State Transformations

Classes, Strategy, Socialism

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Class Politics and Strategies for Party-Building

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The class–party relationship has historically been one of the most complex and thus controversial issues for the left. That is because, class and class stratification compose the ground for any left political strategy, while at the same time, the effectiveness of strategic choices are determined by the party's organizational and political efficiency. Thus, the relation between class and party has been one of the most debated questions, both theoretically and practically, among left activists. Especially after the 1960s, these debates became more intense. It was then that the relatively stable social division of labor and the overall social cleavages that defined parties' development limited the organizational choices of all parties, regardless of their tradition and orientation to a mass party structure. The social, cultural, ideological, and political developments that emerged in the late 1960s challenged party organizational certainties. This is something that the crisis of the 1970s and the neoliberal hegemony challenged further, undermining parties' organizational and representational capacities. Consequently, it is not a surprise that the latter has forced the left to consider the party–class relation again.

More concretely, the collapse of so-called actually existing socialism caused a major setback, even to that part of the left and the Marxists who were critical of 'historical socialism'. In addition, capitalist integration on a world scale, what we came to call 'globalization', along with the rise and fall of the anti-globalization movement, and finally the huge cluster of technological innovations, have radically changed the terrain of the current political scene. Under these conditions, the crisis of representation, propelled by the fiscal crisis, made the question of party-building vital, not simply for the advancement of the left, but for its mere survival. The enormous challenges facing the left, above all the versatile and seemingly almighty hegemony of neoliberalism, have led to a widespread pessimism and even despair among leftists. This can only be curbed by collective action, namely, through the organization and practice of left parties. The democratic capacity of political parties and their key role in socialist transformation never escaped the analytical and political concerns of Leo Panitch in his path-breaking work.[1] This is something which,

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1 Indeed, Panitch's contribution was far reaching on the social and political functions of the party, and it presented a view that is neither formalistic nor instrumentalist as in the Leninist tradition. See for example: Panitch (2001: esp. ch. 7); Albo, Panitch and Zuege (2018: esp. 275ff).

as so many other contributions to this volume underline, stemmed from his commitment to social transformation and to the continuous struggle for the democratization of political power.

This chapter will begin with a brief critical presentation of the various approaches to the relation between the political party and society as it is understood by the mainstream. Then it will turn to the Marxist understanding of the class–party relationship with regard to recent socio-political dynamics. I will conclude by sharing some ideas on the political and social challenges of building a radical left party in the current conjuncture.

1   The Mainstream Contribution

If one wishes to do away with the shortcomings of reductionism, then you cannot but approach the question of party development as a result of the parameters deriving from: social conflict and antagonism; the formal, informal, and customary rules and conditions; and as the positive regulatory and customary conditions of the political struggle in a given social formation. Political conflict and antagonisms that develop during electoral competition are key to understanding parties, but these dynamics are not sufficient for understanding the relationships between political and social forces. On the contrary, party antagonisms are the result of long-term and multidimensional socio-political processes, which must be examined in detail if we want to fully grasp party dynamics. In other words, as Gramsci emphasized, it is inconceivable to consider "the counting of votes as the actual societal condition or as the only reflection of the party–society relationship."[2]

Mainstream theorists, who at best see social antagonisms as secondary in advanced liberal democracies, consider the party–society relationship to be of a brokerage type. That is because they emphasize the parties' functions of interest aggregation and interest articulation as the main processes for the accommodation of social interests.[3] Apart from stating the obvious, i.e., pointing out that parties respond in one way or another to social demands, this approach seems to be based on false assumptions as it implies that parties can accommodate all interests. It is not a given that parties are compelled to respond to demands (aggregation) and then to accommodate them by converting them into responsive policies (articulation). The problem of this approach is not so much that it ignores the obvious differentiation of the strength of social

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2   Gramsci (1971: 192ff).

3   For example, see: Janda (1970).

interests but rather that it seems particularly deterministic, when in reality, consideration of interests (aggregation-articulation) does not necessarily result in responsive policies. Love and marriage do not necessarily go together.

Along these lines, although coming closer to addressing the issues of political conflict and competition, is the Downsian approach.[4] Downs raises the issue of political conflict as a central factor in his analysis. To him, parties should not be examined outside the framework of the conflict expressed in the electoral market. Downs has clearly been inspired by the principles guiding individual behavior in the classic micro-economic model. Thus, he argues that parties are nothing but groups of rational individuals who come together under pressure of their self-interests in order to compete and win in the electoral market. The latter is somehow the guarantee that the winning interests will be fulfilled. Although this approach is more sophisticated than the simple 'brokerage model', because it places the party–society relationship closer to the heart of the political struggle, it suffers from the birth defects of its initial theoretical principles. Micro-economic theory assumes the rationality of 'homo economicus', which is expected to guide the actions not only of the individuals involved but also of their collective institutions and agencies (corporations, unions, and of course political parties). Downsian theory tends to see political parties in the same vein and thus collapses the relationship of parties to society into a relationship between individuals.

This rather simplistic approach to parties has very little methodological usefulness. Above all else, political parties are organizations. Of course, parties are made up of individuals and thus are to some degree subject to the control of their members. However, a party cannot be understood merely as the sum of the individuals that makes them up. Like all organized institutions, parties develop a logic, which, although not unrelated to the individual party members, has a dynamic of its own.[5] Otherwise, for example, how could we explain the rigidity displayed at times by parties vis-à-vis their supporters, even when it concerns immediate electoral gains?[6] Furthermore, how could we explain how subjective and individual interests are articulated and expressed in collective action?[7] Finally, how could we understand the constraints which have been imposed upon parties, by class, religious, linguistic, ethnic, or other cleavages,

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4 See Downs (1957).
5 Panebianco in a way defines this 'logic' as the 'genetic model' of political parties, which defines their founding traits and thus are the least mutable (Panebianco, 1988: 50–53).
6 For example, the frequency of cases in which parties choose leaders who are not the most popular individuals is a case in point.
7 Balbus (1974: 281–83).

and upon which political parties base, although not exclusively, their existence and dynamic?

Other mainstream scholars view political parties merely as transmission belts between the state (and/or the governmental) apparatus and society. As such, parties undertake a number of ex officio functions, which are crucial to the smooth functioning of the entire system.[8] Again, the focus is on their functions: 'political socialization'; 'political recruitment'; 'providing leadership';[9] 'formulating public policy'; and 'structuring the vote'. These functions are seen as the basis upon which the relationship between the party and society is formed. There are however two major problems with this approach. First, these functions are difficult to identify, and in addition, they simply describe the parties' presence in the socio-political environment and not the actual party–society relationship. Secondly, this understanding does not apparently make any distinction between the 'functions' of the different parts of the political spectrum. It would be rather simplistic to accept the idea that a left-wing or working-class party performs the same kind of political functions as their counterparts at the other end of the political spectrum.[10]

The problem with all these approaches to the 'party–society/class' question does not lie in their dismissal of societal conflict, as one might have imagined, but rather in their fractionalized and individualistic perception of that conflict. These theoretical approaches did not manage to cut the umbilical cord from the individualism of the liberal tradition and surpass the liberal understanding of society as a multitude of independent individuals whose interests are articulated in an autonomous and subjective fashion. In fact, these interests are not seen as originating within the structure of the system, which, though in a contradictory fashion, collectivizes individuals. Although collective political expression is taken as given, the interests which support and influence it become understood subjectively and in a fragmented fashion. To be more specific, although the capitalist social formation is characterized by the concentration of social interests that are situated in structurally distinct locations, the liberal analysts insist on considering these interests as if they were the

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8   See: Neumann (1956: 396–400); Merkl (1970: 272–84); Curtis (1968: 134–40); Almond and Powell (1966: 73–112); Macridis (1967: 17).

9   See for example Lipset (1963: 239). In fact, Gramsci in his "Modern Prince", talks about the "task" of political parties to perform this "mass function which selects leaders" (Gramsci, 1971: 191, 146). However, his statement should not be misunderstood and equated with similar arguments made by mainstream theorists. Gramsci, in his symbolic language, refers to the revolutionary party and not to parties in general.

10   This is certainly a methodological conclusion that is drawn even in some classic studies of the same tradition. For example, Epstein (1967: esp. 130–200).

outcome of personal choice. As a result, the social category (or class) to which a person belongs becomes an issue of personal preference and as such, these classes become, in the end, just another factor influencing the party–society/ class relationship.

Thus, on the one hand, most mainstream scholars, without dismissing class divisions, have for decades now reached the conclusion that given "the decomposition of capital and labour, it is highly doubtful whether the concept of class is still applicable to the conflict groups of post-capitalist societies."[11] In such approaches, there is a clear lack of cohesiveness between groups with common economic interests. Naturally, conclusions along these lines distance party theory from the issue of the party–class relationship, and turn it in the direction of a whole series of other cross-class conflicts (i.e., religious, geographic, etc.).[12] On the other hand, the 'orthodox' Marxists tend to focus exclusively on the class–party relationship in such a way as to reduce one to the other.[13]

A comprehensive and methodologically useful analysis of the party–society and class relationship would have to distance itself from both of these conceptions. To approach the party–class relationship, we should begin with an examination of the party–class relationship, focusing in particular on current class dynamics (alignments, de-(re-)alignments). Then account should be taken of those social differences, contradictions, and conflicts that have been called super-structural and that usually over-determine and/or disguise the class base of political parties. This examination is essential as these contradictions and conflicts frequently acquire an autonomous existence vis-à-vis the class dynamic and display an amazing inertia.

2 The Relative Autonomy of Party from Class

As one may have expected, the Marxist literature tends to place more emphasis on the party–class relationship. It does not, however, provide us with a systematic analysis of the question. Only in the context of other analyses can one find some theoretical insights and useful methodological conclusions, which may constitute the starting point of a more comprehensive approach. Before we attempt to draw out these insights, it must be stressed once again, that any

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11   For example, Dahrendorf (1967: 57).
12   For a comprehensive presentation of the issue see: Alford (1963: 18–20ff).
13   See for example: Goertzel (1976: 136–37); and San Francisco Bay Area Kapitalistate Group (1977: 19).

examination of the relationship between party and class should be under-
taken differently for parties from different ends of the political spectrum. Over
and above some general principles that govern the party–class relationship,
it is not possible for all types of parties – with such diverse and, by definition,
adversarial political traditions – to have the same relationship with their social
base. After all, parties and party families are inspired and guided by different
and competing strategic goals and social visions. It is for this reason that in the
following pages, after a brief general introduction to the issues, we will exam-
ine first the relationship of the 'bourgeois' parties with social classes, and then
the relationship between the left-wing parties and their social base.

The real material existence of any social class is the result of its political
organization. Classes or class factions acquire their distinctiveness and effec-
tiveness as soon as they organize (through and) into political parties. Parties
are creations of their classes through this process and as such are assigned cer-
tain tasks. On the one hand, they are to protect and advance the interests of
class(es) or the social alliance that created them, and on the other, they are to
suppress the interests of the other classes. The latter function indicates that
political parties as the "nomenclature for classes" are not simply "a mechanical
and passive expression of those classes but (that they) react energetically upon
them in order to develop, solidify and universalize them."[14] In other words,
"through their political and ideological activity" political parties are critical
"organizers of the relations between classes."[15]

However, no matter how much one stresses the importance of political par-
ties for social classes and strata, it would be erroneous to assume that there is a
one-to-one relationship between them. Such an assumption would be a crude
reduction, which for many reasons is inappropriate.

First, it is clear, even if we accept the claim that capitalism by nature creates
primarily two opposing classes (bourgeois and working class), that capitalist
social formations – i.e., the totality of all the existing modes of production
within the particular historical and territorial framework of a primarily cap-
italist society – contain a number of social groups/remnants from previous
modes of production.[16] Thus, it is no surprise that these social strata, perhaps
more so than other social groups, have a wide range of political choices and
expressions, and are anything but stable. At times, some of these strata ally
their interests with the aims of the bourgeoisie and the parties that best repre-
sent them; and some with the aspirations and the political goals of the working

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14   Gramsci (1971: 152, 227); Poulantzas (1973: 78, 247).
15   Brodie and Jenson (1980: 9).
16   Brodie and Jenson (1980: 14).

class; or sometimes, more rarely, manage to create or control some other party formation.

Second, it is not only the inertia of the 'old' class(es) and social strata which prevents us from identifying party and class, but also the appearance of new social groups. The development of a social formation is not linear, nor can it be anticipated in a deterministic fashion. On the contrary, the dynamic of a social formation is the result of a myriad of internal contradictions and external factors, the outcome of which depends both on the result of and the conditions of the waging of the class struggle at all levels. It is exactly this process which determines the appearance or the disappearance of new social strata, who find themselves in a peculiar and often unique location vis-à-vis the primary classes produced by the antitheses between capital and labor.[17] These new classes and/or factions are faced with a dilemma similar to that of the 'old' (remnant) social groups – to join the bourgeois or the working-class political organizations or perhaps to form one of their own.

However, over and above this line of argument, which prevents the tautology of party and class, the historical conjuncture of recent years has led to social reorganizations that allow us to characterize our time as transitional. For over a decade now, since the outbreak of the most recent deep economic and political crisis, this is clearer than ever before. It appears to shed doubt upon and lead to a reconsideration of the existing manners of political arbitration. In fact, there have been two primary lines of analysis, which attempt to understand the developments of the societies of 'late capitalism'. The first approach, which is rather dated, was based on the expansion of the phenomena of social inequalities as a result of the economic crisis during the 1980s which led to the conclusion that the advanced capitalist societies tend to develop extensive phenomena of social exclusion and what was called the 'two-thirds society'.[18] In a second approach, others focus upon the tendencies and overall macro developments of the 'post-industrial' society[19] or to 'third wave' societies[20] leading not only to new social contradictions and alignments[21] but also necessarily to new types of

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17   Brodie and Jenson (1980).

18   See for example: Glotz (1985; 1986: 36ff).

19   See chapter 2, section II and also: Touraine (1971); Bell (1976); Block (1990); Esping-Andersen (1993: esp. 7–31). A number of scholars have expressed reservations about the concept of the 'post-industrial', in particular the implicit notion that industrial capitalism has been superseded. On this, see: Cohen and Zysman (1987).

20   Toffler (1981: esp. 137ff).

21   Gouldner (1979); Gorz (1982).

political expression and organization.[22] The boom in the field of cultural and post-colonial studies has clearly contributed to the problematique in the same direction. Despite the often-superficial conclusions, there is no doubt that this problematique of modern sociology is based on some genuinely radical developments within our advanced capitalist societies which constitute a further reason to reject the idea of a one-way relationship between party and class.

Third, we have already shown how parties are primarily (but not exclusively) the creation of class interests. As such, they not only promote the interests that by definition they represent, but they also seek to disorganize or rather to organize in a distorted fashion, the articulation of the interests of other classes. The latter takes place through not only omissions and the political inertia of the parties but also through the planning and carrying out of specific initiatives. In other words, as Gramsci put it, this characteristic of parties is nothing other than a "balancing and arbitrating function between the interests of their (class) and those of the other groups," which is necessary for the achievement of their primary goal – i.e., securing and developing the interests of the class(es) they primarily represent.[23] In advanced capitalist societies, this function of political parties seems particularly important and vital, because no class or stratum maintains the absolute majority and strength to enforce its political will and to establish hegemony on its own. As a result, identifying party with class would be an oversimplification since it would not allow an approach to and an analysis of this important "balancing and arbitrating function" of parties.

Fourth, as we mentioned above, by definition, parties live for and are subject to political competition and the struggle for political power. If that competition is at least a partial expression and result of the class struggle, then it is logical to argue that political parties find themselves at the center of class antagonism and of the class struggle. Thus, due to their position at the crossroads of political power on the one hand, and given their vital function in organizing, reorganizing, and disorganizing the class struggle, parties cannot but reflect the totality of the processes of class struggle. Taking this into consideration, it would be absurd to argue that any party is "the unilateral, unequivocal instrument of just one class or class fragment."[24] On the contrary, political parties internalize the entire complexity of class relations and consequently become

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22   This is an argument, which has been made for some time now. See for example: Hindess
      (1971: esp. chs. 1, 2, 7, and 8); *Monthly Review*, special issue on "Technology, the Labor
      Process and the Working Class," July-August 1976, especially articles by Ehrenreich and
      Ehrenreich (1976: 10–18) and by Braverman (1976: esp. 122–24).
23   Gramsci (1971: 148).
24   Bourque (1979: 131).

the arena for part of the class struggle. It follows that "it is inside the party (in addition to a number of other locations) that the hegemony of one class or fragment is imposed upon other classes or fragments."[25] This insight provides a starting point for the examination of both the organizational structure and the mechanism of decision-making for parties' strategies and policies.

Finally, the actual articulation and pursuit of alternative political strategies within a given social formation further prevents us from unilaterally identifying party and class. The possibility of the choice of tactics and/or policies cannot but affect the political expression of the social classes. It appears that a recognition of this phenomenon led Poulantzas to make the distinction between the "political scene,"[26] which is defined as "the field of political parties' action," and the "political interests and practices" of social classes. In fact he makes the useful observation that the "political scene ... is often dislocated in relation to the political practices and to the terrain of political interests of the classes, represented by the parties in the political scene."[27] This dislocation suggests not only that the reduction of a party to a class is unthinkable, but also that it would be legitimate, if not necessary, to claim that there is a relative autonomy of the political party vis-à-vis the interests of the social class(es) it primarily represents. This relative autonomy is a particularly useful notion in analyzing and understanding the conflicts that are often apparent between the class(es) and factions of the power bloc and parts of the bourgeois class, or even the phenomenon of working-class or populist parties expressing and supporting the interests of the bourgeoisie.

Taking a detour for a moment, we must point out that these conclusions are particularly useful in the analysis of the development of bourgeois parties in the two main phases of their history that coincides with the stages of capitalist development – competitive and monopoly/advanced. In the first phase, political parties were 'used' as unifying tools for the diverse and often conflicting interests of the individual members of the bourgeoisie. The political effectiveness of the bourgeoisie was vital at the time, as it had to establish its political hegemony over the declining feudal order. In this effort, the bourgeois

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25   Bourque (1979).
26   Poulantzas argues that "in capitalist formations the political scene is a privileged place in which the open action of social forces can take place by means of their representation by parties ... The metaphors of presence in the political scene, of the place of a class in this scene (whether in the forefront or not), etc. *are constantly related to the modalities of class representation by parties and to the relations between the political parties*" (Poulantzas, 1973: 247).
27   Poulantzas (1973: 251).

parties had to accommodate to some degree, for tactical reasons, the political interests of the working class and other popular strata within their struggle. When the capitalist class(es) established themselves in full command of the social, political, and ideological order of the system, the aims of the parties changed. Thus, today, the bourgeois parties no longer need to organize and unite the interests of all parts of the bourgeois class in the same way. Given its hegemonic role, the bourgeois class does not necessarily need to have its own party, because it is able to "utilize the existing parties turn by turn."[28] To some extent, these remarks are at the base of recent analyses of the crisis of party democracy. From the left, Peter Mair has declared that "the age of party democracy has passed," and Wolfgang Streeck has contended that the liberalization of markets has ended the uneasy relation between capitalism and democracy and thus undermined representative institutions. And from a more conservative perspective, Bernard Manin has gone so far as to attribute the decline of parties to the elitist nature of elections and to the fact that parties cannot keep their programmatic promises, while Frances McCall Rosenbluth and Ian Shapiro claim that the party crisis is the paradoxical result of parties' efforts to decentralize power and engage the electorate.[29] Gramsci's observation on the contingent relationship between bourgeois rule and political parties has achieved wide resonance.

After accepting the thesis of parties' relative autonomy from their founding social class(es), as well as the argument that the bourgeois class does not necessarily need a party of its own, we are led to the question of the definition of 'bourgeois' parties. To put it differently, if direct class (bourgeois) participation in a party is not proof of its orientation, then the question naturally arises: what are the criteria for distinguishing a bourgeois party?

Therborn has approached this question with the insightful observation that the bourgeoisie, with or without its own party or parties, has demonstrated the ability to exploit the peculiarities of class differentiation. As this is the result of the social and technical division of labor, the bourgeoisie has the capacity to organize the "population around the capitalist enterprise and the capitalist state on the basis of various ideologies."[30] In other words, the ability of a political party to effectively organize social classes and strata in such a way demonstrates its 'bourgeois' nature. However, in spite of the fact that this analysis avoids the shortcomings of instrumentalism, it contains a number of other problems which curtail its analytical usefulness.

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28   Gramsci (1971: 155).

29   See: Mair (2013); Streeck (2017: esp. 93–112); Manin (1997); Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018).

30   Therborn (1978: 194).

The critical remarks of the previous paragraphs do not allow us to conclude that class participation in any party constitutes, or could constitute, the determining factor in the characterization of a party. However, this does not mean that class is a peripheral consideration either. Even when it is generally accepted that a working-class party acts in the interests of capital while the bourgeoisie is organized in other party(ies), this does not mean that there is no difference between competing parties and party families. Class participation in a party may not be the determinant but it frames the outside limits of party action and can never turn completely against the interests of the founding class(es) of the party in question. On the other hand, a party's effectiveness or ineffectiveness in organizing the social interests of the society more generally "around the capitalist enterprise and the capitalist state" alone does not constitute the sole criterion for the definition of a bourgeois party. Such a deduction would lead to problematic political conclusions, such that the party itself could be characterized as 'bourgeois' or 'working class' depending on the particular conjuncture.

The criterion of 'organizational effectiveness' remains useful for classifying political parties despite its analytical limitations. In order to be fully appreciated, however, it needs to be combined with criteria of 'class participation' and 'political discourse'.[31] Therefore, in addition to 'organizational effectiveness' (i.e., positive to capitalist interests), a party must also meet the requirements of the appropriate (bourgeois) 'class participation' and the proper 'political discourse'[32] (i.e., "definition of the issues as in but not of, the existing society")[33] in order to gain the 'honor' of being called 'bourgeois'.

The relationship of the so-called bourgeois parties to society conceals yet another dimension that is not covered methodologically in the preceding analysis. This is the problem of the formation of political leadership in the bourgeois class. More specifically, the question arises of how the bourgeoisie – by definition heterogeneous – manages through the vehicle of a political party to establish "a governing authority ... which exercises control in effect and practice."[34] This important question cannot be answered with generalizations

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31 Bourque (1979: 134ff).
32 We define political discourse as the totality of tacit, explicit, and symbolic practices (speeches and actions) which are the outcome of antagonisms and compromises among different interests and strategies, and which determine and set the boundaries of every human activity. For a historical presentation of discourse theory see Macdonell (1986).
33 Therborn (1978: 195).
34 Pareto (1966: 268–69). Pareto's remark is well taken although the notion of class for him is different if not opposite to the Marxist problematic presented here.

based solely on theoretical abstractions. Of course, various approaches have attempted to make theoretical contributions on the issue, but, given the tremendous diversity of the historical and regional experiences they cover, these contributions typically fall far short of the mark. A notable exception of course is the monumental work of Ralph Miliband, as Panitch recently reminded us.[35] Indeed Miliband, in *The State in Capitalist Society*, based primarily on the British and French experiences, reaches interesting conclusions concerning the relationship between the bourgeois classes, governmental leadership in general, and party leadership in particular.[36] Therborn, at a higher level of abstraction, observes that the "reconciliatory function" of the leadership of these parties (a vital function of the dominant class), which becomes particularly obvious during election periods, makes them "less accessible to ... the ruling class." In fact, the latter consequence is considered "the price (which) has to be paid by the bourgeoisie for the advancement of its party."[37]

This observation is particularly useful in understanding the conjunctural contradictions that occur from time to time between the leadership of bourgeois parties and the different parts of the bourgeois class, or even of the power bloc. A further question must still be posed concerning the particular process through which the political leadership of the bourgeois class is brought forward and formed. The answer to such a question can only be given after an examination of the historical conditions that form the particular political party within the framework of a given political formation. We do not of course propose a simple empirical approach to the issue. However, since political and party competition, despite appearances, tends to have a more converging than diverging dynamic, the examination of the actual articulation between political leadership, political parties, and dominant class(es) cannot be a strictly abstract exercise. To put it differently, a concrete and detailed analysis of the relationship between party leadership and social base is vital in outlining party politics and dynamics.

The relationship between left-wing, socialist, and generally working-class parties with their social base, as we have already indicated, differs from the so-called bourgeois parties. Let us briefly examine the specific trends of these parties that do not permit a complete application of the above-mentioned methodological principles. As our discussion on party–class relations focuses on party-building for the radical left, it is important to turn to these differences.

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35   Panitch (2019).
36   Miliband (1969: ch. 7).
37   Therborn (1978: 193).

All Marxists traditions have stressed the need for and the importance of the party in the development and the stabilization of the political unity of the working class. The 'party' had been entrusted with the transformation of the fragmented and individual economic interests of the working class into a united revolutionary political practice capable of materializing the socialist vision. In contrast to other social classes which historically make up the political forces aimed at the taking of or the control of power, the working class has one further aim in sight, which at least initially appears contradictory. In so far as the proletariat revolution is the beginning of the classless society, the proletariat is the first social class in history that aims to gain power not to ensure its ongoing political and social domination, but in order for it to wither away.[38] In fact, it is within this contradiction that the (historically) tragic nature of the working class is to be found. It is the proletariat's own party, its political organizer and expression, which objectively leads it on its tragic course. This last hypothetical scenario leads to the plausible theoretical claim that even in the case of the parties of socialism which were historically working-class parties, a paradoxical distance – a 'relative autonomy' – develops between them and the working class(es) they are supposed to express and organize.

3   The Party-Building Challenge

In addition to the theoretical remarks of the previous section, there are important social and political developments that reinforce the paradox of the relative autonomy of radical left parties (socialist and/or communist) from the working class itself. The technological and other structural needs of accumulation have led in recent decades to important social developments. New social strata have appeared which, regardless of how one defines them (new middle class, new working class, and so forth), have characteristics which do not correspond either to the historical characteristics of the working class or to the characteristics of the traditional middle class. Even if we agree with the view concerning "the contradictory class location"[39] of these strata, there is no doubt that, at least occasionally, broad sections of these new strata embrace visions

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38   Magri (1970).

39   The notion was developed by E. O. Wright, in the context of the debates on class stratification in advanced capitalism during the late 1970s. For a comprehensive and more refined analysis of the notion, see Wright (1985: 19–64). For a critique that challenges the usefulness of the notion in order to "understand ... the complexities" of advanced capitalist societies, see Meiksins (1989: 173–83).

of reforming and/or transforming capitalist society. Large factions participate in left-wing parties and as a result influence them. This cannot but force 'the parties of the working class' to partially distance themselves from their own founding social agent, especially if one considers that structural changes of the accumulation regime have led to a numerical reduction of the traditional working class. At the same time, this autonomy provides the potential of responding to the demands of the emerging new social strata, which appear to constitute new subjects of social transformation.

This should not lead to the conclusion that recent social developments will necessarily result in some form of *catchall-ism* for the parties of socialism. What it means is that new strata have to be added to those who have always been considered the social agents of the socialist transformation. This is because the contradictions of capitalist development bring new social forces into the traditionally socialist, working-class parties. However, these strata have distinct origins, historical experiences and behavioral habits, as well as demands that are different from those attributed to the working class. At the same time, their political tendencies are more diverse than convergent. The political behavior and political choices of a part of these strata, for example those from the agricultural population, will differ from the behavior and the choices of other parts – from the marginalization of the traditional middle class or from those social strata who are proponents of 'post-materialist' demands. It is precisely for this reason that a wide range of strategic choices have opened up for political parties of socialism. This in its turn strengthens the tendency towards the relative autonomy of these parties from the choices of their social base.

Based on this line of analysis, we clearly cannot view parties inspired by the 'vision' of socialist transformation as fully committed agents devoted to the implementation of the working class 'project'. This is more than obvious if one considers that the rationalized anarchy of capitalism gives birth to and sharpens everyday problems and contradictions, which cannot be reduced directly to the process of capitalist accumulation. These multifold contradictions, by their nature, bring together a cluster of classes and social strata from various multilateral movements and political initiatives. Organizations concerned with the environment, urban issues, civil rights, welfare state cuts, and issues of world peace are some of the now common examples of these radical cross-class movements. The developed capitalist societies have not only brought problems and conflicts to the surface, which do not have an obvious relationship to the capital-labor contradiction, but have also given rise to a series of so-called 'post-material interests' which, until the 1960s, essentially had not entered the left's agenda. The conflicts around gender and sexual orientation, climate change and the environment, as well as the dramatic increase of

refugee flows and the demands that emerge from these have recently found their place on the agenda of the traditional or otherwise radical left parties. Although this development, in one way or another, is something that has been with us at least since the middle of the past century, in the past couple of decades it has drastically changed the social base of these parties. Despite the fact that these issues definitely have a class dimension, the programmatic reference to them forced radical left parties to distance themselves even further from the working class and to build their base on a more cross-class alliance.

Regardless of whether one views these new fields of socio-political issues as 'post-materialist' or not, there is little doubt that social participation in left parties is changing. This in turn has had an impact on the strategy of these parties, as was observed long ago when this phenomenon first appeared. As Claus Offe insightfully noted at the time, "in a period of economic strain, not only the clash of material interests, but, in addition, a broad spectrum of post-material interests and causes ... will together make up the scenario of political conflict."[40] Furthermore, this plurality of radical demands, especially in the past two decades after the political experience of the anti-globalization movements, has led a number of radical left parties of our time (e.g., the Communist Party of Portugal, Bloco, Syriza, etc.) to distance themselves not just from the working class, but even from those social strata that composed their generic model.

The idea of the relative autonomy of the political party from its social base (generic or otherwise) is very useful for opening up discussion of the challenge of party-building for the radical left. The ideas and proposals that derive from this notion do not provide a ready-made organizational manifesto for the future direction of the radical left, but rather, offer a starting point for open and critical discussion about strategic planning. In this spirit, one should treat the following pages as an effort to set the stage for overcoming the widespread pessimism of the left. Since the discussion and practical application of ideas always have to do with the evaluation of specific historical circumstances, they should be confronted with audacity and sobriety. Otherwise, it will be very difficult to strike the necessary balance between voluntarism and effectiveness. A few points require initial attention and discussion.

Political parties are the products of socio-historical cleavages. Although economic cleavages and inequalities are important, they are by no means always determinant. This non-reductionist understanding of cleavages means that the conditions and the timing that activate these cleavages are equally

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40   Offe (1980: 12).

important because these will determine the political party's *genetic model* and in turn the conditions of its dynamic.[41] This dynamic has to do primarily with the social alliance that constitutes the social base of the party organization, which is committed to socialist transformation. In other words, it is important to consider and analyze the specific circumstances of its creation and development and to understand the modalities of its establishment and its impact. The latter largely defines the organizational and the programmatic capacities of the parties.

Recent developments on the left have naturally raised the question of which 'left' are we referring to. Any effort to establish a radical left party should encompass the entire tradition of the left, radical, and labor movements. This conclusion flows from a consideration of key political developments of the past few decades. Indeed, after the collapse of so-called 'actually existing socialism' and the disarray of the Western Marxists critical of it after 1989, the dissipation of anti-globalization protest through the early 2000s, the 'Pasokification' of social democracy in the last decade, the limited impact of the anti-austerity movements that sprung up after the 2007 economic crisis, and finally the stalemate of the extra-parliamentary left initiatives and organizations, no one can think of the future of the radical left without aspirations of unifying the entire left tradition. This should be the primary goal. It should be a unity that capitalizes on all the advances of the left and at the same time overcomes the shortcomings of these traditions.

There are at least two assumptions that must be made before one begins thinking strategically about the future of the radical left. These are that: (a) parties before anything else are organizations and party organization is the determining factor for programmatic and political party capacity; and (b) given that left political agencies (parties, movements, initiatives) have at best had limited effectiveness, the future of the radical left must be based on the historically accumulated organizational, programmatic, and ideological practice.

More concretely, the political organization of the radical left should in all its initiatives and functions demonstrate that it is learning the 'lingua franca' that is constantly being produced by ever-changing new social dynamics. The radical left should drop its dogmatic hang-ups and learn and understand the language not just of the working class but also of the unemployed, the poor, the refugees and the immigrants, and especially of the youth that has no experience with the lingua and practice of the old left. In addition, the radical left

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41   Panebianco (1988).

must leave behind its reservations concerning the new means of communication and social media, in its search for new and effective organizational practices.

Finally, the radical left of our times should not look backwards. Of course, we must retain an historical awareness of our history, but we must do away with the frictions and the demarcations among the various left traditions that hinder the unity of the entire left. This unity can only be built by capitalizing upon the positive residues of all traditions and locales of the entire left. This can only be a successful process if the party somehow adopts an 'against and beyond' logic vis-à-vis these traditions.

For the traditional communist left, this means going 'against and beyond': economism; social reductionism; the instrumentalist and essentially liberal conception and use of the state; the opportunistic understanding of formal democratic institutions and of civil rights; the anthropomorphic perception of imperialism; and finally, the monotonous rhetoric of internationalism that often hides a deep-seated nationalism. The effect of these dogmas, which Avishai Ehrlich has ingeniously called 'polyleninism',[42] has been to divide and fragment the left for many decades. Nevertheless, from the communist left tradition, we should still preserve and appreciate the existential commitment to the cause of social transformation as well as the capacity to organize and mobilize subordinate classes, especially the traditional working class.

For the so-called reformist left (the various forms of social democracy), going 'against and beyond' means overcoming parliamentarism, governmentalism, uncritical adoption of the market, an understanding of subordinate class demands as undemocratic populism, and the bureaucratization of the state. On the other hand, one should appreciate their commitment to assume the responsibilities of governing and their optimism to reform and to alleviate the hardships arising from ever-increasing inequalities, although the latter may nowadays seem like an impossible task.

For the extra-parliamentary left, 'against and beyond' should mean doing away with sectarianism and the agoraphobia of political power that eschews governmental responsibilities in a spirit of moral self-righteousness. At the same time, we can learn from this tradition how to remain steadfast in the face of setbacks and to find the courage to overcome them when left organizations find themselves on the margins of politics.

And finally, for the social movements, the task of 'against and beyond' is to transcend the repertoire that they have inherited, since the post-materialist

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42   See Panitch (2013: 113–24).

tendency to focus on single issues often hinders efforts to build connections with wider issues and with socialist transformation. On the other hand, the social movements can enrich the agenda of the mainstream socialists as well as their means of organizing and mobilizing. This is something that cannot be overlooked in the project of building a radical left party.

Leo Panitch's writing made important contributions to the contemporary problematique for the left of class- and party-building. In tracing out political developments in the British Labour Party over the past decades, in a long struggle to remake it as a socialist party from Tony Benn to Jeremy Corbyn or to re-position it as a conventional governing party from Tony Blair to Keir Starmer, Panitch put forward a set of 'guidelines' for a crucial future project for the left. Setting off from his widely-noted article (authored with Sam Gindin) on 'transcending pessimism'[43] as a debilitating process that can only lead to political conformism, Panitch argued that the strategy of left party-building must be a balanced blend of the two Gramscian strategies of 'war of position' and 'war of movement', of gaining institutional position and of a series of class struggles that open fissures in the existing balance of forces and power. This requires a struggle over the state, inside the state itself and outside the state, as well as insisting on the extension of popular power and capacities for self-governance. In doing so, Panitch stressed the importance of democratizing the state, especially after the negative impact of neoliberal 'new public management' that has transformed the capacities of the public service into so many vehicles for privatization and marketization. This is, he contended, central to developing 'new forms of accountability' that could control the de-radicalization of left parties in their engagements with the state, by transforming parties into vehicles of political mobilization that extend beyond elections to social struggles to meet the day-to-day needs of members and communities.[44]

The party-building process for socialists is neither, and never has been, a one-off affair, nor a one-hundred-meter dash to the finish line. It is a marathon, full of defeats, retreats, and setbacks. A race that we must navigate while rebuilding our ships along the way.

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43   Panitch and Gindin (2000).
44   Panitch and Leys (2020). For discussion of 'parties of a new kind' that are needed for socialist politics to regain a mass presence today, see: Panitch, Gindin and Maher (2020) and the essays on socialist strategy in Panitch and Albo (2016).

Decades ago, Joan Baez said it well :

> You left us marching on the road
> and said how heavy was the load.
> The years are young,
> the struggle barely had its start...
> And we are still marching
> in the streets with little victories
> and big defeats

Bobby, JOAN BAEZ, 1972