democracy, far from having won the struggle against its old antagonist, has been profoundly affected in its very identity. To be sure, many more social democratic parties are now in power than at that time, but the kind of politics that they are implementing could hardly qualify as "left". In fact they have been steadily moving towards the right, redefining themselves euphemisticaly as "centre-left". Under the pretence of "modernising" social democracy what the "Third Way" and the "neue Mitte" are doing is abandonning the struggle for equality which has always been at the core of social democracy. We could even say they are well on the way to liquidate the Left project altogether. There is no doubt that the outcome of the crisis of communism has been so far the reinforcement and generalisation of the neo-liberal hegemony.

This indicates that a great opportunity has in fact been lost for democratic politics. In 1989 the possibility existed to begin thinking seriously about the nature of democratic politics, in a way unencumbered by the mortgage which the communist system had represented before. This was the time to redefine democracy in

function of what it stands for and not simply negatively in opposition to what it was not: Communism. There was a real chance for a radicalisation of the democratic project because traditional political frontiers had collapsed and they could have been redrawned in a more progressive way.

What happened was the opposite . What we heard were discourses about "the end of history", the disappearance of antagonism and the possibility of a politics without frontiers, without a "them"; a "win-win politics" in which solutions could be found that favour everybody in society.Today social theorists like Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck argue that with the demise of communism and the socio-economic transformation of society linked to the advent of the information society and to the phenomenon of globalisation, the adversarial model of politics has become obsolete and that what we need is a politics "beyond left and right", a politics not any more structured around social division and without the us/them opposition.

This "post-political" discourse is accompanied by the promotion of humanitarian crusades, ethically correct good causes and the increasing reliance on the judiciary to deal with political issues. What this signifies is the triumph of a moralizing liberalism which pretends that the political has been eradicated and that society can now be ruled through rational moral procedures and conflicts resolved by impartial tribunals. It is the culmination of a tendency inscribed at the very chore of liberalism which, because of its constitutive incapacity to think in truly political terms, always has to resort to another type of discourse: economic, moral or juridical. However the liberal incapacity to acknowledge political antagonisms does not make them disappear. Despites the fact that the key words today are those of "good governance" and "partisan -

free democracy" no politics is possible without defining frontiers. The democratic consensus proclaimed by all those who celebrate the "centre" cannot exist without defining an exterior which by its very exclusion secures its identity and its coherence. Hence the necessity of defining a "them" whose existence will provide the unity of the democratic "we". But since one cannot think of politics in adversarial terms, this "them" cannot be envisaged as a political adversary any more. It is therefore on the moral terrain that the frontier is drawn.This is why the "extreme right" - a rather undifferenciated and unexamined entity- is increasingly presented as the personnification of the "evil them" against which all the good democrats should unite.

Clearly, what we are witnessing is not the disappearance of the political antagonism but a new mode of its manifestation. Given that it cannot be articulated in terms of a confrontation of hegemonic socio-economic projects, this antagonism now expresses itself in the moral register. What is at stake is still a political conflict but disguised as a moral opposition between "good" and "bad". On one side the good democrats who respect universal values and on the other side the representatives of evil, the racist and xenophobic right with whom no discussion is permitted and which has to be eradicated through moral condemnation.

The problem with this conflation of politics with morality is that it forcloses the possibility of posing what are the fundamental questions that a left-wing politics must address, those linked to the transformations of the key power relations in society and with the conditions for the establishment of a new hegemony. Moreover it does not help understanding the reasons behind the increasing success of right-wing populist parties and impedes envisaging how one can struggle against them on a truly political terrain. The same

criticism can also be addressed to the widespread identification democratic politics with the defense of human rights. Indeed nowadays there is a growing tendency to use the defense of human rights as the defining feature of democracy at the expense of the element of popular sovereignty which is seen as "old-fashioned".As Marcel Gauchet has pointed out, the fundamental shortcoming of a politics exclusively centered on human rights is that it has nothing to contribute to an understanding of the causes of present injustices. Indeed, by discrediting attempts to find explanations for what is deemed "inacceptable", it does not help designing strategies to come to terms with its causes. This is why such a politics is so often limited to discourses of denunciation.

Against all those fashionable discourses about the end of antagonism and the displacement of politics by morality there is today an urgent need to reestablish the centrality of the political and this requires drawing new political frontiers capable of giving an real impulse to democracy. One of the crucial stakes for democratic politics is to begin providing an alternative to neo-liberalism. It is the current unchallenged hegemony of neo-liberalism which explains why the left is unable to formulate a credible alternative project. The usual justification for the "there is no alternative dogma" is globalization. Indeed the argument often rehearsed against redistributive type social democratic policies is that the tight fiscal constraints faced by governments are the only realistic possibility in a world where global markets would not allow any deviation from neo-liberal orthodoxy. This kind of argument takes for granted the ideological terrain which has been established as a result of years of neo-liberal hegemony and transform what is a conjonctural state of affairs into an historical necessity. When it is presented as driven exclusively by the information revolution, globalisation is detached from its political

dimension and appears as a fate to which we all have to submit. This is precisely where our critic should begin. Scrutinizing this conception, Andre Gorz has argued that instead of being seen as the necessary consequence of a technological revolution, the process of globalization should be understood as a move by capital to provide what was a fundamentally political answer to the "crisis of governability of the 1970's". In his view the crisis of the fordist model of development led to a divorce between the interests of capital and those of the nation-states. The space of politics became dissociated from the space of the economy. To be sure this phenomenon of globalization was made possible by new forms of technology. But this technological revolution required for its implementation a profound transformation in the relations of power among social groups and between capitalist corporations and the state and it was made possible by deliberate choices by governments. The political move was the crucial one and it coincided with the rejection of the consensus around the welfare-state which had been characteristic of the period posterior to the second world-war. This took place at different times in the various countries and now it has finally reached Austria.

All over Europe social-democratic parties have shown their impotence in front of this neo-liberal revolution because they have been unable to acknowledge its political nature.Having accepted the dogma of "globalization" third way theorists are unable to grasp the systemic connections existing between global market forces and the variety of problems- from exclusion to environmentsl risks- that they pretend to tackle. It is very symptomatic indeed that they have recourse to the language of "exclusion" which does not provide any tool to analyse the origin of that phenomenon but limits itself to describe it. By redefining the structural inequalities systematically produced by the market system in terms of

"exclusion" they eschew any type of structural anaysis of their causes and side step the fundamental question of what needs to be done to address them. As if the very condition for the inclusion of the excluded did not require at the very least a new mode of regulation of capitalism which will permit a drastic redistribution and a correction of the profound inequalities caused by neo-liberal policies.

Without advocating the kind of total overthrow of capitalism that some nostalgic marxists are still dreaming of, it seems to me that one should be able to think of alternative to the neo-liberal order, a real hegemonic alternative not the supposedly third way between social-democracy and neo-liberalism that is currently advertised by its advocates as the "new politics for the new century". Indeed far from being an alternative to the neo-liberal type of globalisation, such a politics accepts the basic tenets of neo-liberal orthodoxy and limits itself to helping people to cope with what is perceived as a "fate"by making themselves "employable". No wonder that we now live in political systems where there is no real opposition.
One of the main problems nowadays is that the coming to terms by the left with the importance of pluralism and of liberal democratic institutions has been accompamied by the mistaken belief that this meant abandoning any attempt to transform the present hegemonic order. Hence the sacralisation of consensus, the blurring of the frontiers between left and right and the trend to replace the political adversary by the moral enemy. This is, in my view, one of the main reason for the incapacity of the Left to envisage the conditions for a radicalization of democracy. There cannot be a radical politics without the definition of a political adversary because to be radical is to aim at a profound transformation of the relations of power, at the creation of a different hegemony.

If there is a lesson that the left should draw from the failure of communism, it is that the democratic struggle should not be envisaged in terms of friend/enemy and that liberal democracy is not the enemy to be destroyed in order to create something abolutely new from scratch. If we acknowledge that the ethico-political principles of modern liberal democracy- understanding by ethico-political principles what Montesquieu defined as "the passions that move a regime"- are the assertion of liberty and equality for all, it is clear that we could not find more radical principles to organize a society. The problem in "actually existing liberal democracies" is not their ideals, but the fact that those ideals are not put into practice. So the task for the left is not to reject those ideals, with the argument that they are a sham, a cover for capitalist domination, but to fight for their implementation and for making liberal democratic societies accountable for their ideals.

But such a struggle, if it should not be envisaged in terms of friend/enemy, cannot be envisaged either as simple competition among interests, taking place in a neutral terrain and where the aim is to reach compromises and to aggregate preferences. This is of course how democracy is conceived by many liberal theorists and unfortunately, it seems that this is the way left wing parties are now visualizing democratic politics. It is the reason why they are unable to grasp the structure of power relations and to think in terms of creating a new hegemony. Obviously it chimes with their refusal to draw political frontiers and their belief that they can side step fundamental conflicts of interests by avoiding to define a political adversary.

But, as I have tried to show, this lead to a new form of friend / enemy politics, this time with the enemy being conceived in moral

terms. This explains why it is so difficult today to envisage the creation of an opposition with hegemonic perspectives. On one side politics is reduced to a competition of interests among the "we" of the democratic bloc, on the other side the identity of this democratic block is secured by the denunciation of the "evil them". In this oscillation between the liberal competitor and the moral enemy what is precluded is the very place of the political adversary. The consequence is to forclose any possibility of putting forward a real alternative to the current hegemony of neo-liberalism .
That the traditional conceptions of Left and Right are inadequate for the problems we are facing, I readily accept. But to believe that the antagonisms that those categories evoke have disappeared in our globalized world is to fall prey to the hegemonic liberal discourse of the end of politics. Far from having lost their relevance the stakes to which left and right allude are more pertinent than ever. What is needed is a widening of the field of politics so as to offer people a real say in the kind of society they want to live in and the type of future they want to built. Are the enormous possibilities opened by the new technologies going to be left in the hands of experts and monopolized by the big transnational corporations? Or are a variety of different alternatives going to be made available thanks to which people will be able to choose which world they will inhabit ? As the recent controversies about mad cow disease, genetic transformations and treats to the environment testify, the range of issues on which crucial decisions for the future need to be made is widening. In all cases fundamental relations of power are at stake.Contrary to what the dominant discourse wants us to believe, there are alternatives. Who is going to articulate them and confront the forces which are trying to impose their own interests as the only rational solution? This is the challenge that the European Left needs to tackle in order to become a real force of opposition.