

Class War And After

The Left is in crisis. Few would now dissent from this view. But why? Here **Ernesto Laclau** argues that the cause could not be more fundamental: the idea of the working class as 'the historical agent of change' is no longer valid.

Since the turn of the century, four key concepts have shaped the way the west European Left has understood the world. During the early 1900s, social and political events were conceived as part of the inexorable decline of the capitalist system and the inevitable movement towards socialism. During the 1930s, this vision was incorporated within a perspective that saw the opposition between democracy and fascism as the fundamental political division. At roughly the same time, the conflict between imperialist and oppressed nations began to play a similar role in the colonial and semi-colonial world. Finally, in the immediate postwar period, European social democratic parties came to view the advance towards socialism through expansion of the nationalised sector of the economy.

Each of these four visions - the necessary transition to socialism via the progressive expansion of the productive forces; democratic fronts in opposition to fascism; national anti-imperialist revolutions; increasing expansion of the public sector of the mixed economies - were for the Left something far more important than mere 'circumstantial' strategies. They were the key ideas with which it was possible to make sense of the multiplicity of historical events, the bases of all forms of political calculation. It was around these ideas that the political experience of the masses acquired a certain unity which made possible the constitution of traditions of struggle and political thought.

There is much talk today about the generalised crisis of the Left. I want to argue that this crisis is not so much one of particular aspects or policies within a stable framework of political references, but rather the result of the slow erosion and decline of those basic ideas. Thus the various leftwing political practices, lacking any unifying long-term vision, are increasingly reduced to a short-term pragmatic game incapable

of generating any kind of collective enthusiasm. The political horizon looks darkened and the historical process without direction. This is, in my view, the kernel of the present crisis of the Left. What follows are some reflections on its roots and on the possible ways of dealing with it.

Let's review some of the most frequent interpretations of the present crisis. For the 'theoreticians' of the hard Left, everything is, of course, clear: there is no crisis, and the central role of the working class is an unshaken and unshakeable dogma. They are, of course, usually unable to specify what they mean by such a central role. Centrality in relation to what? If it is intended as an assertion concerning the political world, it has to be discussed in precise historical contexts and in relation to particular issues.

Let us limit our argument to the industrialised West. Two convergent processes undermine the argument of our 'class warriors': on the one hand, the numerical decline and economic fragmentation of the working class, and on the other, the marginalisation of increasingly wide sections of the population, which is at the basis of the proliferation of a wide range of new antagonisms.

So, as a sociological description, the assertion of the central role of the working class in the social structure is increasingly less acceptable. And as a political proposition it is also far from evident. Central role of the working class in the feminist struggle, in the ecological struggles, in the mobilisations of the marginalised sectors of the population in the decaying inner cities?

And claims that without the working class these other struggles have no future are circular - they presuppose a central role for the working class, which is precisely what has to be proved. This does not lead, of course, to denying the importance of mobilising workers, and their effectiveness in particular contexts, but to the rather different

assertion that the working class is - as are all other sectors - a social agent limited in its objectives and possibilities, and not the 'universal class' of the marxist tradition, the *necessary* agent of global human emancipation.

All these arguments have been frequently presented and there is no point in reiterating them any further here. Let us deal with those approaches which in some way or the other recognise the limitations of the working class as an historical agent, but which handle these limitations in ways we consider inadequate. We can distinguish, in this respect, three basic approaches. The first suggests that the working class has to supersede its structural limits through the formation of a broad democratic alliance with other progressive sectors, following a venerable tradition going back to the popular fronts of the 1930s. The second searches for a new social agent which would not present the historical limitations of the working class. The third no longer postulates this need and accepts as inevitable and even positive the dispersion and fragmentation of the various forms of social protest.

As for the popular front strategy, its prestige among those coming from a Communist tradition is explicable for two reasons. The first is that when it was adopted by the Comintern in 1935, it was perceived as a return to common sense after years of the absurd 'class against class' line of the Third Period, which presented social democracy as the main enemy in the period leading to the seizure of power by Nazism. In this sense, the popular front themes have remained since as the epitome of reason compared with such vanguardist adventurism. The second reason is that under the umbrella of the popular fronts, the Communist parties were able, in the period leading to the war and later during the various resistance movements and wars of liberation, immensely to widen the struggles and democratic experiences of the masses. There is no doubt that the era of the popular fronts was the heyday of the communist movements in Western Europe.

But precisely because of these successes, many analysts tend to return nostalgically to that period and to overlook the essential respects in which the experience of the popular fronts belongs to the past. The popular front mobilisations and systems of alliances presupposed the presence of the fascist danger. The broad character of the fronts was a direct consequence of the threat to the liberal democratic regimes that fascism posed. Since the end of the war, the Communist postulation of broad democratic alliances has often been accompanied by warnings of the re-emergence of fascism, but these claims have been received with general and justified scepticism.

This is even more the case when we consider present political phenomena such as Thatcherism. It would simply be



The working class is a social agent limited in its objectives and possibilities, and not the "universal class" of the marxist tradition'



grotesque to say that Thatcherism constitutes a fascist danger. The danger represented by the present neo-conservative offensive is very different from fascism: it is the slow erosion of many centres of power - like the trade union movement - which have provided the conditions for democratic advance in the postwar period, and the increasingly authoritarian reorganisation of the political system. This reorganisation, however, is multiplying the areas of confrontation - in factories, in neighbourhoods, in the educational system, in institutions, etc. There is thus an accumulation of unfulfilled demands, which constantly expands the bases from which a new democratic alternative has to start. Now, if today the alternative is between an authoritarian turn in the liberal-parliamentary system or its radical democratic reorganisation, the logic and system of alliances on which the popular front strategy was based is clearly of little use.

The second basic difference between our time and the 1930s is that, however much the leftwing parties of that time recognised the political limitations of the labour movement and the need to establish broad democratic alliances, their social basis and constant point of reference was the traditional working class. Popular front mobilisations in France would have been unthinkable without the red belts of the big industrial cities, which started to erode after 1945. It was within the context provided by the presence of a homogeneous social sector, anchored in its class objectives, that discussions such as the one on the relation between socialist and democratic objectives could take place.

Today, the problem facing the Left is very different. It is no longer how to establish a system of alliances for an *already constituted* social sector but, rather, *how to constitute* as unities those very social sectors which are supposed to participate in the alliances, starting from a multiplicity of conflicts and demands far more fragmented and dispersed than those of the 1930s.

The second way of dealing with the limitations of the working class consists of retaining the idea of a non-limited historical actor, capable of carrying out the 'universal' task of human emancipation, but in transferring the latter from the working class to other agents in the historical arena. Sections of the Left in the 1960s (especially, but not only, in America) were particularly prone to proposing new candidates for this role - the student movement, the peoples of the Third World, women, the marginals, etc. But none of these candidates lived up to expectations.

It was at this moment that the idea dawned that perhaps what was wrong had nothing to do with the working class and its actual struggles, but rather with the very idea of a 'fundamental social

'Many analysts tend to overlook the essential respects in which the experience of the popular fronts belongs to the past'



agent of a historical transformation', with the notion that there is *one* project of global emancipation which has to be carried out by *one precise* social agent. What was increasingly put into question was the whole conception of history as a unified process - past, present and future - within which roles were intellectually attributed to imaginary actors who were later identified with concrete social agents - the workers, the masses, etc. And when the agents did not behave in the expected way, this was explained as the result of 'false consciousness', a concept which says little more than that people do not think in the way that we think they should. Now, because the Left has lived so long in a world of universal subjects (the class, the party), and of scientific (that is, depository of the truth) socialism, the very simple perception that history is a process of pragmatic and limited constructions rather than of the realisation of universal destinies, has inevitably led to a growing feeling of disillusionment. This is, I think, the root of the present frustration and disenchantment.

One reaction to these feelings has been to accept that all social agents have limited historical tasks, that none of them is destined to carry out a global project of human emancipation, and to assert as a political formula a pluralism grounded in the autonomy of the various social - that is, single issue orientated - movements. This is the third way of dealing with the problem of the limitation of historical agents. What is proposed is a response to the dispersion and fragmentation of present day social struggles by organisational forms which fully accept that fragmentation. Workers, women, gays, ecologists - all their struggles have to be carried out without their subordination to any kind of unified direction.

There is no doubt that this is an advance in relation to the naive dogmatism of the traditional Left; but the way in which the case for pluralism and autonomy has been argued fails to solve the problems at stake. This happens for two fundamental reasons. The first is that a world of *purely* autonomous movements will not be a democratic place at all. Can we imagine what would happen if the women's or gay movements were totally unconcerned with, for instance, racial discrimination? It is necessary to create some link or, at least, some shared common sense of solidarity among these various struggles. This will certainly not be automatic - it is far from a foregone conclusion that a white British worker will be anti-racist or anti-sexist - and will depend consequently on a political struggle. Because of the very plurality of social struggles, this linking mechanism cannot simply be a party, but must be a much wider and unstable system of democratic institutions.

The second limitation of a pluralistic theory grounded *only* in the autonomy of social movements and ignoring the problems related to the creation of a

wider common sense is that it ignores the fact that neo-conservative offensives attempting precisely to create a common sense of an opposite kind are already and constantly taking place. The problem is not so much one of opposing a unified common sense to an imaginary autonomy of social movements but to decide, through political struggle *which* common sense is going to prevail.

Some political projects will attempt to link anti-sexist and anti-racist demands, while others will try to sever the link between the two. Which will prevail is an open question and will depend on political initiatives. This means that, in our societies, social and political identities are essentially unstable. The question is not so much what are the basic agents of socialist struggles - classes or social movements - but to understand the particular instabilities to which the identities of both of them are subjected in advanced industrial societies and the appropriate political strategies to deal with them.

Is this complexity and instability so difficult to grasp and to cope with for socialists? I do not think so. It is a question of extending and deepening something known for a long time. Marx understood well that capitalism only exists and expands by constantly revolutionising its means of production, thereby dissolving traditional social relations, so that more and more areas of social life which had traditionally been relatively stable enter, as soon as the logic of capitalism has reached a certain point, into a situation of radical instability. The whole history of capitalism can be seen, from this point of view, as a history of radical destabilisation. The point is that this destabilisation, which in Marx's age had reached a certain stage, has today developed much further, desegregating the very social identities which constituted the kernel of the marxist theory of society and revolution.

Let's look at a category like 'working class'. For Marx it had an intuitive reality. We can see why: to be a worker in the middle of the 19th century meant to spend many hours in the factory, to live in certain areas, to have certain patterns of consumption, to participate only in rigidly defined ways in the political and cultural life of the country. But the strict correlation among all these forms of social participation becomes looser and looser as the increase in productivity means that less and less hours are spent in the factory, and as the expansion of the welfare state means that the social identity of the worker is going decreasingly to be determined by his/her location in the relations of production.

The participation of the worker in a variety of social relations means that many more areas of his/her participation in social life, *not strictly depending on his/her location in the relations of*

production, can be the sites of new and radical social struggles, and that the ways they are going to be linked do not depend on a pattern established beforehand - as was the case with the old-fashioned distinction base/superstructure - but will be the result of a hegemonic struggle and thus remain largely open. In this sense, the whole notion of 'class' in Marx is simply a synthesis corresponding to a large extent to the social identities evident in the 19th century, but this synthesis is less and less helpful today in understanding the logic and pattern of anti-capitalist struggles. Precisely because capitalism has in many senses gone in the direction predicted by Marx, we have to put into question today his conception of class.

Let's go back to the beginning of this article. We said that previously in the socialist tradition, some basic 'ideas' or 'visions' unified the experience and imagination of the Left and gave it a certain image of the historical process. Social struggles were read and interpreted through the prism of those ideas. Is it possible today to ground leftwing politics in a new 'background image'? I think the answer is positive, and this new background image should be constructed around the themes of what, in a recent book, we have called *radical democracy*.¹ What is the meaning of 'radical democracy' and how can it become a new background image unifying the political experience of the Left? We said earlier that the capitalist world, through the essential instability that it creates by its rate of technological change and dissolution of traditional relations, threatens the identity of a large variety of social agents.

What might their response be to that threat? Have they any ideological weapons to answer to it? I think they have and, in a single sentence, I would say that they are the discourses of rights and equality. They have not only been there available for political struggle; in fact they are a radical innovation of the last 200 years. Before that, human beings were considered equal only before God, while in this world hierarchy and inequality were accepted as necessary foundations of the social order. But with the French Revolution the idea that men are essentially equal is given a juridical recognition; equality becomes the basic principle of a free society.

Now, during the French Revolution the principles of equality had a limited application, being restricted to citizenship and the constitution of a public sphere, while in the private sphere all forms of inequality were accepted. But we can see the whole period of the last two centuries as a process of increasing expansion of a 'democratic revolution': the discourses

¹ This analysis is fully developed in E. Laclau and C. Mouffe *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* London Verso 1985.

and ideology of equality has penetrated wider and wider spheres. With the socialist discourses of the 19th century egalitarianism invades the economic sphere and with the new social movements of the present century a new deepening of the democratic process has taken place. At the basis of this constant expansion of the democratic revolution lies the transformations that we have referred to earlier: the dissolution of traditional relations under capitalism. In these conditions, more and more social identities are threatened and dislocated, and increasingly wider sections of the population present new types of egalitarian challenges and demands on the system. There is an increasing politicisation of social relations.

In this sense 1968 represents a fundamental turning point in the history of industrial societies, whose long term effects are going to be as important as those of 1848. If 1789 can be seen as a symbol of the emergence of the principles of egalitarianism in the public sphere and 1848 as an extension of them to the whole realm of socialist demands, 1968 is the symbol of the proliferation of new movements and demands which constitute the terrain of democratic struggles in our time. If the Left is going to be reconstructed it has to be in terms of a radical democracy whose demands are going to be wider and more radical than those of the socialist movements of the

past.

In the last 15 years we have seen an immense widening of the field of social struggles. It is this which explains why the notion of 'privileged subject of history' had to collapse. Any project of a democratic and socialist transformation of society has to start today from wider and more heterogeneous social bases than at any time in the past. This heterogeneity means that the agents of historical change are going to be many, that their demands are going to be limited, that negotiation and unstable equilibria among them are going to be the rule and principle of political life.

Many consequences follow from this, but there are two which I particularly want to emphasise. The first is that if radical democracy is going to be the new political horizon of the Left, this horizon cannot be conceived as the dogmatic postulation of *one* type of society.

The expansion of democratic egalitarianism to wider and wider areas of social relations does not prejudice in what new direction this expansion will take place, or what new social actors are going to emerge. The limited character of all social agents, far from being something negative, is the necessary consequence of the open character of the historical process which is, in turn, the essential precondition for radical democracy. An 'unlimited' social actor, a universal class, has to claim for itself absolute knowledge and the right to

absolute mastery (eg, the dictatorship of the proletariat).

The second consequence is that the expansion of the democratic revolution involves the constitution of a plurality of spaces within which political struggles are fought. There are no privileged points for politics. Local associations, educational institutions, resistance groups of marginalised sections of the population, women's organisations, are all places where political argumentation has to develop, also where the progressive self-management of civil society has to start blurring its distance from the state. This is the way in which the old communist theme of the withering away of the state can be reformulated and reintroduced into the political perspective of the Left - not as the elimination of the political system and its substitution by some Utopian form of direct democracy, but as the reduction of the former to very precise and limited functions within the context of a plural society increasingly capable of self-regulation. This involves a libertarian dimension which has to be incorporated into the political perspective of the Left, breaking with the deeply entrenched statism which has been characteristic of both its communist and its social-democratic variants. •

'1968 represents a fundamental turning point whose long-term effects are going to be as important as those of 1848'



In the May and June issues we will carry a range of responses to Ernesto Laclau's argument.

LE OPERE DI ANTONIO GRAMSCI NELLE EDIZIONI EINAUDI



Socialismo e fascismo.

L'Ordine nuovo

Opere, pp. XVIII - 556, L.20 000

La costruzione

del Partito comunista (1923-1926)

Opere, pp. XV - 565, L.20 000

In preparazione:

L'Ordine nuovo 1919-1920

Lettere dal carcere

Gli struzzi, pp. 260, L.12 000

Passato e presente

Opere, pp. XVIII - 273, L.10 000

Scritti giovanili (1914-1918)

Opere, pp. 392, L.15 000

Sotto la Mole

Opere, pp. XVIII - 509, L.18 000

Quaderno 13.

Noterelle sulla politica del Machiavelli

Phe, pp. 257, L.10 000

Quaderno 19.

Risorgimento italiano

Phe, pp. 267, L.14 000

Quaderno 22.

Americanismo e fordismo

Phe, pp. 132, L.5 500