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In or Out: Political strategies of the radical left in France and Europe

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Introduction – A conflictual revival

The campaign for the 2012 presidential election in France seemed to have revived the spirit of socialist politics. Carried by rallies that attracted thousands, in large cities tens of thousands of people, it appeared as if the Front de Gauche (FdG), a coalition of eight, now nine left-wing parties including the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and the Parti de Gauche (PG)¹, represented by its candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon, would establish itself as a strong force of the radical left², capable of altering the balance of power within the republican left of France.

French media wrote about the “big disturbance” of the campaign (Le Nouvel Observateur, 2012), and often demonstrated a degree of criticism and mockery that appeared at odds with journalistic deontology (see for example Barbier, 2012) while suggesting fear of the group’s electoral success.

The rise of the FdG also attracted interest in other European countries like the UK, with descriptions of Mélenchon’s campaign as “a sensation” (The Economist, 2012, p. 32) or characterisations of the candidate himself as a “socialist firebrand” (Chrisafis, 2012, p. 34) – reports driven by a mixture of serious interest and patronising amusement regarding the particularities of French politics.

The result of the first round of the presidential election³, with a share of 11.1% for Mélenchon, appeared to have fallen slightly short of heightened expectations; especially if one considers that a cumulative two-digit score is nothing unusual for the radical left in presidential elections.⁴ The outcome of the vote in 2012 has been

¹ For an overview on the FdG and its young history see Delwit (2014).

² The term ‘radical’ (which is admittedly rather vague) refers in this context to those groups of the left that aim for a profound transformation of society, economy and the political system in accordance with socialist or communist principles.

³ One could object that focusing primarily on the presidential election is insufficient to gauge the balance of power within the French left and to assess the potential for radical politics. However, due to the particularities of other elections, like the relevance of local politics or tactical voting, it makes sense to start such an investigation by looking closely at the presidential election as the key to politics in the semi-presidential system of the Fifth Republic.

⁴ If the results of all other left-wing candidates (with the exception of the representatives of the Parti Socialiste, PS) are added, the total vote share of the ‘other left’ corresponded to 15.12% in 2012, which may represent a considerable increase in comparison to 2007 (10.57%), but remains clearly below the score of 2002 (26.71%) or 1995 (17.26%) (France-Politique, n.d.).

It is however necessary to note that not all these diverse candidates can be labelled as ‘radical left’: For example Jean-Pierre Chevènement, who reached 5.33% in 2002, represented a particular strand of the

nevertheless remarkable for two reasons: It was the first time since 1981 that a single candidate of the left who did not stand for the Parti Socialiste (PS) reached a share of more than 10%. Furthermore, the result of the FdG coincided with a considerably increased result for the candidate of the PS, which indicated an overall strengthening of the left in the last presidential election.⁵ On balance, the election of 2012 could therefore be considered as a crucial stage in the revival of the radical left, after closer cooperation between the plethora of parties, movements and organisations as well as increased political awareness among otherwise disaffected voters had emerged during the campaign against the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005 (Mauger, 2007).⁶

However, looking back at the almost two years that have passed since Hollande was elected President, two observations undermine this view:

First, despite its undeniable weight within the political left of France, the FdG has been unable to influence governmental policy or to successfully shift the public discourse towards its own programme. Older fault lines within the left regarding economic, social but also international policies have gained in visibility, but so far the social-liberal and US-centred policies of President Hollande and his Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault dominate clearly, with no apparent inclination to adjust the governmental agenda in order to reflect preferences of more left-leaning voters.

Secondly, debates regarding the most effective strategy have arisen within the radical parliamentary left itself, as illustrated most clearly in preparation of the 2014 local elections – debates that undermine the coherence of the FdG, represent a

moderate left, with strong sovereignist leanings, while Christiane Taubira (2.32%) stood in 2002 for the Parti Radical de Gauche (PRG), one of the oldest parties in France with a long centre-left tradition. It is also problematic to consider candidates of Green parties automatically as 'radical left', even though their candidates in 2002 and 2012 have presented pronounced left-wing positions.

⁵ Lionel Jospin, candidate of the PS in 1995 and 2002, scored 23.3% and 16.18% respectively, failing to reach the second round of the election in 2002 due to a dispersion of the left vote over eight candidates. In 2007, Ségolène Royal achieved a vote share of 25.87%, whereas the successful candidate of 2012, François Hollande, reached 28.63% (France-Politique, n.d.).

⁶ Not too surprisingly, the question as to what extent this result represents a success has been answered differently according to the political interests of those who express their verdict. In addition to the points mentioned, one should in this context bear in mind that during the campaign an electoral score of around 10% was often presented as benchmark for success (Douat, 2012), even though some opinion polls (leaving aside the matter of how reliable such polls actually are) indicated a potentially much higher score, for example BVA (2012, 14) which suggested that 13% of the polled were sure to vote for Mélenchon and 21% could in all likelihood vote for him.

revival of old tensions and conflicts within the radical left, and represent ultimately a threat to the organisation itself (Weber, 2013).⁷

In general, two strategic-tactical positions can be distinguished: On the one hand, proponents of alliances with the PS or of engagement within the PS argue that it is crucial to be part of the party-political and governmental apparatus to shape public policy from within the currently leading party. On the other hand, proponents of autonomy and independence argue that the radical parliamentary left ought to differentiate itself clearly from the PS to represent an alternative able to attract left-wing voters who are disappointed with and disaffected from the PS.

The purpose of this discussion paper⁸ is to critically analyse both strategic positions, with regards to their short-term and long-term implications. Drawing on political developments in the last months, the analysis will consider the potential and limits of these approaches in light of the power resources and ideational orientations of relevant political actors as well as of the institutional and ideological particularities of French politics.

The text is divided into two main parts:

First, the relationships between different orientations of the left are categorised, to identify similarities, differences and fault lines. Secondly, the mentioned 'interior' and 'exterior' strategies are assessed with regards to their likely future impact in the short- and the long-run. In this context, the focus will be on the interplay between relevant political actors and the institutional, ideational as well as electoral framework of contemporary French politics. Finally, as conclusion, general hypotheses regarding the potentials and pitfalls of radical left-wing politics in Europe are presented, built on the conclusions from this case study and going beyond the example of France.

⁷ The latest illustration of this conflict is, at the moment of completion of this paper, the decision by David Noël to not lead an independent list of the FdG in the municipal elections as initially planned and to join instead the list of Eugène Binaise, representative of a centre-left alliance (Noël, 2014). What is symbolic of this particular case (only one among many municipalities where the FdG is split, most notably in Paris) is the fact that it takes place in Hénin-Beaumont, where Jean-Luc Mélenchon faced Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right Front National (FN), during the legislative elections in 2012.

⁸ I use the term 'discussion paper' deliberately to indicate that this text and the presentation at the conference are seen as a contribution to the debate on 'rebels and radicals' in contemporary politics, in line with the conference theme, and not as a presentation of a much advanced research project.

1. Divisions of the left

Before discussing different strategic options, it seems important to outline the major fault lines and conflicts within the French left. This will highlight the profound policy differences between the PS on the one hand and the more radical left on the other hand. It will also help to contrast the high degree of policy consistency within the parliamentary radical left with the profound divisions regarding strategic orientations among radical parties – divisions that matter to the long-term prospects of these radical left-wing organisations in France.

It is worth noting that divisions have shaped the republican left for decades. Looking at those periods of the 20th century when coalitions of the left governed France, be it the 'Cartel des Gauches' (1924-1926), the 'Front populaire' (1936-1938), the years of the 'Union de la Gauche' under President François Mitterrand, notably 1981-1984, or even the particular circumstances of the liberation government (1944-1947), government policy has been marked by ambivalences and tensions – between revolutionary change and reformist adjustments, cooperation and internal conflict, substantive social progress and accommodation of existing socio-economic structures (Halimi, 2000). Despite these ambivalences, the underpinning strategic assumption has overall been to “march separately, but strike together” (Khalifa, 2012, p. 47). The same assessment applies to the so-called 'Gauche plurielle' of Prime Minister Jospin between 1997 and 2002, even though it seems necessary to consider this period as a parenthesis within a general trend towards a separation, both with regards to policy and strategy, of the different components of the radical parliamentary left. Explaining this argument in more detail will help to highlight current tensions between left-wing parties:

Poor results in elections of the 1960s encouraged PS and PCF to engage in closer cooperation, institutionalised in the 'Programme commun' of 1972. Key tenets of this shared agenda were wage increases to stimulate demand, an extension of social protection, strengthening of social and civil rights, nationalisation of key industries and institutional reform to overcome the presidential system of the Fifth Republic.

Commitment to these objectives however weakened during the decade and the presidential and parliamentary election victory in 1981 was built on a more modest programme. This reflected a profound change in power relations within the left, since the PS had overtaken the PCF as the strongest force of the left in the 1970s, fulfilling Mitterrand's objective to weaken the PCF (Short, 2013). However, Communist ministers were part of the government until 1983, when the 'tournant de la rigueur' by Mitterrand put an end to attempts of implementing a socialist reform programme (Sassoon, 2010).

From this point on, the PS followed a path of so-called 'modernisation', similar to social-democratic parties in other European countries. In addition to a general acceptance of the institutional framework of the Fifth Republic, this mainly entailed a stronger focus of economic policies on supply-side factors, increasing reliance on activating labour market policies and a shift from representation of working class voters towards the defence of minority groups and campaigns in support of societal questions. Strategically, this shift was built on the assumption that socio-economic transformations had eroded the old class base of the PS and that therefore new voter groups needed to be engaged (Bouvet, 2012). It also aligned the PS with the wider trend towards 'Third Way' approaches, even though the French Socialists were often regarded as more 'traditionalist' than for example New Labour (Petring & Henkes, 2006) – an observation that makes sense if one considers the resistance of the PS under Jospin against openly market-embracing policies (despite a range of privatisations), but that overstates the extent to which the PS managed to maintain its socialist credentials. It is in this sense that one can interpret the inclusion of a variety of left-wing forces in the government and the insistence on a set of non-Third Way policies such as the 35 hours week as a parenthesis in the move of the PS to the centre. These orientations may have slowed down the process but without stopping it, as the time after 2002 and especially the campaign of Ségolène Royal in 2007 and the current presidency of Hollande demonstrate.

This move of the PS towards the centre-left and towards the mainstream of European social-democracy coincided with little successful attempts of the PCF to modernise its image and rhetoric, to regain its popular support that continued to erode considerably, and to find a sustainable balance between protestation and pragmatic

collaboration (Spier & Wirries, 2007). The latter orientation, between 1997 and 2002, opened up a wide space on the far-left side of the political spectrum – a place readily occupied by parties and movements such as the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR), which transformed itself 2009 into the Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste (NPA) and campaigns for an opposition to neoliberal politics via associations, trade unions and street protests while bypassing the traditional forms of parliamentary representative democracy (Godard, 2009).

However, despite these different pathways, the radical left has upheld a degree of consistency with regards to its programmatic orientations. The main objectives of the 'Programme commun' remain central, notably the focus on demand-side economic policies, the extension of the social protection system, more progressive forms of taxation with a stronger onus on capital, and the impetus of institutional reform to democratise the political system. The programme of the FdG, even though it is not directly and explicitly supported by the NPA and all far-left movements, illustrates this insistence on an ambitious reform process that would change the social, political and economic foundations of French society (Front de Gauche, 2011). In this context, one essential addition to this corpus of policy aims ought to be mentioned: an increased awareness of the environmental problems that affect capitalist consumer societies and the objective to transform production, consumption and energy supply into environmentally-friendly forms that protect and preserve the ecosystem and establish an 'eco-socialist' society (Conferences for eco-socialism, 2013).

One further comment is required: Even though the programme of the FdG, with its focus on overcoming the presidential system by establishing a Sixth Republic via popular involvement, its aim of laying the foundations for an eco-socialist revival of the French economy, and its objective of strengthening social protection, regulation and redistribution, represents a compromise of policy orientations shared by all members of the FdG, it cannot be denied that it has been strongly influenced by the views and positions of Mélenchon, not surprisingly given the key role he played as common presidential candidate. Considering the presidential election campaign and

political activities since Hollande took office, it seems to be Mélenchon and the PG that are the ideational driving force.⁹

Looking at programmatic orientations and priorities, there seems to be little reason to exclude a close collaboration between parties and movements of the radical left, even if disagreements persist for example with regards to the role of nuclear energy. However, the radical left remains on “diverging paths” (Callinicos, 2008, p. 91) at the beginning of the 21st century when it comes to strategic choices, in other words in determining which instruments should be used and are most effective in achieving these goals. Since the FdG is understood primarily as an “instrument for a strategy: the citizens’ revolution” (Mélenchon, 2013, p. 4), disagreements on strategic choices go to the core of this organisation.

To simplify and summarise these different positions, four distinct strategic approaches can be identified:

- 1) More radical groups within the PS¹⁰ and the Green party argue the best way of implementing the desired policy changes is to operate from within the government and the parliamentary majority, by trying to alter the course of the government and by securing at least small steps towards an ambitious socialist programme.
- 2) Parts of the PCF and of other members of the FdG aim for cooperation or opposition depending on circumstances. In local communities for example, it is accepted that coalitions with the PS should be formed if necessary whereas opposition should be more pronounced on the national or European level.
- 3) The PG and other members of the FdG wish to establish the FdG as an autonomous, independent force that servers as strict left-wing opposition to a

⁹ As a side note, it is furthermore interesting to see the consistency of Mélenchon’s positions. Given that he has been member of the PS for more than 30 years and decided to leave the party in 2008 to form the PG (Alemagna & Alliès, 2012), it wouldn’t be too astonishing to observe some public changes in his ideological beliefs at the end of his allegiance to the PS. But based on his writings, there is a remarkable degree of coherence for example between his reasoning in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, as Senator and Minister (Mélenchon, 2004) on the one hand, and the key tenets of his positions as the presidential candidate of the FdG on the other hand (Mélenchon, 2010; Front de Gauche, 2011).

¹⁰ The PS is constituted by different ‘courants’, internal factions, which aim at shifting the centre of gravity of the party towards their objectives and priorities, depending on the vote share their political motions gather at internal elections. It would be beyond the scope of this short paper to outline the history of these different groups, but it should be noted that the most left-wing motion at the major party congress of 2008 gained 18.5% of internal votes (Sahuc, 2012), which gives an idea of the weight carried by this segment of the party.

social-liberal PS and presents itself as a credible alternative for disenchanted voters and supporters, ready to assume governmental responsibilities.

- 4) The NPA and other groups of the extreme left prioritise direct forms of peaceful action, such as street protests, engagement at workplaces and in local communities as well as in associations.

Obviously these forms of engagement are not exclusive, so that for example street protests or close collaborations with more radical trade unions figure prominently in the repertoire of all groups, with the exception of the PS. In other words, these ideal-types of relations with the centre-left represent the main principles of political engagement while leaving room for adaptations if necessary. With regards to the local elections in March 2014, the disagreement between strategy 2) and 3) boils down to the question as to whether alliances with the PS should be made before or after the first round of the election.

Common feature of all four strategies is that their proponents consider them as most likely to secure electoral success and social progress in line with the programmatic priorities of the radical left. In the following part, these claims shall be reviewed critically, in light of the institutional and ideational circumstances of French politics and the socio-economic context in which left-wing parties operate.

2. The radical left: Obstacles and political strategies

For a concise discussion of the context of left-wing politics in France, I wish to present the following three arguments for discussion:

First, the polity of the Fifth Republic, notably with regards to the decision-making and the electoral process, requires attention. The presidential system implies a strong role for the presidential executive, with parties, both chambers of parliament and the government in a subordinated position. This applies especially to those instances when president and parliamentary majority are from the same party, a situation that gives the president the possibility to appoint the prime minister, to dissolve the National Assembly, to invoke referenda, to define the orientations of public policy and to reign unchallenged when it comes to the 'reserved domain' of foreign and defence policies. The disposition of article 49 (3) of the constitution

furthermore enables a government to pass laws without proper parliamentary debates by linking them to a motion of confidence (Rouvillois, 2001). This hierarchic system explains the importance of the presidential election, and indicates how political power is highly concentrated on the 'elected monarch'.

In addition, the electoral process in two rounds encourages tactical voting, known in French as 'vote utile'. The presidential election of 2002, with the elimination of the candidate of the PS in round one and the presence of the leader of the far-right, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in the second round, has highlighted dramatically the need for 'voting usefully' within the institutional framework of the Fifth Republic – an argument that is amply used by the PS to discourage alternative left-wing groups from standing against its candidates or to attract susceptible voters in round one, as illustrated by the campaign for the local elections of 2014 (see introduction). When it comes to parliamentary elections, the situation is more complex but equally stifling for candidates of the radical left: Here, it is possible for more than two candidates to enter the second round but only if they are supported in round one by at least 12.5% of registered voters – a condition that undermines chances of smaller parties to be represented especially if turnout is low, and that can lead to complex situations in the second round, with three or more candidates involved. This system therefore attributes a structural bonus to those parties that are seen by the voting public as the dominant force of their political camp, as it is only the dominant party that can convincingly argue for and benefit from 'useful voting'.

Due to this structural bias, electoral results of the past are likely to influence current voting behaviour. This form of path-dependence does not preclude changes within the left or the right, as the fall of the PCF in relation to the PS and the potential rise of the Front National (FN) at the detriment of the Union pour un Mouvement populaire (UMP) illustrate. However, changes tend to be gradual and incremental.

The mentioned fragmentation of the radical left implies, within this institutional context, a considerable weakness. To succeed electorally and to hence have the opportunity of implementing more far-reaching policy changes, cooperation between diverse groups is necessary to avoid a dissipation of forces that finally amounts to lack of power and influence (Accardo, 2007). The FdG can be seen, so far, as a successful way of achieving this union, but the tensions that erupted in recent

months indicate that the heterogeneity of interests and strategic choices¹¹ seriously undermines stability of and trust within the organisation. It can also be assumed that when the results of the local elections are known at the end of March 2014, these internal conflicts will play out in a blame game regarding the causes of electoral under-performance, with proponents of independence from the PS and proponents of cooperation with the PS both able to blame the other side for negative results. It seems as if the FdG, like the proverbial bicycle, works well as long as it progresses and improves its electoral performance, but finds it more difficult to reconcile the different traditions, priorities, strategic and programmatic orientation of its components when facing political obstacles.

Secondly, the left in a wider sense but especially the radical left suffer from a long-term disaffection of its traditional core voters, namely those of the working class. In the first three decades after the end of the Second World War, left-wing parties like the PCF or the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO), the predecessor organisation of the PS, not only represented an ambition for a radical reorganisation of society in the interest of working class voters but also managed to mobilise and engage those social groups, so that they participated fully in the political process. The erosion of traditional working class jobs as a consequence of shifts towards a service economy alone cannot account convincingly for the decrease in support for left-wing parties. As argued by Braconnier (2012), these voters need to be mobilised and organised, their political awareness raised and their identity as social groups with a particular political agenda have to be fostered. Since left-wing parties, especially the PS, have abandoned this constant work of construction of consciously politicised citizens and ceased to represent an option for profound change, turnout among working class voters and poorer groups has plummeted, leading to a form of 'electoral segregation' (Braconnier & Dormagen, 2007).

In this context, it seems the rise of the FN as repository for protest votes has replaced the radical left as rallying point for workers and socially disadvantaged groups. Even though the often repeated myth of the FN as the new party of the working class has

¹¹ As indicated, the decision by many local groups of the PCF to join lists of the PS right from the first round of the municipal elections, notably in Paris, is the main issue – a choice that can be explained by the fact that the PCF needs to defend its role in local politics to compensate for the loss of clout on the national level and to secure public funding.

been debunked thoroughly by Collovald (2004), popular support for the FN should not be ignored, especially since the FN benefits from an increasingly benign media coverage and has seen a number of its key assumptions 'validated' by social-democratic parties (and, less surprisingly, parties of the centre-right) in search for public support (Bale et al, 2010) – which can only contribute to the gradual acceptance of an increasingly xenophobic public discourse.

The campaigns run by the FdG since its creation have attempted to counter-act this long-term trend, but it is hardly surprising that an erosive process of popular disengagement that has continued for decades cannot be reversed in a short period of time. This problem is reinforced by the wide-spread discredit brought upon the radical left with the end and failure of the socialist project in the Soviet Union and its allied countries.

Thirdly, it is difficult to ignore the extent of hostility in considerable parts of the media, especially the printed press, towards the FdG, its candidates and the general project of a revived radical left.¹² It would require a more thorough study of media coverage to offer a detailed discussion, but having followed French politics for more than ten years, I couldn't help noticing with how much zest journalists are fulfilling their role as 'guard dogs' (Halimi, 2005) of the existing social and political order by discrediting both the FdG and its presidential candidate and blocking meaningful discussions of their programmatic proposals.

This bias in the media makes it challenging for the radical left to reach those social groups and geographical regions that are less inclined to entertain the possibility of voting for the FdG or other representatives of the left. France remains a divided country, a society with profound differences between more conservative and more progressive regions, between economically successful and deprived areas (Le Bras & Todd, 2013). This is of course true of all complex societies, but seems to be more pronounced politically in a state with such an agitated and colourful history, most notably due to the legacy of the French Revolution. To express it metaphorically, the success of any radical left-wing movement appears to depend on its ability to gather active support from 'rebellious France' while not generating too much resistance

¹² Particularly insightful with regards to this topic is the relationship between the media and Mélenchon (Sieffert & Soudais, 2012).

from 'conservative France' – which reproduces a conflict that has marked French history for the last two hundred years. Up to this point, it remains uncertain to what extent the radical left will be able to mobilise its own supporters and to convince those who hesitate, while at the same time weakening support for parties of the right and social-liberal left, especially in a climate marked by concerns for the presumed decline of France and a mentality of individual striving and self-help, which falls in line with the neoliberal doxa of the last decades.

Overall, it therefore seems as if the radical left had to face a number of considerable obstacles, namely the institutional framework of the Fifth Republic that interacts so problematically with the left's own fragmentation; the disaffection of core voters; and an overall hostile social environment. Given these circumstances, what are then the chances of the radical left to succeed, in other words to influence government policy or to even govern itself, and to sustainably shift the public discourse towards its own interpretation of the current 'crisis'? And which strategy is likely to work best for achieving these objectives?

I would argue that the answer to this question depends strongly on how Western societies and their elected representatives manage to respond to the multiple crises they face. Assuming that the global problems that erupted in 2007/2008 and whose effects are now felt across the European continent in form of austerity measures, underperforming national economies and growing disaffection of voters with parties of the centre-left and the centre-right¹³ have only been the cumulation of long-term structural problems that severely undermine the model of welfare capitalism as it was established after 1945 (see for example Généreux, 2010; Glyn, 2007; Harvey, 2011), it is highly questionable whether a return to the old 'normality' of sustained economic growth, fair distribution of wealth and political consensus is possible – particularly if one considers the environmental implications of this model of economic development and the extent to which the deregulated system of financialised global capitalism is incompatible with these principles.

¹³ Parties that govern a majority of European Union member states in coalitions with each other and hence further undermine the idea that a change in government can lead to a change in policy (Gatinois & Salles, 2014).

If this assessment is incorrect, the period of austerity with all the individual suffering it causes (Stuckler & Basu, 2013) will have been a temporary evil, a necessary step to regain balanced national budgets and the competitiveness needed to perform well on global markets. If this assessment is incorrect, the principles of the social-democratic compromise, the ideas of negotiation between employers and employees, chaperoned by a modernised welfare state, will regain prominence and will manage to deliver those outputs that citizens expect to reaffirm their approval of the existing political system and its main actors.

It is not surprising that the radical left, contrary to this view, operates under the assumption that the mentioned assessment corresponds to reality, that in other words the current crisis has more deep-reaching roots and that hence a managerial solution within the framework of post-war social democracy will not be possible (Mélénchon, 2009).

Depending on the interpretation of the likely course of development in the next years, the mentioned different strategies acquire their meaning and sense:

If the scenario of a 'punctuated status quo', a return to the post-war modes of national governance materialises, the strategy of cooperation with the PS or engagement within the PS (options 1 or 2) is logical, as it would enable the radical left to influence the distribution of these future fruits of economic growth. Punishment by voters for the association with an unpopular government is, in this case, nothing but a short-term problem that can be overcome once the crisis is overcome.

If however there is no return to the 'old order', if social and environmental problems gain in severity and salience, any collusion with the discredited forces of the centre-left would be a barrier to electoral and political success, and a contribution to further disaffection of those voters whose living standards deteriorate and who have less and less trust in traditional politics to deliver the change they wish for. Following this interpretation, cooperation with the PS undermines permanently the potential of the FdG or other forces of the radical left to replace the PS as main party of the left - which is, as shown, a key condition for building a majority. At the same time, this strategy (option 3) requires a readiness to participate in the parliamentary process, in order to be seen as a plausible alternative to the social-liberal left. This dividing line to groups of the extreme left (option 4) implies a difficult balancing act

between outright systematic opposition and engagement with the procedures of republican politics.

Conclusion: The radical left in Europe

In Europe, the radical left-wing coalition 'Syriza' in Greece seems to have come closest to demonstrating the electoral potential of a strategy of autonomy and independence (Kaimaki, 2013). After years of recession, imposed austerity measures and an explosion of social hardship, it seems the social-democratic PASOK has lost its credibility and public support, with polls putting Syriza in a position of potentially winning the next election. This case appears to confirm the strategy of independence and clear opposition from the left.

However, it has only limited value for predicting developments in France and other European countries with a presence of radical left-wing parties, like for example Germany, the Netherlands or Spain, given that the economic and social situation of Greece is particularly dire. The same applies to those countries in Latin America in which radical left-wing movements were elected after years of austerity, social decline and domination by international organisations and investors led to a devastating erosion of credibility and support for parties of the social-liberal left (Philip & Panizza, 2011).

Despite their decrease in popularity and their incapacity to address the economic, social and ecological challenges of our time, social-democratic governments in France and other wealthy European countries are still far from being discredited in the same fashion, which enables them to maintain their advantageous position within the political system, despite decreasing vote shares and party membership.

These examples furthermore demonstrate that any advance by the radical left requires a wide-ranging collapse of the 'old order' and that such a collapse involves a general radicalisation of politics of which benefit not only groups of the radical left but also those of the far right. It would therefore be a dangerous error to assume in deterministic manner that a further degradation of living standards will automatically and necessarily benefit the left. As long as the mentioned barriers to political success remain in place, in France and elsewhere, the cards are stacked

against the radical left, particularly if the disaffection of voters and the ideational influence of the dominant neoliberal doxa are not overcome.

Moreover, it would be fallacious to expect that increasing discredit of centre-left governments would lead voters who are more inclined to left-leaning positions necessarily towards supporting the radical left. It is not unlikely that those sympathetic citizens might come to the conclusion that any failures of the 'moderate' left would be even more severe if more radical policies had been pursued. The consequence of such a confusion and disappointment could well be further disaffection and demobilisation¹⁴, which would ultimately contribute to a more pronounced shift of the centre of public discourse and politics to the right. It is hence one of the defining challenges of the radical left to actively fill the space within the political continuum that has been vacated by the so-called 'modernisation' of centre-left parties, and to act as a 'centre of gravity' able to attract, engage and mobilise all those who uphold the values of the political left.

In this conflictual phase of the 'strange non-death of neoliberalism' (Crouch, 2011), it seems that only sustained engagement with citizens, the mobilisation of supporters for the democratic process and the ability to represent a clear, practical as well as radical programme for social, political, economic and ecological transformation can help to uphold the chances of the radical left to succeed politically. Whether such a victory will be forthcoming is likely to depend both on the future unravelling of the structural crisis of contemporary global capitalism and on the ability of the radical left to convincingly represent an alternative.

¹⁴ The depoliticisation of problems contributes to this risk. The more policy responses to social problems are presented and seen as being without alternative, as being a merely 'technical' solution, and the more the conflictual nature of society is obfuscated, the more likely it becomes that the role of democratic politics in organising these conflicts and developing alternative solutions is underestimated - which undermines political engagement. The radical left in Europe, to achieve its objectives, therefore needs to raise public awareness of this social conflictuality, following the example of the FdG.

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