

THE LEFT DILEMMA FOR THE GREENS

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If we consider the world today, the most dynamic representation of social life is neither optimistic functionalism, pessimistic structural Marxism, nor pragmatic strategic conception of social action but the call for identity and community.(Touraine 1985, 769)

This article does not seek to prove that the Left continues to exist or to describe its current manifestations. Anyone involved in the anti-war movement in 2003 could not deny its existence. Left groups were as vocal in the peace movement as they have ever been. However, they are still quite marginalised, whether inside or outside the ALP, although many have joined the Greens in order to make their leftism more effective.

Within the various anti-war coalitions, revolutionary left organisations like the International Socialist Organisation, along with the Democratic Socialist Party, argued their traditionally strong positions on anti-imperialism and the need for supporting the militant opposition to Western imperialism regardless of where it was located. Had US President Bush not deceptively declared the war in Iraq over, it is likely the peace movement would have been thrown into tensions and turmoil by the difference between the revolutionary and progressive wings of the movement, a split that included those emphasising class struggle on one hand and those arguing for non-violence on the other.

Even in three short months we saw the failure to adopt an explicit commitment to non-violence at the Books not Bombs student protests in Sydney and the failure to condemn violence on all sides, not just the USA and its coalition supporters. The resulting support for Palestinian groups as enemies of the US, without an explicit exclusion of Hamas and Hezbollah, on public platforms would have produced movement division and contraction, had the anti-war mobilisations continued.

By way of contrast with the core Left, the social democratic Left appears to have fractured during the anti-war mobilisations between those who chose to remain in the ALP and continued to back antiwar dissidents within the party and those who finally resigned in disgust. According to the published polls many of the latter have switched their allegiance to the Greens.

Since the Greens share the Left's opposition to war and racism and to social injustice this should be a happy marriage. Yet historic and theoretical differences between the Greens and the Left are significant. This paper outlines some of the tensions which the influence of the traditional Left inside the Greens could provoke. It does this by briefly outlining the Greens' social movement origins in order to elucidate its characteristic differences with the Left's approach to social change and its end goals.

Like its German counterpart, the Australian Greens grew out of the Australian peace and conservation mobilisations of the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1980s social scientists

such as Jean Cohen characterised contemporary mass social movements as "new" because they eschewed many of the problems and failings of the New Left (1985, 665), which along with the western student movement had mobilised dissent in the 1950s culminating in the widespread protests of 1968. As the New Left declined into sectarianism and experimented with terrorism, social dissent was increasingly expressed instead through participation in peace and environment protest events.

The new social movements attracted this support because they learnt from the mistakes of the Left. Rather than class interests they focused on universal problems with a moral concern that cut across class lines. The great leftist historian, E.P Thompson, showed the way out of the Left's tunnel vision which forces all political phenomena through the prism of class analysis. In his classic 1982 essay, 'Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization,' Thompson argues that, to understand the New Cold War (between the USA and the USSR) it was necessary to go beyond the Left's preoccupations with defending the USSR and look instead at what both East and West societies were creating. In this case, what they were creating was enough nuclear weapons pointed at each other with the capacity to blow up everyone in the world many times over. As he says:

There is an internal dynamic and reciprocal logic here which requires a new category for its analysis. If 'the hand mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam mill with the industrial capitalist', what are we given by those Satanic mills which are now at work, grinding out the means of human extermination? I have reached this point of thought more than once before, but have turned my head away in despair. Now, when I look at it directly, I know that the category which we need is that of 'exterminism' (Thompson 1982, 4-5).

Now, if we replace the phenomenon of nuclear confrontation and the threat of global nuclear war with that of ecological destruction, we arrive at much the same analytical conclusions. We need to focus more on the end product of current human activity - global ecological crises - and show how the technologies being employed, supposedly to meet human needs, are destroying many of the natural systems upon which the technologies act and which are the bases of all economic systems. Ideological approaches endlessly debating causes can become a barrier to understanding the real world and it shuts off a wider analysis and more creative approach to the ecological crisis just as it hindered a critical approach to the new cold war of the 1980s.

This focus on practical and immediate problems by the anti-nuclear and environment movements of the 1970s not only led to more creative approaches to protest actions and to human solutions, it also had the advantage of avoiding the ideological infighting and sectarianism of the New Left. Furthermore, while the analyses of ecological and nuclear annihilation which developed from these protests were radical, state repression was avoided by focusing on solutions which challenged and extended the role of the state rather than directly opposing it, and by a commitment to the methods of non-violence. Each of these aspects which have been characterised by historians and social scientists as an instrumentalist orientation and self-limiting radicalism differentiated the eco-pax movements from the Left (Hutton and Connors 1999, 4-12).

Yet there was much about the new social movements which also made them attractive to the core of leftist groups who maintained the ideological struggle. Firstly, they were always more than just pragmatic and strategic responses to crisis. There was also an expressive nature to the 1980s protests which invented new counter-cultural symbols of opposition. The utopianism and romantic idealism of the new social movements was familiar territory for the Left.

They were also successful. Ever keen to 're-educate' progressive movements to a 'true' analysis of social relations, core Left groups have always sought to be part of mass movements which, it seemed to them, with only a slight change of emphasis could be developed into truly revolutionary expressions of working class interests.

The first national expression of party politics to derive from the eco-pax movements in Australia was the Nuclear Disarmament Party (Hutton and Connors 1999, 224-7). There the Left's open participation led to the walkout of the party's leading members and the eventual demise of the party (Fisher 1995). Consequently when talks were under way to form the Australian Greens in 1991, one of the groups present at the formation meetings, especially at a conference in Sydney toward the end of 1991, was the Democratic Socialist Party, a Marxist-Leninist party that controlled several local, federally registered Greens parties. After another twelve months during which the role of these groups was debated, the Australian Greens was formed, this time with proscription of members of all other political parties.

Of course while formal Left membership is proscribed under the Greens constitution, many Greens have informal Left linkages, either through past association or personal identification. It remains to be seen whether the instrumentalist legacy of the environment movement, the strong social movement desire to be effective rather than doctrinaire, will remain ascendant over the programmatic tendencies of the Left who have been attracted by Bob Brown's strong moral leadership in opposing the invasion of Iraq.

A good example of this tension came to the fore when in 2002 Bob Brown raised the issue of the sale of Telstra. The eco-pax movements, having experienced the excesses of both bureaucratic state mismanagement of resources and of market exploitation, lack any deep commitment to retaining state ownership. For both the Marxist and the social democratic left, however, state ownership is an essential component of socialist goals and Brown would have come under strong criticism from the Left within the Greens if he had not pulled back from his proposal.

Green politics is unquestionably on the Left of the political spectrum yet there are significant differences between those who take a social justice or ethical approach and those who posit social class as the defining category for social policy generally. Consequently another area of debate within the party has been over public funding of education. Those with a Left background tend to a view of public education as a leveling and equalising means of social control to be defended at any cost. Yet the sympathy for diversity that is part of the environment and multicultural movements' legacies leads other Greens to demand simply a better distribution of funding to poor private schools as well as public schools on social justice grounds.

Those in the Greens for whom ecological crisis is the prime motivating factor in their political life still, almost invariably, accompany their environmental concerns with a strategic analysis that sees the need for re-distributive justice, a state structure that can bring strong regulatory pressures to bear on the market and other elements characteristic of the progressive Left. This is backed by the Greens Charter and the commonly mentioned 'four pillars' - ecological sustainability, social justice, participatory democracy and non-violence. However, the 'green' Greens (as distinct from the left Greens) usually see the last three of these pillars as moral imperatives and as necessary accompaniments to the achievement of a sustainable world order rather than deriving from the class-based nature of the struggle against capitalism.

Thus the radical pragmatism of the green Greens fits neatly into the European discourse of ecological modernisation. According to Hein-Anton van der Heijden ecological modernization,

recognises the structural character of environmental problems but nonetheless assumes that existing political, economic and social institutions can internalise care for the environment (van der Heijden, citing Hajer 1999, 211)

The project of ecological modernisation should not be seen merely as middle-of-the-road environmentalists and other social movement actors jumping into bed with industry, although this does happen. Instead it should be seen as the fundamental challenge being thrown at capitalism by the movement in all its various forms and the degree to which capitalism responds to this challenge. In van der Heijden's assessment this attempt to ecologise the economy has had uneven success across Europe, very little in the United States and is manifest in the concern for sustainable development in the Third World. It remains to be seen how open the Australian political process will be to the greening of production.

It seems clear, though, that ecological modernisation will go nowhere without the political pressure of the Greens and that it will no doubt involve political trade-offs. For the green Greens ecological sustainability will be the ultimate goal worth a high price. For those with a traditional focus on class politics and statism it may well appear as a futile attempt to make Australian capitalism work better. Thus the Greens will share the same internal tensions as contemporary movement actors - to what extent should the party engage with business and industry and to what extent should it reject them?

With the Australian Democrats already jumping too readily to an accommodating position, the Greens may be squeezed into a more radical space. Yet the danger will be the adoption of a dogmatic purist 'no deals' position. As Dean Jaensch and David Scott Mathieson have shown, an ideological political party may have a long life in the Australian political system, but its programmatic purity tends to confine it to the margins of the political system. The Communist Party of Australia was the second oldest party before it folded, yet it struggled on for most of its 60 years attracting no more than 1% to 2% of the vote (Jaensch and Mathieson 1998)

The moral commitment to social justice and the ideological commitment to redistribution should be able to co-exist in the one political party but it will not always be easy. Conflicts will emerge from time to time and, undoubtedly, they will usually

be around the trade-offs that are available within the parliamentary system between environmental and social goals or those policy items where there are different levels of commitment among Greens parliamentarians to state ownership or control.

As the Touraine quote suggests in the opening to this article, a too optimistic or strategic approach to the economic system may be as stultifying as pessimistic Marxism. The ongoing success of the Greens in Australia will need to draw on creative oppositional ideas from the social movements.

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