How to move forward

How progressives can build effective political coalitions to reverse the populist victories since the financial crisis

That the expression 'may you live in interesting times' sounds like a blessing but is in fact a curse is clear today to anyone living in the United States today.

The US is having a particularly bad pandemic, with disproportionately high cases and deaths, due largely to an ineffective, uncoordinated and frankly uninterested response from the Trump administration. That response has deepened our economy's problems and our society's divisions, disproportionately affecting the working and middle classes as well as minorities. The democracy we have long taken for granted is under threat, and in about a week we face the prospect of a disputed, violent election akin to those in some 'third world' countries.

If there were ever a time when a strong left — committed to defending liberal democracy, fostering social solidarity and promoting dynamic and just economies — was needed, it is now.

Yet it isn't necessary to remind Social Europe readers how elusive has been a left with distinctive and viable plans to deal generally with the west's problems — and capable of earning the electoral support to implement its solutions — over the past generation.

Immense dissatisfaction

This lack was perhaps most painfully highlighted by the financial crisis of 2008, which created immense dissatisfaction with neoliberalism and austerity and a general recognition that capitalism had gone 'out of whack'. But it saw no surge in support for the left and concomitantly no major change in the economic status quo.

Indeed, the discontent and grievances generated by the financial crisis and its aftermath ended up benefiting right-wing populists in Europe and Donald Trump in the US, which of course only deepened our societies'

problems and made them harder to solve. If the aftermath of the 'interesting' period of dislocation and turbulence we are experiencing is to be different from that following the financial crisis, the left will need to learn from past mistakes.

Significant structural reforms are needed to deal with capitalism's extensive problems and the risks and disadvantages workers and the middle class face today.

The American debate has been particularly lively on this front, spurred on by the existential need for the Democratic party to defeat Trump and the version of the Republican party backing him. This means winning the coming presidential election, of course, but also expanding the party's power at the state and local levels as well, so as to be able to begin reconstructing America's society and economy from the bottom up.

Gaining political power is evidently even more necessary, now that we face the prospect of a conservative-dominated Supreme Court for many years to come. To do this the Democrats, as with other centre-left parties, need attractive and feasible plans for dealing with our economy's and society's problems, as well as the ability to build broad and diverse electoral coalitions.

One extremely helpful recent intervention in the debate on how the American left should move forward is John Judis' The Socialist Awakening. What's Different Now About the Left. Judis analyses the left resurgence accompanying Bernie Sanders' surprisingly successful campaigns for nomination as the Democratic presidential candidate in 2016 and 2020. He sees signs of hope in developments on the left in recent years — but also reasons for concern.

Two temptations

Economically, Judis argues the left needs to thread its way between two temptations which have bedevilled it in the past. The first, present in left-wing intellectual circles in the US today as well as in many European left parties — perhaps most notably Britain's Labour Party when Jeremy Corbyn was leader — is a tendency to engage in unmediated critiques of capitalism and 'eschatological fantasies' about revolutionary transformations of it.

Another active participant in American debates, Ruy Teixeira, refers to this as the sin of 'retro-socialism'. He notes: 'By grasping nostalgically at revolutionary rhetoric, the Left sets the bar high for public embrace of what might otherwise be quite popular policy ideas, from single-payer

health insurance to free college to a job guarantee.'

Teixeira, Judis and many other analysts have shown time and again that there is little support for revolutionary transformation outside a relatively small circle of intellectuals and activists. In The Socialist Awakening, for example, Judis recounts conversations with people who claim to support 'socialism' but mostly really favour something close to European social democracy: public provision for fundamental needs such as healthcare and education, allied to increasing government regulation of business, banks, the environment and so on.

But if it is important to avoid scaring voters with demands that they do not favour and which cannot be achieved, it is also necessary to go beyond 'merely' ameliorative reforms. There can be no return either to the technocratic management of capitalism characterising the 'third-way' approach of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as embodied in the US presidency of Bill Clinton or the British premiership of Tony Blair.

The pitfalls of the left

Significant structural reforms are needed to deal with capitalism's extensive problems and the risks and disadvantages workers and the middle class face today. But these types of reforms, Judis stresses, must be practicable as well as 'conceivable in the space of a generation'.

Rather than demonising particular groups for their purported privileges, 'erroneous' thinking and so on, the goal should be to remind voters that helping historically disadvantaged minorities is an integral part of the larger progressive goal of creating a more just and equal society that will benefit all citizens.

Corbyn's Labour provides a cautionary illustration here. Election surveys made clear that majorities disliked Conservative austerity policies and favoured protecting and even expanding social welfare. But voters doubted Corbyn's ability to manage the economy (or even his party) and rejected the radical attacks he and some of his advisers made on private enterprise overall — as opposed to criticisms of market excesses, corrupt billionaires and inequality, with which voters largely agreed. (It didn't help, of course, that voters came to dislike Corbyn as well.)

But alongside wariness about Labour's ability or willingness to deliver the type of economic change voters actually wanted, many British citizens were also turned off by Corbyn's rejection of concerns about national

identity. The Socialist Awakening does an embarrassingly good job of analysing some particularly egregious 'own goals' by parts of the Labour party in this regard, noting that 'the self-styled progressive left relentlessly attacked the full spectrum of traditional institutions, beliefs, values and identities', turning off many voters who would have supported a 'progressive economic project based on public control of finance and investment' and so on.

Identity politics

If developing comprehensive and convincing plans for reforming contemporary capitalism is one prerequisite for a successful centre-left today, the other, obviously, is winning power, and here is where this latter tendency — what Teixiera, for example, calls the 'sin of identity politics' — comes in.

Because the term 'identity politics' almost immediately triggers rage and resentment on both the left and right in the US, it is important to be clear about what is meant here. As with critiques of radical, unattainable economic policies, critiques of 'identity politics' from sympathetic analysts on the left are not a call to ignore the disadvantages faced by minorities. They are rather a call to address those disadvantages in ways that can build bridges among people and garner the majority support to win elections and gain the political power necessary to begin addressing these and other problems.

This means designing policies and appeals that are positive rather than zero-sum. Rather than demonising particular groups for their purported privileges, 'erroneous' thinking and so on, the goal should be to remind voters that helping historically disadvantaged minorities is an integral part of the larger progressive goal of creating a more just and equal society that will benefit all citizens.

As Teixiera puts it, as long as the 'left appears more interested in finding new enemies than in seeking new friends, it will fail to advance its many important priorities'. This is true not only because it is politically limiting but also because recreating a sense of social solidarity, of shared commitment among citizens, is the prerequisite for repairing the damage done by Trump — and the decades of unaddressed economic and social problems which provided the foundation for his rise in the first place.



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