

Are Political Labels A Farce? The Case Of The (Non-) Radical Left



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Radical social change does not take place on its own, and surely not without viable solutions to the very problems confronting contemporary capitalist societies.

Political labels, more than any other time in the late modern history, which traditionally begins with the French Revolution of 1789, not only have lost their former relevance but have become a poor substitute for critical thinking. Think for instance of Trump and his ilk when they attack Democrats as “communists” and “radical left-wing socialists,” label [Black Lives Matter](#) as “Marxists,” and link the radical left in general with anarchism and looters, with people “[who want to tear down our statues, erase our history, indoctrinate our children or trample our freedoms.](#)”

What’s in a name? Let’s talk about the Radical Left by explaining why it is in fact not radical and why it’s failing to become relevant in today’s capitalist environment. Let’s talk specifically about Europe’s Radical Left since we actually have radical left political parties across Europe. The United States doesn’t even have a left-wing party, and what passes for radical left-wing economic agenda in the U.S. (thanks to the contributions of [Bernie Sanders](#) and [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#)) has been mainstream party agenda in Europe for several decades. In fact, rarely does one come across a far-right party in Europe that favors a free market economy. And many of them, such as Marine Le Pen’s National Rally party, favor

essentially “socialist” economic policies. Targeting a working-class vote, Le Pen’s far-right party promotes an anti-globalization economic agenda in which the “protection” of workers takes priority over economic “freedoms.” Setting prices, taxing the rich, giving out subsidies to collapsing sectors of the economy, and retirement at sixty are part of the “social populism” agenda of the National Rally party, which explains why it has attracted traditional left-wing voters.

The political and ideological profile of today’s European radical left parties and organizations has been largely shaped by the experience of the collapse of communism.

Those parties that did not remain committed to communism after the dissolution of the communist bloc and the integration of the former communist countries into the Western capitalist system shifted to a variety of different left-reformist political outlooks, ranging from an exclusive emphasis on “green politics” (ecological parties of the Red-Green type found mostly in Scandinavian countries) to the adoption of postmodern radicalism and the politics of multiculturalism built around a resistance project that emphasizes primarily non-class forms of oppression. In Greece, the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) combined a blend of ideological perspectives, ranging from anarcho-communism and environmentalism to Maoism, Eurocommunism, and even social democracy.

Today’s radical left parties in Europe represent what we might call “left reformism.” None of them qualify as being “anti-system,” and most of them are “anti-neoliberal” rather than “anti-capitalist.”

There are two key factors that explain the shift toward “left reformism.” First, the collapse of “actually existing socialism” itself and the overall lack of ideological appeal that Soviet-style communism had on the majority of western European citizenry; and, second, the fundamental changes that have taken place inside capitalist societies since the end of World War II, not the least of which have been the growth of the middle class and the sharp decline of the industrial proletariat—even though we seem to be returning to a stage where the poor working class appears to be growing rapidly while the middle class is shrinking.

But there is a third factor, less frequently mentioned in explanations for the shift on the part of Europe’s radical left-wing parties to “left reformism,” which is none other than the realization that revolutions represent rare phenomena while the few revolutions that succeeded have taken place in the periphery of the global capital system.

Marx may have been right when he wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* that “the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains,” but the Western proletariat, even before World War II, seems to have felt that it had much to lose by risking a socialist/communist revolution. Fully aware of the fact that economic deprivation and political oppression can drive people into rebellion, the capitalist classes and their political representatives sought to prevent this scenario from happening by increasing the standard of living for working-class people and by providing some type of social security for them, as well as certain types of freedoms and individual rights. Bismarck’s social welfare reforms in the 1880s were undertaken with the explicit aim of improving the position of German workers in order to keep socialism/communism and radicalism at bay. In the United States in the 1930s, the New Deal was intended by its planners to keep capitalism alive and stave off social unrest and rebellion.

The expansion of the social state in Europe after World War II was also undertaken with similar objectives in mind, although the ideological and repressive state apparatuses played an equally crucial role in the legitimization and reproduction of the capitalist social order. The U.S. intervened to suppress popular progressive forces and defend the interests of U.S. corporations not only in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, but also in western Europe, including countries like Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Holland, and France. The CIA interfered even in British politics, and it is estimated that it spent hundreds of millions of dollars (more than \$65 million in Italy alone between 1945 and 1968) on various subversive operations against parties of the left, trade unions, and political activists in postwar Western Europe alone.

But let’s return to the politics of “left reformism.” In today’s global capitalist environment, “left reformism” implies by necessity a certain degree of inevitable ideological and political ambiguity as well as plenty of confusion around economic policy. Social classes are not divided into two highly rigid groups—rich and poor, or capitalists and workers—nor do ideological proclivities or political affiliations stem naturally from one’s given social class. Support for France’s National Rally party is increasingly derived from various social classes, but with a common outlook: They stand for traditional conservative values, including deep-seated nationalism, defense of the French welfare state and of national industry, and an overtly anti-immigration policy mixed with a strong dose of anti-EU sentiments.

If the multilayered structure of social class and social stratification and the non-

determined correspondence between ideology/politics and class present an inherent problem for the Radical Left, so does the ever-increasing global character of capitalism, including the entire project of the European Union.

In a truly globalized environment, and with global economic and financial elites literally dictating—either directly or indirectly via the enormous power they hold over economic resources—political processes and policies, the strategies to be pursued for the radical restructuring of the system's operations and ultimately for the political and economic transformation from capitalism to socialism entail far greater difficulties and substantially more significant risks than ever before. Indeed, as the current eurozone regime demonstrates, even fairly “capitalist-friendly” policies that seek to provide a less extreme balance between capital and labor, such as those inspired by Keynesianism, have become extremely difficult to implement. The balance of power has shifted so overwhelmingly to capital that perhaps nothing short of massive popular rebellions might work in order to change the system. That, however, just isn't in the cards in today's Europe for all the reasons mentioned above.

The ambiguity on the part of the Radical Left's project as to the task of “reforming” or “transforming” capitalism isn't of course merely because of the greater challenges that global capitalism poses to this undertaking but also because of a rather serious gap in the political economy spectrum.

To put the matter bluntly, while Marxist and leftist theoreticians have made huge progress toward our understanding of capitalism as a socioeconomic system, contributions to the literature on the political economy of alternative economic systems (i.e., socialism or some other variant of people-centered economics) remains a rather underdeveloped area of study, with our understanding of the economics of socialism (growth, efficiency, distribution and even the relationship of socialism to the regulation of social relations by markets) being scant at best. Little wonder then why there are so few—and far in between—fully fledged alternative visions or why the Radical Left has failed to become politically relevant on the European political scene since the collapse of communism.

Notions like cooperation, equality, and participatory and radical democracy (ideas which, shockingly enough, are rarely raised or explored by the intellectuals or the parties of the Radical Left in Europe) are in urgent need of discussion and elaboration if the hope is to make inroads on the project of envisioning and

working toward building a new social order with mass support.

Likewise, issues such as the fit between immigration and the domestic economy (an issue which, again, the Radical Left appears simply incapable or unwilling to address beyond vague humanistic proclamations, thereby allowing right-wing and far-right parties in Europe to gain popular support at its expense), the balance between environmental protection and growth, public employment schemes for tackling the massive problem of unemployment, and alternative forms of ownership and means of production need to be addressed and raised to the highest level of public awareness for the successful transformation of capitalism into a more humane and just social order.

Undoubtedly, this is a tall order. But radical social change does not take place on its own, and surely not without viable solutions to the very problems confronting contemporary capitalist societies. Indeed, in a way, what distinguishes the old communist left from the (non-)Radical Left of today is that “at least the Bolsheviks in Russia had a plan.”

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