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Some Aspects for the Interpretation of Left Radicalism as Social Self-Organization

Theses for the PhD dissertation “Alternatives of Social Self-Organization in Soviet-Russia and the Soviet Union as well as in other countries of Europe from the beginning of the 20th century to 1968”

The aim of my research is to present and analyze those radical movements, which were formulated and worked either independently of the Bolshevik-oriented communist movements, the Soviet Union and the official Communist Parties, or even in opposition with them. Nevertheless, “left radicalism” is a rather facultative definition – Bolshevism itself could be understood as such from various aspects – since it is not at all easy to find an effective terminology for a phenomenon with that much complexity. The term I adopt has some historical roots (one of the most important theoreticians and activists of this movement, Anton Pannekoek used it for the first time), but naturally it has got its pitfalls as well. I could not find a better one, but of course, a narrow term in itself could not replace an ample analysis.

In my study, the focus has narrowed by the emphasis – unfortunately sometimes too much emphasis – on the occidental (West European and North American) region, and I concentrate mostly on basically Marxist, or at least Marxian tendencies. For the latter collectivist anarchism may seem to a surprising exception, but from one hand its history is mainly parallel with other left radical tendencies, and from the other, the will for a kind of “synthesis” is rather prevalent, especially in the more important historical intersections. Furthermore, there are Hungarian publications, even monographic ones on the questions of anarchism (for example Bozóki, Sükösd and Seres), often debatable or shows a kind of misunderstanding of the matter based mostly on their method to approach to anarchism in itself, as a perfectly separated *construction* of theory. Nevertheless, the tendencies I study do not have a general common ground even to call themselves “left”: many of them defined themselves to be out of the system of “left” and “right”, since revolutionary praxis could not search for alternatives *inside* the system only *against* it. Anyway, all of these tendencies are common in a class-based understanding of society, in which all of them recognize class struggle, although in several allotments. Another common denomination is the demand for self-organization; even without rigorous typological confirmation, we may declare that *the left radical method of organizing the society* is a peculiar type of the self-organization of the society itself. A type that still directly has an important formative effect on our images of society until nowadays; indeed we can declare that the need for social self-organization during the 20th century appears basically as a “left” need, and – independently from the age – is a *radical* idea, aiming a rather general and widespread reconstruction of the existing relations.

The chronological limits of present study are pretty incidental and arbitrary. Indeed, the great turning point of the 20th century is more 1945 than 1968, which I stated as a closing time. However, the left radical way of self-organization more or less for the end of the 1960's reach a point to evaluate and digest – through its peculiar tools and methods – the lessons of the Second World War and the subsequent world order, including its own roles in it. After 1968, “old-style” left radicalism lost its primacy inside the milieu, and radical self-organization stepped into its asseverated “postmodern” epoch.

From a geographical aspect, the events and the groupings themselves marked the intersections. Well, 20th century and revolution – the axis of the matter is not surprisingly organizing around Russia. Left radicalism, radical self-organization has constituted itself particularly in the never-ending debates with Bolshevism. Although the need for a social self-organization has reappeared repeatedly during the century almost everywhere on Earth, this is fundamentally a movement of the era of advanced capitalism (to exceed advanced capitalism). Its cradle was West Europe, and in Russia or let us say, in Hungary it has always confronted with the problems of “overtake”. The answers to this were multiform. In the present study I analyze mainly the Hungarian trends which – combined with their other East European connections – complement the ideological development in the west, shows its adaptiveness and the limits of it (from this aspect Herman Gorter’s polemic with Lenin is exemplary).

One of the basic problems of this matter is to embrace “leftism” itself; it seems clear that to talk about a unified “left” in the examined period is only possible in such a high level of abstraction, which would be inappropriate for any analysis, or even for the mere description of the events. Exactly the 20th century - and particularly its end – has proved that neither “leftism”, nor “radicalism” are not static conceptions (although *theoretically* it was always on the agenda ever since Marx, but its practical implementations were mainly eliminated), since they are linked to the actual social-economical-political relations, and – in a more or less contradictory context – they are the results of social, often even individual psychological states. Today, this is already almost a commonplace of politology, but in the first half of the last century, it was not so equivocally understood and accepted. The main question for me here was the structure of negations: opposite to whom (what), or against whom (what) one has to be a “leftist”? (These two, apparently coessential questions mark quite different problems: for the first a more or less general answer was formulated – “leftism” is in opposition with the capitalism (or the bourgeoisie). For the second, it needs the articulation of a more concrete image of the enemy; it encompasses tactical aspects of an actual struggle activity – so it diversely integrates the inner wars of the left, and even have a by-effect on the first question (popular fronts, inter-class alliances, or the rejection of these; support for the national bourgeoisie against “foreign” capital; the issue of “small nations” etc.). Communism (so *therefore* anarchism) primarily war articulated in terms of negations, and one could see it both advantage and weakness. Real politics demanded positive statements and positive actions thereafter; nevertheless, left radicalism – contrary to social democracy and Bolshevism that was defined (by Pannekoek) as “radical social democracy” – has perceived the former to be (in better cases) utopia or (with less benevolence) to political Machiavellism, “cheating of the workers”, while the latter (both the parliamentarism of social democracy and the power of Bolshevism) has been titled “revisionism”. Accordingly, the concrete, direct image of the

enemy was transformed for both Bolshevism and left radicalism: from the beginning of the 1920's onward, they recognized each other as the main enemy (although Bolsheviks, who understand the relative weakness of left radicalism, more defined it as a *perspective* danger).

The statist "turn" of the Bolshevik leadership and Lenin personally (which in itself would have been the subject of serious analysis) could have been perceived as already a sign for that "socialism" was formulating under their command will be centered around the problem of the state that would neither commit suicide nor "die out", indeed it will invigorate. Parallely, Bolsheviks in the center of power began to "institutionalize" and appropriate "communism" (it was more two aspects of the same process than a separated *political* motivation). These were the circumstances of the debates around "leftism", or more concrete on "communism", which determined the further development of left radicalism. The "belligerents" accused each other with utopism and lust of power. After all, neither accusation was fully justified.

If we approach to the general, widely understood "leftism" from a more moral direction, and regard it as a kind of collection of values, the result will be similar to the above mentioned: there was no general, unified "left" or "leftism". Indeed, it is hardly possible to find any value commonly accepted by all the movements and tendencies that defining themselves "left" or defined as such by others. It shows not only the relativity of these supposed "basic values", but as well as their *system-specific character*. Since these terms already in the 1920's had antagonistic meanings for the radical left (even still it is a rough simplification) and for the traditional left – in a wide spectrum from revisionist social-democrats to Bolsheviks -, a study on radical left brings up many terminological questions, and provoke a lot of debates.

The "20th century" in the title is not only a kind of chronological limitation behind the main issue; this whole chronicle is in fact a *possible history* of the century and of self-organization, observed through the looking-glass of left radicalism. During the 20th century, left radicalism was thought dead and buried several times – after 1923, after 1939, after 1945, after 1968, or in the middle of the 1980's, etc. – but on all occasions it was able to revive itself in some forms. Some reasons of it I tried to evaluate in my study. A common advantage (and naturally a common weakness as well) of the left radicalisms is the abiding and *in its own logical structure* coherent criticism of the system, their ineffectuality for compromises. They never ever were bounded to real-politics: therefore, they could never be power factors in any political constellation, but collaterally they proved to be able to uncover such contradictions of the actual society, which remained hidden for other political-theoretical tendencies.

From the other hand, it could be important to recognize these movements and tendencies to have a broader understanding the broader history of the labour movement (that is not so fashionable nowadays, but still is important from my point of view). Although formerly – because of objective, ideological reasons – left radicalism was generally ignored, sometimes almost denied in its existence, but these tendencies had an important – albeit certainly marginal - role in the progress of the labour movement in general, or even in political thinking more generally. In some rare occasions (1918 – 1922, 1968) they had obtained massive support as well, but their importance is more the effect of their mere existence, their criticism in the curse of the "mainstream" movements – communist and social democrat parties, trade

unions, etc. – both ideologically and practically. Their criticism and analyses could be useful for the understanding of the whole labour movement. It seems particularly true in the case of “existing socialism” (or, in a more widespread chronological context, from the Bolshevik’s advent to power until the recently existing “socialist states”). We know very well its legitimating ideologies and the “anti-communist” ideologies as its supposed negation; however, the opinion of the “third side” of left radicalism (or with a kind of catachresis, *one of the third sides*) is far less familiar, though it was tiny, but equipped with scholarly, fascinating ideologues. The debate around “state socialism” versus “state capitalism” that have aroused from the 1920’s in itself could fulfill (useful) volumes, as it has shown for example in a recent Hungarian debate initiated by the journal *Eszmélet*. Furthermore, this dispute has generated interesting divisions even inside left radicalism itself. The debate on state socialism and state capitalism naturally was not too significant in the directly affected countries (called “socialists”), since left radicalism albeit its traditions, was hardly present here in the second half of the 20th century. (One could talk about more or less significant traditions only in the case of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and of course, Russia. Even the “Yugoslavian model” presented some room to move. In Hungary, these tendencies already had been dissolved in the middle of the 1930’s.) Around 1968 there were some members of the Situationist International in Yugoslavia, who conceptualized their relations to that special form of “existing socialism” in a rather confused, albeit dashing and suggestive manifesto. Elsewhere the construction of “socialism with a human face” was on the agenda for a while, not at all mirroring the expectations of left radicals, and not altering the relations they described as “state capitalism”, even reinforced some of its aspects. Radicals of the “two world systems” hardly found any common denominations; hence, they practically presented a kind of inverse of the dominant ideology of bipolarity. Although “existing socialism” for now belongs to the (half)past, but ideological confusion still has been intensified; the legitimizing angles of retrospective analysis seems to be reinforced also in East-Europe, and becomes more and more tools of the political games.

I found important to explore and analyze the results of these movements – which are rather clearly the movements of the *past* - in recent time society. Since many phenomena which we found already natural, are based (also) on them: imaginations of grass-root democracy, civil organization, counter-culture... - even some parts of present-day advertising methods (!) as heirs of the Situationist “active aesthetic”. Furthermore, anti-globalization movements have signed again that “left radicalism” – in new forms – is still present as a part of the criticism versus capitalism. Today there is an ever-increasing political requirement to adapt some aspects formulated by left radical movements (it is hardly known for example that Amadeo Bordiga unfolded first the global affects of ecological destruction, along with psychological results of the altering environment at length) even before the middle of the 20th century. What makes it more important, the power of capitalism, the exploitation of human and nature not decreased (because of structural causes it would be impossible), but the problems it generated are more and more acute. The radical criticism of the system, albeit all of its real and relative defeats in the past, in my opinion still is (the only viable) hope of the future. The dilemma articulated by Rosa Luxemburg – socialism or barbarity – was never more acute than nowadays. Still is becoming more acute. So to understand the failures and the lessons is far

more important than a purely scholar question. Nevertheless, this could not be the reason to reject scientific approach, and create a left radical hagiographic tract.

Lastly, and organically linked to the above mentioned aspects, the explanation of “radicalism” could be problematic as well: if we put left radicalism to a context by its “leftism” (to translate there as “radical”), is not equally justified to start from the other edge, and put “radicalism” into the focus. From this angle, left radicalism is in relation with other radicalisms (right wing radicalisms, fundamentalist ideologies, etc.) instead of other elements of the left. Anyway, I do not think this is a central question; beyond doubt, there are such analyses, and I would not deny that these are justified from *some* aspects. But the term “radicalism” is rather meaningless without any epithet, since it get sense only in the context of actual political constellations, and it could be the base for analysis only in concrete, actual relations. To put an equality sign between, let us say, left and right radicalism is nothing else than the revitalization of the already decayed, artificially feed totalitarianism-theory, hence it only could be the subject of criticism – if it is worth to criticize it at all. The manifold narratives of identification of communism and fascism should to be left for political ideology-makers, manufacturers of historical identities and ardent amateurs.