

## THE CRISIS OF THE PARTIES

Reprinted from *Le Monde Diplomatique*

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**A** new authoritarian statism is establishing deeper implantation at this time in the advanced capitalist countries, and the role of political parties is being eroded, paving the way for a clampdown on liberties which is also conducive to more general transmutation of the State. Economic and social reality undoubtedly contribute to the crisis of the party system, but through the political and ideological institutions that are undergoing transformation: the increase in violent state repression is being accompanied, for example, by a reform model that legitimates it: the State responds to its own crisis by reorganizing itself.

The new repression resorts to a violence that is not merely symbolic but overt, in a variety of forms: restrictions on freedom, electronic screening, deprivation of individual rights, reorganization of the judicial and policing mechanisms, which will henceforth be organically interlinked, control harsh and violent. To provide cover for this development, the Right — in a profound restructuring, incorporates into its ideological armory certain liberal themes that have been bothering it since 1968. It takes advantage of the facility with which cultural integration can be achieved by capitalism, which is capable of every kind of corrective shift.

The originality of this new ideology is grounded in the contradictions it succeeds in reconciling by virtue of its system:

- Through irrationality an attack is launched on Marxism and the rationality of Enlightenment, exploiting a return to the sacred or to a neo-spiritualism which goes beyond mere reaction to an ideological crisis and proceeds on to instrumentalist rationality and the technocratic logic of experts, beyond law and the general will.
- In the name of neoliberalism and on the pretext of liberating the individual, the ideology of the Right enlists the argumentation against statism. At the same time the State continues to control the sector of reproduction of capital, though abandoning — with the opportunity of the economic crisis — the social functions of the welfare state imposed on it by the popular masses.
- In the name of security of citizens the dominant ideology is permeated by a discourse of law and order, or a discourse about limiting the “misuse” of democratic freedoms (see the Trilateral Commission) and implements totalitarianism.

- In the name of pseudo-scientific positions on “biological inequality” the ideology of the Right promotes a revival of racism against migrant workers, against the Third World or the petroleum producing countries, which it accuses of being responsible for the present crisis, when the same ideology supports the idea of the new global economic order and solidarity between the peoples.

This reorganization of the content of the dominant discourse is a response to the modification of the channels and the mechanisms that process and propagate it, while at the same time accusing them. The processes of legitimating the State are tending to be taken away from the political parties and assigned to the administration. This development corresponds to the shift of the principal ideological functions from the school and university to the mainstream media, a shift based on the abovementioned modification, because the restructuring of the media goes hand in hand with their increased control by the state administration, while the logic and the symbolism that is implemented in media discourse reproduce precisely its counterpart in administration. These phenomena lie at the root of a crisis and a process of decline in the political parties: to a very limited extent they are present in the decision-making centers, which have already been moved from the parliament to the executive, retaining a specific role in political organization and in representation of class interests against the administrative sector, or alongside it, remaining its privileged interlocutors. Additionally, they were first-class ideological mechanisms, processing and propagating, in its basics, a discourse grounded in the general will, which established the institutions of representative democracy. They guaranteed the constitutional state (the case of the fascist parties is different). Today the executive is projected as the key political organizer, authentic party of the ruling classes, with a mission to integrate the popular masses also: the hegemony of multinational monopoly capitalism, at the center of the ruling alliance, is linked to this exercise of usurpation. The executive represents the site of decision making: it directly addresses the various social and professional groups at a level higher than the parties, favoring a new institutional corporatism and new vertical clientelistic relations.

The crisis of representation of the “parties of power” vis à vis the classes and the groups that they represent has to do, even more than with legitimation, with administration through accelerated mutation of popular sovereignty into state sovereignty. The argumentation of technocracy thus finds through management of the State a privileged terrain for propagating itself. In the same way the discourse of neoliberalism and its idea of the State as referee of the game, a notion challenged by the groupings of civil society, defends the self-legitimation of the State. Correspondingly, it is in this way that the new racism emerges, managed by the technocracy under the pretense of crisis management, with its laws against immigrants and the psychosis of enmity toward the Third World.

All the above stances reinforce the uniformity and the flattening effect of the dominant ideology, the forms of creating consent through populist referenda and the imprecise language of specialists.

The institutional crisis has to do first and foremost with the formations that participate systematically in government and among them the parties of social democracy. Their coming to power, in Germany or in Great Britain, no longer represents a real alternative political solution. Moreover, although they cannot be designated mere caricatures of the right, citizens are not able to make a clearly delineated choice between the dominant political elites who alternate in power (like in “competitive democracy” in Schumpeter’s terms). Contemporary developments tend to give rise to a hybrid exclusive party out of the institutional intermixing of the forces of the majority party and the main opposition party.

As for the other socialist and Eurocommunist parties, which do not participate in governing formations, they too suffer the relevant consequences: legitimation through elections and the equation of power with specific leading personalities reinforce their traditional bureaucratic character: they encourage their leaderships to make use of the mainstream media for proselytizing their base. Moreover, these mass workers’ parties are undergoing a crisis of their own which influences their political strategy, their ideology and hence their identity. For the Eurocommunist parties their central task is to discredit the Stalinist model as defined by the Third International, and this has consequences for the character of the party and the type of socialism. For the socialist parties (above all the French, Spanish and Italian) the central task is to ask questions about social democracy following, on the one hand, the collapse of Keynesian illusions of a planning state with the potential to deal with the crises of capitalism, and on the other, the dwindling possibilities of a compromise between the dominating and dominated classes which might make feasible a moderation of the current crisis.

This problematic gives rise to a number of hesitations in a transitional course towards democratic socialism, to be differentiated both from Stalinism and from social democracy. But the first goal, above all social, of this crisis of the left, is evidently disappearing from view: the workers’ parties and the communist parties have been established on the basis of the parties of labor. The dominant tendency in them has been working class. Their organization has as its point of departure the internal contradictions of the factory (the party-trade union duality) and the relatively homogeneous working conditions that prevail there. This was the orientation of the communist parties but also the social democratic parties of England, Germany or Sweden (with the French socialist party as the odd one out).

But the social struggle unfolds in tandem with the legitimation of the State. The expansion of statism into all sectors of everyday life — consumption,

reproduction of labor power (housing, transport, health...), the evolution of administrative procedures but also the economic crisis and the crisis of the Welfare State, particularly afflicting specific social groups (young people, women, immigrants, some geographical areas) all these phenomena give rise to a creeping legitimization crisis without for all that triggering a breach of consensus over class domination.

But popular revolt is expressed in new forms: the general strike or the global political project, in the way that they comprised a tangible reality in the fierce crisis of the 1930s are off the agenda today. Indeed, as far as the working class is concerned, revolts often break out today around the productive mechanism, without that meaning that they are marginal, as they were a few years ago. They exemplify a widespread popular protest, registering it in the cultural sector: student movements, feminist, ecological, marginal phenomena which nevertheless embody class contradictions, whatever Alain Touraine might say to the contrary. These social movements are not incompatible with the class struggle: they are intrinsically among the economic political and ideological contradictions inherent in current forms of reproduction of capital. However, these revolts retain their specificity, reflecting class conflict, not restricting it.

The movements “outside the factories” pertain to different social classes that they gather within them: they cover a broader terrain, relatively heterogeneous from the viewpoint of their conditions of subsistence. Their internal differentiation is also a by-product of the wide social range of the popular movements: the new petty bourgeoisie of public sector workers, technicians, administrative cadres, tertiary-educated employees who are not particularly drawn to the political-party schema and the solidarity struggle given that they are relatively mobile and seek social progress as individuals. Institutional networks and professional associations suit them better. Inside the factories the struggles are intensifying but, in contrast to the illusions of the 1960s, scientific progress has not been a factor encouraging working-class homogeneity in the productive process. On the contrary, it has in some way sharpened the differences, erecting more powerful distinctions between manual and mental labor, between the labor of immigrants and the labor of the locally born, and even in the interior of each of these categories.

These are the main reasons for the crisis in the mass workers’ parties, at a time when their presence in society, and on the terrain of the social movements, appears more necessary than ever. For the quest for a democratic socialism must include successful construction of a profoundly representative democracy and a democratized State, with self-managing nuclei of direct democracy. Parties are an important means for achieving this, contrary to the positions advanced by Mrs Foucault, Guattari, etc., who propagandize total autonomy from social movements, simply promoting small-scale resistance and piecemeal experimentation.

Corporatism, privatization and corrective moves by the bourgeois class would not fail, in that case to emasculate them, not through a less likely potential rebirth of fascist populism but through an “Americanization” that threatens European societies. The thorough transformation of the workers’ parties, their internal democratization, adaptation of the traditional links they maintain with mass organizations, a viewpoint able to deal with the social diversity that characterizes them (including intellectuals, for example), all these reforms are indispensable. They will equip them for handling the crisis in the political system while at the same time making their presence felt on the terrain of the social movements.

Nevertheless, this transformation in itself poses difficult questions. How far can parties be transformed without developing into populist catch-all parties? As regards the social movements, their integration does not appear to be at all desirable to those parties who were always regarded as ecumenical connective links, however flexible and democratic they might be. These movements will be in danger of disintegrating, of losing their authenticity in parties, for an additional reason: because they have not yet found suitable forms of organization - and in truth, should they? Perhaps a certain undiminished tension between the renewed workers’ parties and the social movements is a necessary condition for a dynamic course towards democratic socialism.

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