

# Where did the left go?

by Serge Halimi

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**As capitalism faces the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, the parties of the left are silent or embarrassed.**

The Occupy Wall Street protests in the US are also directed against the Street's representatives in the Democratic Party and the White House. The protesters probably don't know that Socialists in France still consider Barack Obama exemplary, since, unlike President Sarkozy, he had the foresight to take action against banks. Is there a misunderstanding? Those who are unwilling or unable to attack the pillars of the neoliberal order (financialisation, globalisation of movements of capital and goods) are tempted to personalise the disaster, to attribute the crisis in capitalism to poor planning or mismanagement by their political opponents. In France it's Sarkozy, in Italy Berlusconi, in Germany Merkel, who are to blame. And elsewhere?

Elsewhere, and not only in the US, political leaders long considered as models by the moderate left also face angry crowds. In Greece, the president of the Socialist International, George Papandreou, is pursuing a policy of extreme austerity: privatisations, cuts in the civil service, and delivering economic and social sovereignty to an ultra-neoliberal "troika"<sup>1</sup>. The conduct of the Spanish, Portuguese and Slovenian governments reminds us that the term "left" is now so debased that it is no longer associated with any specific political content.

The current French Socialist Party spokesman explains the impossible situation of European social democracy very clearly: in his new book *Tourner la page*, Benoît Hamon writes: "In the European Union, the European Socialist Party is historically associated, through the compromise linking it with Christian democracy, with the strategy of liberalising the internal market and the implications for social rights and public services. Socialist governments negotiated the austerity measures that the European Union and the International Monetary Fund wanted. In Spain, Portugal and Greece, opposition to the austerity measures is naturally directed against the IMF and the European Commission, but also against the socialist governments ... Part of the European left no longer denies that it is necessary, like the European right, to sacrifice the welfare state in order to balance the budget and please the markets. ... We have blocked the march of progress in several parts of the world. I cannot resign myself to this"<sup>2</sup>.

Others think the debasement is irreversible because it is connected to the gentrification of European socialists and their lack of contact with the world of work.

The Brazilian Labour Party (PT), a generally moderate party, thinks the Latin American left should take over from the Old World left, which is too capitalist, too

Atlanticist, and unconvincing in its claims to defend the interests of the people: “The ideological leadership of the left is moving to a new part of the world,” according to a document for the PT Congress in September. “South America is the salient example [see [Latin America’s Pink Tide](#)]. ... The left in European countries, which has had such an influence on the left worldwide since the 19th century, has not managed to produce an adequate response to the crisis and appears to be capitulating to the forces of neoliberalism”<sup>3</sup>. The decline of Europe may also signal the end of the ideological influence of the continent where trade unionism, socialism and communism were born. Europe now appears more resigned than others to their demise.

## **A ritual performance**

Is it all over? Can voters and leftwing militants concerned with the content rather than the label hope to fight the right (in western countries, too) when the parties they vote for have converted to neoliberalism but still have the power to win elections? It has become a ritual performance: the distinction between reforming left and conservative is maintained during the election campaign by an optical illusion. Then, given the chance, the left runs the country just like its opponents, taking care not to upset the economic order.

Most leftwing candidates with their eye on a post in government insist that social change is needed, even urgently needed. But to bring about such change, they must see more in it than election hype and they must win the election. And it is on this precise point that the moderate left lectures the “radicals” and other “protesters”. It is not waiting for a “great debate” (see *The US left’s great debate*, page 12) or dreaming of an alternative society far removed from the world, inhabited by exceptional people. To quote the French Socialist leader François Hollande, it does not intend to “thwart rather than try. Hold back rather than act. Resist rather than conquer”. It believes that “not beating the right means keeping it alive, and that means choosing it”<sup>4</sup>. The radical left would prefer, in Hollande’s words, “to exploit any anger for all it is worth” rather than “opt for realism”<sup>5</sup>.

The left in government has a trump card: it has the voters behind it here and now and it has an eager and professional team ready to take over. But victory over the right is no substitute for a plan. Once the elections are won, the structures already in place national, European, or international are likely to constrain the desire for change expressed during the election campaign. In the US, Obama could claim that industrial lobbies and blocking moves by the Republicans in Congress had sapped the government’s proactive (“Yes, we can”) spirit despite wide popular support.

Elsewhere leftwing governments explained their caution or their cowardice with talk of constraints and inherited problems (an internationally uncompetitive production sector, a high level of debt) that left little room for manoeuvre. As Lionel Jospin said in 1992: “Our public life is dominated by a strange dichotomy. On the one hand, the [Socialist] government is blamed for unemployment, troubles in the suburbs, social unrest, extremism on the right, and despair on the left. On the other hand, it is urged not to abandon a financial economic policy that makes it very difficult to deal with these problems”<sup>6</sup>.

His words are fresh and pertinent today. Socialists remember them every time they argue in favour of tactical voting: should the left lose the next election, the victorious right would immediately unleash neoliberal reforms privatisations, curbs on trade union rights, public spending cuts that would destroy the tools that might shape a different policy. Hence the tactical vote for the moderate left. Yet there may be lessons to be learned from defeat. Benoît Hamon admits that in Germany “the result of the [September 2009] parliamentary elections, in which the SPD share of the vote [23%] was the lowest in a hundred years, convinced the leadership that a change of direction was needed”<sup>7</sup>.

Equally modest policy reviews were conducted in France after the Socialist defeat in 1993, and in the UK after the (partial) Conservative victory in 2010. The same process will probably be repeated in Spain and Greece soon, since their socialist governments are unlikely to attribute their forthcoming defeats to revolutionary policies. Defending Papandreou, the Greek Socialist MP Elena Panaritis cited an unexpected example: “It took Margaret Thatcher 11 years to complete her reforms in a country where the structural problems were not so serious. Our programme has only been running for 14 months”<sup>8</sup>. Or, Papandreou does it better than Thatcher.

Escaping from this vicious circle means listing the conditions needed to bring financial globalisation into line. There is an immediate problem: given the plethora of sophisticated mechanisms that have linked national economic development with capitalist speculation for the past 30 years, even a relatively soft reform policy (adjusting unfair taxes, increasing purchasing power, maintaining the education budget) now requires significant breaks with the past with both the current European order and earlier socialist policies.

We shall be off to a bad start unless we review the “independence” of the European Central Bank (assured under the European treaties that its monetary policy will not be subject to democratic control); unless we introduce flexibility into the stability and growth pact (which, in a crisis, stifles any proactive strategy for dealing with unemployment); unless we condemn the Liberal-Social Democrat alliance in the European parliament (which led the Social Democrats to support Mario Draghi, former vice chairman and managing director of Goldman Sachs, as a candidate for the post of president of the ECB), and challenge free trade (the European Commission’s preferred policy), and the public debt audit (to avoid reimbursing speculators who betted against the weakest countries in the eurozone)<sup>9</sup>.

The game may even be lost before it begins. There is no reason to believe that François Hollande in France, Sigmar Gabriel in Germany or Ed Miliband in the UK will succeed where Obama, Jos Luis Zapatero and Papandreou have failed. To imagine, as Massimo d’Alema hopes, that “an alliance that places the political union of Europe at the heart of its policy will revive the progressive movement”<sup>10</sup> is a dream. In the current political and social situation, a federal Europe would strengthen the already stifling neoliberal mechanisms and reduce the sovereign power of the people by handing it over to shadowy technocratic bodies. Currency and trade have already been federalised.

However, as long as the moderate left parties continue to represent most progressive voters either because they support those parties’ policies or because they believe those

policies offer the only prospect of change in the near future more radical political bodies will be relegated to bit parts or sent backstage. Even with 15% of the vote, 44 MPs, four ministers and an organisation that included tens of thousands of militants, the French Communist Party (PCF) never influenced François Mitterrand's political, economic and financial policies between 1981 and 1984. The Communist Refoundation Party in Italy, trapped in an alliance with the centre-left parties, has failed and does not inspire; their aim was to prevent, at any cost, Silvio Berlusconi getting in again but he got in again anyway, later.

## **Last sparks from a dead star**

In France, the Left Front (which includes the PCF) hopes to beat the trend. By exerting pressure on the PS, it hopes to help it escape the tyranny of the past. This may seem deluded, even desperate. But, while there is more to it than relative voting strength and institutional constraints, there are some historical precedents. None of the Popular Front's great social achievements (paid holidays, the 40-hour week) were included in the very modest programme of the coalition that won in April-May 1936; it was the strikes of June that forced the French employers to accept them.

However, that is not just a history of the irresistible force of a social movement and the pressure it put on scared or timid leftwing parties. It was the Popular Front's victory in the elections that began the social revolt by giving workers the feeling that they would no longer be repressed by police and employers, as they had been. They took heart, but they also knew that the parties they had voted for would give them nothing unless arms were twisted. Hence the winning but rare dialectic between election and mobilisation, voting booths and factory floors. As things now stand, a leftwing government spared from this pressure would immediately enter into a solid marriage with the technocrats, who only know neoliberalism. Their obsession would be to win over the rating agencies, which will immediately downgrade any country that pursues a genuine leftwing policy.

So, strike out boldly or toe the line and get stuck right away? The risks of striking out isolation, inflation, downgrading are dinned into us. But what about the risks of toeing the line? Reviewing Europe's situation in the 1930s, historian Karl Polanyi recalled that "the *impasse* reached by liberal capitalism" had led in some countries to "a reform of market economy achieved at the price of the extirpation of all democratic institutions"<sup>11</sup>. Even Michel Rocard, a most moderate socialist, is alarmed at that prospect: imposing harder conditions on the Greeks could mean the end of Greek democracy. "Given the anger that the people will feel," he wrote last month, "it is doubtful whether any Greek government can hold on without the support of the army. This sad observation probably applies equally to Portugal and/or Ireland, and/or other, larger, countries. How far will it go?"<sup>12</sup>.

The republic of the centre has institutions and media behind it, but it is tottering. The race is on between tough neoliberal authoritarianism and a break with capitalism. These still seem a long way off. But when the people cease to believe in a political game in which the dice are loaded, when they see that governments are stripped of their sovereignty, when they demand that banks be brought into line, when they

mobilise without knowing where their anger will lead then the left is still very much alive

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<sup>1</sup> The European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund

<sup>2</sup> Benoît Hamon, *Tourner la page*, Flammarion, Paris, 2011, pp 14-19.

<sup>3</sup> AFP, 4 September 2011.

<sup>4</sup> François Hollande, *Devoirs de vérité*, Stock, Paris, 2006, pp 91 and 206.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp 51 and 43.

<sup>6</sup> Lionel Jospin, “Reconstruire la gauche”, *Le Monde*, Paris, 11 April 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Benoît Hamon, op cit, p 180.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Alain Salles, “L’odyssée de Papandréou”, *Le Monde*, 16 September 2011.

<sup>9</sup> In Benoît Hamon’s opinion, “It is impossible for the left to ask the French for support at the polls and insist that they foot this particular bill.”

<sup>10</sup> Massimo d’Alema, “Le succès de la gauche au Danemark annonce un renouveau européen”, *Le Monde*, 21 September 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1957.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Rocard, “Un système bancaire à repenser”, *Le Monde*, 4 October 2011.