

Four Reasons the European Left Lost

BY

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The setbacks for centrist parties in the European elections showed that the EU's crisis is anything but over. Yet the Left's lack of strategy and identity has hobbled its ability to provide an alternative.

Hardly any of the countless comments on the European election results 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 and after collecting various splinter groups, the GUE/NGL cobbled together a total of fifty-two seats, a little less than 7 percent of the European Parliament's 751 MEPs. Now, in 2019, it ended up with thirty-eight, a loss of more than a quarter.

The near-death experience of the European left — or more precisely, its representation in the European Parliament — came at a time when the old parties of the center-left and center-right suffered dramatic setbacks. Together, these latter won only 329 seats: 44 percent of the total. Their combined loss of seventy-five seats put an end to their Grand Coalition parliamentary majority and also coincided with a steep vote rise for various parties of a new, if not always entirely new, nationalist right (114 seats, an increase of thirty-six). There were similarly impressive gains for the Greens, who rose from fifty-two to seventy seats, making them almost twice as strong as the Left.

These are, then, times of rapidly shifting political allegiances. But when should the Left expect to make electoral progress among European workers

and reformist sections of the middle class, if not now? There is an urgent need to explain the Left's disastrous failure to do this. Four reasons come to mind — certainly, there are more.

Strategy

The first and most basic reason is the seemingly total absence of a realistic anti-capitalist, or at least anti-neoliberal, left-wing political strategy related to the European Union.

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 — and it's 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.

In particular, on the Left, there's no mention of the way in which the EU's *de facto* constitution limits the political space for any anti-capitalist or even pro-labor program, with its safely enshrined free markets (the “four freedoms”), the *de facto* dictatorship of the European Court, and the balanced budget provisions under European Monetary Union, imposing austerity on countries and citizens.

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.

Moreover, this goes in tandem with entirely illusory policy projects, for example a European minimum wage. Only after insistent questioning is it admitted that a European minimum wage would in fact have to be differentiated by country. Predictably, this proposal has found no support 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 they are the ones who will have to foot the bill for the Left's “European solidarity.”

Europeanism

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, which made voting “for Europe,” or even for “more Europe” the necessary defensive position. In fact, often enough, the Left raised the stakes 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, reprehensible as their speech and thought may be, and private armies aiming to replace a democratic state with a dictatorial one. Such historical confusion especially played into the hands of the Greens, in several ways.

Exaggerating the threat from the new right was certain to drive voters into the arms of liberal establishment parties who promised “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 means 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.

This is because the center parties — on whose side the European left has fought its electoral phony war against rising fascism in Europe — are themselves doing quite enough to undermine democracy. They do precisely that 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.

Defending democracy is always a good thing. But in joining the fight, the Left could at least have pointed out that democracy is not just mobilizing progressive voters for a powerless parliament. It also means provisions for local government autonomy, for collective bargaining and trade union representation, for workers’ voice on the shop floor and on the boards of large firms, for a public property regime conducive to high public investment, and a truly pluralist media. It appears unlikely that here the Greens could be reliable allies.

Climate

Third, the radical left had no idea how to handle the issue of climate change, whose prominence in recent months again played into the hands of the Greens. In this, the Left did not differ at all from the established center parties. It is easy to understand why it stumbled on this question.

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 may awaken the bad conscience of the environmentally woke but fail to reach 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 from the Left's point of view is that voluntary changes in lifestyles are vastly inadequate to stopping global warming or the long ongoing decline of biodiversity.

A Left that limits itself to reciting the Greens' scare stories about an impending end to 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 change and deterioration — for this it may be too late — but also to help us cope with its effects.

This would require significant increases in public spending, to be funded at least in part by public debt beyond existing austerity debt limits, and by replacing private with public consumption in order to adapt social and economic life to a changed environment. A Green New Deal of this kind would create jobs in addition to raising taxes and would thereby on balance benefit rather than burden the working class.

Faux Federalism

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 working people, “Europe” is a far-away technocracy, a world outside of their life experience. This is not much different from the middle class. The

latter, however, has learned, and prefers, to pretend that it knows who is doing what in Brussels, which in fact nobody outside of a narrow circle of specialists really does know.

Details, however, do not really matter for those for whom “Europe” has become a mood, a feeling, rather than a political institution; a symbol of a happy, hip “cosmopolitan” consumerist life, even if with a few environmentalist corrections. In their circles, “pro-Europeanism” is essential for admission to an urban social milieu to which the leaders and activists of radical-left parties may belong, but only very few of their members and voters do.

For these 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. In fact, they 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 the social heirs of traditional working-class internationalism instead appear as hopelessly culturally backward.

This is why, even if the parties representing these latter do conspicuously join in the middle class’s Europeanist enthusiasm, they cannot attract any sizable fraction of the neoliberal internationalist community. Nor, in their modernized guise, can they attract those who do not share in the consumerist optimism of the urban cosmopolitans, and instead find themselves on the receiving end.

The Left, like the Greens, tend to relegate political issues to a European level of democratic politics that doesn’t exist outside parties’ imagination and indeed won’t exist for any foreseeable future. “Europe,” and the European Parliament in particular, is a depository of pious hopes. This will, however, last only until it is finally discovered that the Europeanists have overplayed their hand 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. Consider the German case, where the Die Linke majority forced Aufstehen leader Sahra Wagenknecht to resign from her post as parliamentary speaker.

A radical left in its right mind could contribute importantly to “Europe.” It would, however, have to take leave of the superficial “pro-Europeanism” of the old and new center parties. It would have to insist that “European solutions” cannot replace national-level action, if only because they tend to be unavailable or will come too late. It would also have to defend really existing democracy, i.e., nation-state democracy, against its “cosmopolitan” replacement with castle-in-the-sky supranational democracy.

This would mean pointing out that democracy begins at the bottom. That reconciliation with nature and among people does not fall from the sky of “Europe” and is not to be had for nothing. Shortly after their election, the members of the European Parliament will have become 751 like-minded lobbyists for supranational technocracy, dressed up as democratic representatives of a European people that does not yet exist. Social change for the better will not come from above, from them.

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