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Conversation  
with Richard  
Seymour

## Perspectives of the left in Europe

### Bionote

*Richard Seymour is the author of Unhitched: the Trial of Christopher Hitchens (2012), American Insurgents: A Brief History of American Anti-Imperialism (2012), The Meaning of David Cameron (2010) and The Liberal Defence of Murder (2008). He writes regularly for the Guardian and runs the popular blog Lenin's Tomb.*

### Abstract

There is a general framework that we have to get in mind, and that is the crisis of the Left. And, 2008, the Recession, the credit crunch and everything that followed from that has not been just a crisis of capitalism as we are used to hearing, but most importantly, for our purposes, it's also crisis of the Left. And, if you are a materialist, if you are a Marxist in any way, I think that it logically follows, that you expect that the institutions of the Left being embedded in this social formation that are affected by crisis, would themselves be thrown into crisis.

### Perspectives of the left in Europe

*Transcript of a public talk given by Richard Seymour in conversation with Artan Sadiku on 16<sup>th</sup> January*

*2014 in Skopje, Macedonia. The talk was part of a series of seminars of the School for politics and critique organized by the Institute of social sciences and humanities – Skopje with the support of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation South-eastern Europe.*

**Artan:** *Good evening everybody, let me welcome you all to the School for politics and critique, which is organized by the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities-Skopje with the support of Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and which aims to boost the capacities and knowledge of the left wing activists of Macedonia. The School will be organized, as you know, in one to two seminars per month. It is my pleasure tonight to welcome our guest from the UK, Richard Seymour, author, academic, activist, a columnist for the Guardian a member of Left Unity in the UK. Tonight's talk's title is "The Perspectives of the Left in Europe." We believe that we should open the School with this topic in order for us to get a perspective of what are the political dynamics of the Left in Europe and to have a wider perspective while trying to find our political alternatives, our means and strategies for acting. Welcome, Richard, thank you for coming along.*

*Can we start with a brief description of what can be considered today as The Left, the political Left in*

*Europe, while remaining aware of the diversities that exist within the different formations across Europe? Can we give a sort of a general frame of the politics which we might consider a leftist politics in Europe?*

**Richard:** I think before answering that question, there is a general framework that we have to get in mind, and that is the crisis of the Left. And, 2008, the Recession, the credit crunch and everything that followed from that has not been just a crisis of capitalism as we are used to hearing, but most importantly, for our purposes, it's also crisis of the Left. And, if you are a materialist, if you are a Marxist in any way, I think that it logically follows, that you expect that the institutions of the Left being embedded in this social formation that are affected by crisis, would themselves be thrown into crisis.

So, it's three ways in which this manifests itself, which partly answers your question by just talking about it:

First, it sharpens and throws into relief the dimensions of a structural crisis which is already one of the Left. So it's not just a conjunctural crisis, it's a structural crisis in three ways. First of all, the traditional social-democratic left has been losing its base; it's been losing its connection with its voting base, which has been fragmenting across various different directions for about 30 years now. It is been losing its ideological distinctiveness, as is been colonized by neoliberal ideologies and practices, and it has been losing its historic sort of a repertoire of tactics and strategies. In other words, the social democracy has been the major form in which leftist politics has been expressed in constant, and it currently has no ability to answer, to analyse or explain the current crisis of capitalism, or to pose any solutions other than mile diversions of the austerity remedies that the parties of the Right have been pushing. So, that's social-democracy.

Then there's the old communist party. Aging, very sub cultural, they are not the kinds of routines and rituals they are interested in, are the kinds of things that don't interest, particularly newer generations of leftists. They are very conservative tactically; generally speaking politically far more moderate than their rhetoric and their formal ideological commitment would allow. Two examples where communists actually go into government – Cyprus and Moldova. I mean, did you see any serious challenge to market based neoliberalism? I don't think so.

So, you see those parties also experiencing a long turn decline, not just decline in their formal substantive politics, but a decline to their ability to relate to a wider audience in most cases. The various remedies adopted to fix that, Euro-communism being one of them, did nothing really except accelerate and accentuate the crisis.

Then there is the Far Left, the various parties of revolutionary Left which more or less most of them thrived since this 1960-es. At least, I think, in Western Europe, and in the context of revolutions in Southern Europe, but also just general tumult in North-Western Europe too. And, these organizations have singularly failed to respond effectively to the crisis of capitalism. They failed, I think, largely because they did not, in a general way, their analysis of capitalism and neoliberalism was not up to date, that, in order to preserve their ideological purity and rectitude all too often they refused to face up to certain changes taking place in the composition of the working class in the way in which capitalism was organized. So, you had a defence of treasure orthodoxies, rather than an attempt to face up to realities. They started with the good old things rather than bad new things.

There's three sectors of the Left, all of them in a crisis. I mentioned the crisis in far Left, I just want to specify

something. The crisis of the Far-Left is very particular to the Anglophone Far-Left. I don't know much beyond that, but there is a very particular element of it in the Anglophone Far-Left and it's linked up, as some of you have already know, with failures on other forms of politics such as gender politics. Again, the refusals to incorporate and understand the contribution of feminist movements was a largely defensive and reactive posture and attempt to sort of conserve the purity of the Marxist commitment. That has come back in a seriously destructive way. This fragmentation, by the way, is happening in several organizations, not just the Socialist Workers Party from which I come.

**Artan:** *During the crisis of the Left which coincides with the economic crisis throughout Europe, a movement has emerged. It has been spreading as a strategy, as a tactic, as an occurrence throughout Europe and it is consisted of social movements. You have written that these social movements have not succeeded to inflict even a single damage on austerity. You have pointed out to the limitations of these social movements which only focus on kicking off, resisting and advocating for broader alliances with no clear idea of the final outcome. Could you explain the social context in which these movements have emerged, and in particular, their resistance to any form of association with political parties the structures of the left, i.e., the far left?*

**Richard:** This is why I often get called pessimistic: the thing about historic social movements that have been successful, the anti-Vietnam War Movement, the Civil Rights Movement. My examples will be largely American based because that's where my area of study is. But if you look at them, what you find is that there is something that the present day social movements actually lack, and that is an infrastructure – they don't have any infrastructure!

Of course, there are forms of organization, there are ways in which people stay in touch and pull together a large number of people, raise money and produce publicity and so on. But, there is a real breakdown of the institutions that have traditionally been able to sustain political movements, a breakdown of political parties, a breakdown of community based organization in the wake of neoliberalism. Even the traditional role of the churches to mobilize people has run down to some extent. So, what you've get is pathological symptoms. There are two ways in which this is been done: one, there is the NGO-aization of Left-Wing politics. That is, you get small groups of people who are media-savvy and who are tightly nit and reasonably well organized and well branded. And they can project inordinate influence, you literally get NGO-s calling protests like the "Big If" – an anti-poverty thing in London, and they simulate a social movement, there is no social movement, but they simulate the appearance of one! They have celebrities, tele-broadcast and advertisements, and they create a big excitement and there is a big glorious day of reckoning in which everybody meet in a big park, and there is a rock concert, and they have a big orgasmic explosion—"it's happening!"—and then they go home, are apparently satisfied and nothing has changed! This is one of the pathological symptoms. And you get this whit certain kinds of left-wing groups as well.

The other is this, sort of, anti-political. I don't want to be sectarian about this. On the other hand, I am going to be! I think that there is an element of it being a pathology of defeat and fragmentation. That is to say give the historic collapse, or any attempt to form a kind of genuinely democratic form of organization which can fuse significant sections of population, concentrate their interests in a political form, help lead a struggle and so on, given the every single attempt has either failed or has

resulted in some sort of bizarre bureaucratic distortion then logically there is an element of giving up, we don't need that level of organization, we can rely on people's individual initiative and somehow out of the interaction and collective interaction hopefully through internet—you know, this is not a fetish that's come about now—mediated by the Internet, we will spontaneously generate the types of organization that we need.

I feel this overlaps with a kind of neoliberal ideology. A central claim that a neoliberalism makes is that the last thing we need is a social organisation, this necessarily leads to tyranny, it leads to inefficiency, leads to distortion therefore what we need is to allow the spontaneous order of the market to do its job, and if you can create market-like structures in every area of life, from the government to the internet and wherever. People interact on that basis and somehow information is spontaneously accumulated and sent out again in signals a bit like price signals, so on Twitter you have a trending topics, a hash tag. These are almost like price signals; they tell you what's hot and what's not. Well, there is a certain overlap there, there's a way in which people can end up rationalizing the very irrelevance, the very powerlessness that has been inflicted on them. They can end up treating as if it is a virtue, as something to be embraced, rather than a problem.

**Artan.** *Basically you consider that in some sense the Left has retreated from the public space during these social movements across Europe. Do you think there was a genuine withdrawal of the Left from the space in order not to be conceived as sectarian, or as hawks that come in and try to kidnap the movements? How do you think, how do you evaluate the fact that this kind of springs of movements across Europe had their points of increased resistance, disobedience, and then they kind of*

*slowly retrieved or ended up without a significant effect, or as you say – without inflicting even a single damage to austerity? Can we expect that after an eclipse of the social movements and protests across Europe, a new space for the Left will emerge? Can we expect different structures of the Left to take on and build alliances with whatever structures that will remain from these social movements by either incorporating them or building large socially based alliances? I am aware that there are different contexts across Europe. Might this be a moment in which the Left might attempt to use in order to build such coalitions and such blocs?*

**Richard:** I should correct myself. There is one instance where austerity has been defeated, an austerity government implementing a savage austerity measure, and that's in Québec in Canada! You could argue that belongs to a different cycle, that it belongs to the cycle of student protests from the 2000's. Possibly, however, it was an explicitly austerity lead measure, so the question is – how did they win? Because they did win, it was a provisional success. It's susceptible to roll back, there's all sort of problems, but, you could look in what they did. These student movements did have an infrastructure. They had a long history of building a direct democracy, and they had real organisational campuses. So, it wasn't like in United Kingdom. In UK, the national union of students is effectively turning itself into a lobby, it presses a little for students, it's not really democratic institution, it's very difficult to be involved, and its mostly direct political role is to catapult certain ambitious and attractive young students into the role of a Labour Party candidate for the election.

In Québec it was different! They had forms of direct democracy, they set up to build social alliances, and they went out looking for alliances with organized workers.

They could not get the trade union's bureaucracy to actually call strikes and stuff like that, but they could call on solidarity actions from the workers, and they won over working class people in their communities. You had a famous Pots and Pans Protest – a working class people coming out on the streets at night and bashing their pots and pans. This basically signalled that the people are powerfully opposed to it. The Government sent out the police after them. Here is a question: at that point do you try to appease the forces of law and order? Do you try to appease the media? We have a problem – when the government says a protest is illegal, it's not just a treat of violence; it is a normative and ideological pressure not to protest. So, the student movement in Québec said: "no, fuck off!" Not only did they refuse the police to tell where they were going marching, they send the police an image of their route which was rightly (an image of a middle finger). I am not encouraging this behaviour, good Lord! But I am saying that their disregard for how they'll be received from the media, how they'll be received within the consensus of law and order meant that they were able to go and continue to wage a militant struggle which in the end led to the government losing in a serious way. It didn't just lose because of the left nationalist grouping, they were pretty pathetic. Actually the government base split because it was totally incapacitated by the student movement, so its base split between two different parties, one ultra-neoliberal and so on.

So, what I am saying is for us, we didn't have anything like in England; but, generally speaking, the infrastructure of the social movement is much more depleted. The social movement will always dissipate, that's going to happen, the question is what residue, what traces do they leave in the form of institutions that would be capable of sustaining ideas and strategies and certain discussions through difficult times and can help propel new

movements towards success? And generally speaking, they don't help and this is a problem. Therefore, I propose three strategic orientations, they all take time:

Rebuilding of the basic grass-roots from below infrastructure that makes it possible to have a successful social movement. By that, I don't think having a think-tank or something like that, I mean building in communities on issues that count to ordinary people. In the United Kingdom, in working class areas you can build up campaigns against the so called "bedroom tax"... These are a local, very issue specific campaign, but they bring people together in a way that neoliberalism prefers to keep them apart. If you could find spaces like that, you can actually get people to act collectively and in a democratic way together. That can call together a much larger and wider layer of people than those who are explicitly politicized and who know that they are politicized.

I think we need a reconstruction of that symbolic space within which a left alternative is feasible and means something. It's not just 1989. I really think that the classical model of socialism has utterly collapsed, and I don't mean to say that we can just forget about it, we cannot. It's our legacy I think if we are on the Left, and we have to assimilate to it and figure out what went wrong. But there is a traditional three legged vision, there is the ideological normative goal of socialism and there is a general view of what socialism is, whether a state controlled or workers control or something else. There is a long term strategy, whether it is formed through the state or sort of revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, and there is the agency that is capable of implementing it, usually the working class. All three of those layers have been attacked and weakened and I don't think it's just something that's happened since 1989 or even the 1979-

ies. I think it's something to do with the post-war period and the collapse of what used to be called the vanguard. I think rebuilding that space means building in a space where social democracy used to be.

**Artan:** *You talk about the failure of social movements to build sustainable social institutions. On the other hand, we have the traditional social democracy, the reformist left, which is dramatically falling apart all around Europe. Do you consider that the new Left has the capacity to address the social base of the reformist social democracy? Do you think the crisis has made it possible to address this kind of social base with the arguments of the the Radical Left??*

**Richard:** I would say, it depends on what you mean by being pulled to the Right. I think that it depends also on the conjuncture of the social formation, all sorts of things. But, for example in United Kingdom, Left Unity is well to the right of where I am, but I am the member of it nonetheless. The reason, I think, is because if you want to relate to people who are essentially ordinary people who have always voted Labour, they got certain ideas, they believe in public services, they believe in nationalizing key industries, banks and so on. These aren't hugely radical things but they well to the left to the mainstream consensus and they are alienated by the neoliberal direction of the dominant Social Democratic Party. You need to somehow effectively mediate between where you'd like to be and where things actually are. And you need to somehow find a structure that can mediate between your maximalist revolutionary goals and where the people you want to talk to are at the moment. So I think the radical Left formations that have been emerging, the fact that they did start to emerge in the late 1990-s and 2000's is not accidental, it has to do with the defeats that have been inflicted on the Left and the

labour movement in the 1980's and in the wake of the collapse of the USSR and the ideological horizon that that represented. So, that has opened up a space in which it's possible to build radical left organizations. But we can learn a lot of the successes and failures thus far. One model we definitely don't want to imitate is that of the Rifondazione Comunista, and the reason why it's such a disaster is not just that they were to the right wing, that they were of the quite radical, in principle. It's because they joined a government that was neoliberal, they joined the government and they implemented neoliberal policies. They destroyed their whole historic purpose.

**Artan:** *Then there is the model of SYRIZA which basically has inspired some enthusiasm, not only in Macedonia, but throughout the Balkans. But the way in which SYRIZA have managed itself through the political process has brought about a sense of dissatisfaction and demoralization with the easing of their rhetoric. As they went inside the political process, as they went in the elections, and now the latest polls show they are the first party by support in Greece and basically they are a government in waiting, it seems that they have slowly shifted to the right in order to accommodate the different challenges that the political process offers to them. Would you see this model as a viable model for similar parties in contrast to Rifondazione Comunista in Italy?*

**Richard:** Well, we don't know what the viable model is yet. We are only at the beginning of the pedagogical process. What I would say about SYRIZA is two things, first of all, I've spoken to a number of SYRIZA members and their perspective, when I spoke to them, was that the majority of the membership of SYRIZA prior to the elections had not really had to face up to the idea of – what would you do if the sticking to the austerity, or leaving the

European Union? So they were able to go with this slogan of “not one sacrifice to the Euro,” although in practice it was quietly dropped for the elections. But this was the idea, you know, this was the idea that, they were able to slightly sell the whole question of discussing the euro and the Eurozone. Since the elections and the campaign of economic blackmail that was bewitched by the EU rulers in order to prevent SYRIZA being elected, the pressure have been on to SYRIZA to move to the Right in order to not be seen as damaging to the country’s economy and so on and so forth. And the majority of members faced with this issue decided actually, “you know we’ll stick with the Eurozone for all the sacrifices are necessary, we’ll water down the anti-austerity commitment rather than break the commitment with the Eurozone.” And I think that it’s a fundamental weakness, and I think it’s a problem. But it’s not something that can be overcome with exhortations or propaganda. It’s something you have to win by fighting within the organization, or working alongside the members of SYRIZA.

So, is it a successful model? Well, you know, we’ll have to see. But, I suspect that the successful model is yet to emerge. The other thing is that there is the materiality of the state to bear in mind. There is a Right-Wing Poulantzian interpretation of the state which is essentially in my opinion a bastardized version which will basically lead to conclusion that if you get allies within the State, if you work on certain issues within the State apparatus you can gradually convert it to a socialist kind of state, “eventually,” you know – “we’ll get there, somewhat down the road.” I mean this is an argument for a gradualist, performist and reconciliationist project which basically means you will end up with opportunistic measures, like SYRIZA aligning with the Independent Greeks. The sort of Left Poulantzianism, which I think is more correct, at least more correct than the Right one, is that it requires

the creation of crisis within the state apparatuses, and crises within the power block and therefore you have to, and that has to be induced by serious antagonism. And the problem is that SYRIZA is pursuing, you know, I have no idea whether it would be effective for them to try to create some sort of crisis within the State, but I know for sure that there is not going to be any positive result for them, tempering their analysis and watering down their commitments. And the problem is that once they get elected, which is quite possible they will that the most, the people who will be reformed will not be the state apparatus, it would be SYRIZA!

*Artan: So, basically one of the valuable ways for our radical politics is not to choose between these binaries of acting within or outside the state. In case a socialist, revolutionary party takes the power through elections, without a preceding genuine institutional crisis, there will be a lot of sectors within the state working against it. Such a radical party must also maintain a strong degree of level of political activity, struggle and engagement outside of the State. A challenging issue is the sudden raise and increase in popularity of SYRIZA, increase which does not correspond with its social base. Do you think this is a kind of a false image which might crumble if they don’t succeed to build up alliances with social structures which act independently? If the support for SYRIZA crumbles dramatically there will be strong implications to the common European political reference of the (new) radical left politics.*

**Richard:** I think it’s a feature of conjuncture, I mean, given the general depleted state of the Left, given the absence of infrastructure I was talking about. It does become quite easy for, well not easy, but, possible for comparatively small groups, and certainly there are small groups in SYRIZA, if they intervene at the correct

moment with a correct slogan to suddenly acquire huge influence in that situation. I'll give you an example, not as contentious as SYRIZA, in the United Kingdom when the student movement kicked off in 2010. And when I say "kicked of" I mean there actually was a student movement as opposed to there've been nothing. The nature of sort of organized grouping that was doing anything and setting the dates of protest and where they would be, was a small group of people of couple of Far-Left organizations which are actually miniscule. They are marginal, they've got no social win at all, but they launched a couple of front campaigns and they set up the Facebook page, and these kids were coming from poor outer suburbs of London, who just responded to what was posted on the Facebook. And that was the influence they had. The result of this was the leader of one of these fronts, a guy named Michael Chessum, came to believe that if he called a protest, he could have summoned 50 000 people to the streets of London. But essentially this is the sort of situation that conjunction that we are in. There is always going to be an inherently fragile situation until we reconstitute some of that structure.

And SYRIZA is definitely in a paralysed situation. That does offer opportunities. One of the things that you can say is that if SYRIZA were to win, there would be pressure on them to sort of try quieting their base, to try to sort of keep struggles under control and so on. But if they did have a base in a trade union movement, if they did have a serious relationship with several trade unions, I mean serious, in the way that the KKE has historically done, or the PASOC, you know, I mean, if they were able to do that, they would have been much more successful in their struggles. So the weakness of their relationship to social movements and to trade unions and so on, might actually be strategic opportunity, to bear in mind.

***Artan:** You mentioned some issues that I would like to focus a little bit more before we go to the next step. You mentioned the trade unions and we've seen a decline in trade union activity and trade union revolutionary politics throughout Europe. Here we talked about the trade unions, we even had a protest in front of their headquarters because they don't use protest and because they have been occupied by the union's elites which are in tight relation with current government structure, or whatever government, or whatever party is in government in the country. It seems that you kind of advocating for more wider approach to social movements which means that in the context of class war we should not only focus in the unionized workers in the current unions, but we should use wider struggles which spring throughout different issues and try to bring in the class rhetoric, the class argument inside this struggles. You believe that it is still possible to politicise and to mobilize trade unions and unionized workers in alliances with the Left or they should be considered as one of the many social actors, social formations and social movements with which we should work with. Should we still maintain the classical Marxist political praxis of insisting only on the revolutionary politicization of the working class?*

**Richard:** Yes, there is a potential, but I mean, when we talk about the working class, the reality is, I don't know what the situation is in Macedonia, but in the United Kingdom of all private sectors, working places, 90% have never seen a trade union representative. The truth is that the most working class people have never seen a strike, never seen a picket line; don't know what is like to be in the trade union or what benefit you get there. So there is no real historic disconnection there. Even though the trade unions in Britain are the largest social organisations, they have 6 million members (which is



not insubstantial), they are very specialized, and they are particular to certain public sector, an occupation, a little bit of manufacture. So, my answer to you would be that we need first of all, yes, social movements, in order to bring together the broadest possible range of the working class. I mean, we aren't talking about slogans like "the 99%". The 99% we know it's not a 99% of people who are against the austerity, or whatever, but it's a populist slogan. One thing it does, it establishes the idea of the overwhelming working majority and it's the overwhelming working class majority that we need to somehow put together, and since the trade unions are not capable of doing that, and since the majority of people have never seen a trade union and since the neoliberalism have restructured the space of work in such a way to make the trade unions, actually trade unionizing is very difficult. The obvious way is to find a way to organize unorganized workers as well and I think it's another way of the long term reconstruction project we are talking about.

So, that's a long term objective. The other thing about this is that there is three levels that we need to be reconstructing, there is the social movements, there is the Left, or the social-democratic type of organization, there is also revolutionary regroupement, a revolutionary reconstruction. The idea of a fundamental challenge to capitalism has been germinally, basically reborn little bit with the anti-capitalist movement, with the subsequent Occupy movements and so on, but they are still very nebulous, very diffuse. So I think there is a need for process of rethinking, thinking through all the debates and arguments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, working out what is still valuable, what is not. But also, working out how it is appropriate for us to organize in this age, because I cannot believe that the methods of organization that were appropriate in the era of when the mass press

was relatively new, mass literature was relatively new, before the era of the television should be the same as those of the era of the Internet and you know, mass cell communication which is now becoming the norm. So, that's another part of, I think it's progressively narrowing and focused, but I think they are all essential part of the reconstruction process.

***Artan:** We've seen some kind of resistance towards the European Union, on the part of movements and parties such as Syriza. On the other hand, in Macedonia, we witness the opposite tendency: the largest fraction of the Left, of the people who consider themselves to be leftist, are in favour of joining the EU. You've claimed that the European Union cannot be considered as savior simply because it operates through neoliberal logic and I think last night you mentioned that European Union is an example of the victory of the project of the bourgeoisie in Europe. Can you elaborate your point a bit further?*

**Richard:** I think your problem, what you are addressing is a real one. The question is one of organizing the working class, the subordinate class elements and so on and disorganizing the ruling class. And the problem is: at the moment when there is a social struggle, when there is a question of privatisation or austerity, who comes to implement it? If you are in Greece, it's the IMF and the European Union, European finance ministers, the European Central Bank, they are organised at the European level. But when someone has to resist, it's not the European working class, it's the national working class. In other words, the problem we face is the fact that the European Union is based upon the successful organisation and to a degree a political centralisation of the European ruling class in a sort of hierarchical structure, while maintaining the disorganisation of the European working classes.

So, I mean, one thing you could see underpinning the whole process of Europeanization, the convergence of currencies and so on and so forth, is the development of what sociologists call an interlocking directorate. That means that companies are increasingly sharing directors across different companies and that is expanding across Europe. So you've got this network of firms, large transnational firms across Europe which effectively are dependent on one another for supply chains, for expertise, etc. And they form basis across which the political institutions of, I think, European Union are formed. Labour, organised labour, the working class is by large excluded, I mean, you know, occasionally corporate or some very junior apparatuses and the European Union, and then only on consultative basis. The democratic institutions of the European Union are extremely weak, and that's by design. Increasingly what's happening therefore is that the European Union forms, and it's institutions, forms one of the ways in which electoral potencies of national elected bodies are taken away, delegated upwards to the European federal level, and this has the effect of seriously restricting even the limited choices within the parliamentary democracy.

The question is: can you somehow occupy the European Union? Can you get into their apparatuses, can you join European Union and hope to get elected to European institutions and get your man, and maybe get Tsipras in one of these institutions and thereby hope to reform it? I would say that if you get a national capitalist state is hard to reform, the European Union is going to be way, way worst because of its susceptibility, it's vulnerability from the pressure from below, from the working class. So, it is much, much weaker. It's far more self-consciously, institutionally a ruling class project. So I think it's doomed. You know, Europeanization is possible answer, or a regionalization, but actually I don't

think those two ends are in conflict. Europeanization of the labour movement and of the Left and so on, can be institutionalized in various ways, it doesn't have to take a form of being in favour of the expansion of the monetary union, which if implemented, means that you're going to have a fiscal strait jacket imposed on any state that participates in it. Quite probably, the imperial structure of the system will mean that, you know, you're going to have a German capital, French capital and so on, bashing down the door to get you to lower the wages and so on, but the they'll lead you to buy their stuff, so you'll have to borrow a lot in order to buy their stuff. And eventually at some point you'll find you can't pay the debt and they'll say: "lazy bastards, they can't pay their debts", you know. So, I mean, you're going to end up in a sort of Greek dilemma, I think, if you go down that route. It's surprising that more countries haven't found themselves in that severe crisis, but I am certain that they will.

*Artan: And now we can start taking questions. But before we take the first one, I have just one last question related to the rise of the Far-Right and especially tendencies of its political mainstreaming through the electoral victories throughout Europe. You said that you don't see a kind of direct causality between the crisis and rise of the far left. Is there a link between the rise of the far right and the crisis?*

**Richard:** there is a causality of this, just not a simple and an immediate one. I mean, I think there are the structural causes and the conjuncture causes. The same thing with SYRIZA actually: I mean, the parties of the radical left have been developing for a long time and you get the credit crunch and the crisis and you get the implementation of austerity and that opens the space in which SYRIZA can grow. And, you know, before them the Left Bloc has been growing, Die Linke has been

growing. Same thing with the far right, if you want to look at the far right, the growth of far right parties across Europe, I think you could see that they have roots in something else. Now, there was an old Trotskyist analysis that said that fascism is a chemically pure distillation of the culture of imperialism. And what that means in effect is that if you really apply that analysis in a serious and systematic way, the culture of imperialism today is totally different than it was in the 1930s. In 1930 you still had colonialism as the dominant world system, you still had white supremacy built into the global system, Anti-Semitism was the dominant norm of those imperial blocs.

The far right today is far more predicated upon imperialist culture of the radical right in America. If you look in someone like Breivik, where does he get his ideas from? He gets his ideas from the libertarian right think-tanks in America. You could see that there are various crisis going on, there is a crisis of the collapse of the representation, and representative democracy in neoliberalism, there is the crisis of working class politics which makes it possible in certain formally industrialized areas for struggles to take on a racial dimension which then means that the far right can profit. There is the crisis of imperialism and the fact that the United States undertake so extremely risky interventionist project of trying to remake the world, you know, under the Bush administration. These projects put forward this new kind of Islamophobic articulation, and that becomes the dominant form of racism of the far right. And it doesn't look like the traditional sort of biologically determinist, somatic kind of racism, this one is very culturist and so on. I think Poulantzas is right on the claim of the crisis of the representative institutions which appears as crisis of the traditional authority which is most severe in cases of economic crisis. When the representative institutions are in crisis, there are always

institutions of the far right who come in to substitute the repressive apparatuses. This is exactly what happened in Greece, The Golden Dawn effectively replaced the police, especially in dealing with the migrants and often acted as their formal proxy.

### Discussion with the audience

**Q1:** *You talked about SYRIZA's moderation as they are moving closer to power. I believe this is a strategy not to scare the potential voters off with a radical rhetoric that can also be easily used by the neoliberal propaganda machinery for the same purpose. Do you think there is more space for more radicalism once they get to lead the government in Greece?*

**Q2:** *What is to be done with the social movements and can they be considered as a social base for building a project for socialism?*

**Richard:** Well, it might be a strategy, it might be that they are moderate and the rhetoric will change once they will have the power. The problem with that is, of course, if you do that, and if you are dependent upon popular base, well, you've immediately lost your base, "actually, we lied; we are going to go way further." Then, you risk creating a crisis. Given the arrangements of power within Greece, the media, the state apparatuses, and so on, they would take that government down quite easily. The problem is that the state apparatuses, the materiality of the state is such that it is far more meaningful to pro-capitalist, pro-neoliberal uses than it is to the uses of the radical left, such that if you go in there with the strategy of not trying to offend anyone, of trying to keep broad coalitions going, once you get in there, you are up against tremendous resistance from people who are far more powerful, much more an immediate problem

for you, that the voters. You only have to talk to the voters for a couple of months before the elections. Now you have to talk to the civil servants, now you have to talk to the “Inner Troika” as SYRIZA calls it. And you know that they are congenitally hostile to your goals. Now you are also going to talk to the European Union’s leadership. You’ve got to find some way of not alienating them, and you got to talk to Obama. And this accounts for this curious dance that SYRIZA leadership has been doing. They’ve been trying desperately to say the right things, “if we could send the right signals, yes we are going to try to pursue a project of social justice, no, don’t be frightened, we are not going to affect/offend your fundamental interests, you should actually be in favour of us because only we can deliver a real resolutions to Europe’s problems, austerity can’t deliver a real solution” and so on, and so forth. The problem with this is, of course, they’ve misunderstood Obama, Merkel and all the rest of it. They are not bothered about the solution to unemployment, they are not that bothered about the solution of the social instability, I mean, it’s pain, but they are bothered about the solution for the banks, because ultimately for them the banks are at the centre of any growth strategy, they are at the centre of any future for an expanded European capitalism. And they would be quite happy to have a government implement socially catastrophic policies, policies that would result in considerable political instability, provided that they can actually get away with it, and that’s what they’ve proven. So finally this strategy of moderation with the idea of radicalisation once in power, is one that is likely to fail. The resistance to any attempt to be too radical once you get in to lead the government would be overwhelming, I think that they would have to put up a hell of a fight against the entrenched power of the state and of the international capital, European capital and so on. In that case, who would be their allies? This is another challenge

in that strategy. They will need the social movements, they will need the workers and the problem is that a lot of the people that voted for them will say: “we didn’t vote for you to do this, we voted to implement the moderate policies, and to come along with Washington, and so on.” And I think it would be a strategy that would collapse in incoherence as soon as they get into the government. . And, to be honest with you, I don’t think it is just a strategy, I think they’ve decided that better of something than nothing, I think they’ve decided that for Greece to get kicked out of European Union, or rather of the Eurozone, would be so catastrophic, the only alternative been offered, as far as they can see is some sort of Cuba in the Mediterranean. So they’ve decide, I think, to accept the European Union and the Eurozone sort of dominant policies and to try and mediate between where they want to be and where the European leadership actually is.

On the second question, the challenge is that if you’ve got a social movement that really resonates with the interests of the people with something that has to do with urgent need of theirs, than you would have much more chance of withstanding the attempts to hijack, to control things by small unrepresentative groups. The more you could build up a sort of grass-roots democracies, something from below, the better chance you’ll have for a sustainable thing. The problem is that in trying to find a way to mediate between the fact that we don’t have much infrastructure at the moment, and that we, ourselves are small unrepresentative groups, and therefore for us to be able to reach out to people and help the people to build the kinds of connections and sort of social structures and infrastructures and democratic forms of organisation, we would have to avoid being the kind of manipulative organisations.. So we have to be somehow implanted in struggles, implanted in movements and very much part of them but respecting their specific ecology, respecting

their needs and participating as co-equals, rather than people who somehow want to control it. I think this is a long term project, but I definitely think that if you commit to such a strategy you could start to see some returns relatedly quickly.

On rebuilding the system base of socialism, I would be in favour of building up radical left organisations wherever possible, and radical left means something somewhere between traditional sort of social-democratic reformism and the parts of the revolutionary left. I think they are organizations where a debate can happen, where the answers are not known in advance, because you know, the thing about the revolutionary socialist organisations in the great degree ideological homogeneity, so it's very difficult to have a process of rethinking and reconstructing, when everybody already knows the answers. , I think these are spaces in which it is possible for some sort of dialogue to take place. But also I think that they should embed themselves in the labour movement, in the environmental movement in the feminist movement, among students, if they are able to do this in a way that says "we don't claim to speak for you, we don't think to dominate you, we don't claim to own you, but we want to be with you, we want to work alongside you." And at the same time in that organisation's policy its dominant ideology should also contain the expressed interests and social goals of the various groups that it is inflated into, and I think over time you will build up that new space.

**Q3:** *My question is about the social movements and the broader sectors of society, for example the Quebec protests are primarily led by students, but it looks like a social movement. Is it again an issue of initial agency and then others join in?*

**Q4:** *You briefly opened the question of the European Union and the Left, so my question will be: what is the future of the European Left, would it stay in the European Union and try to reform it from the inside, should we go back to the old model of the national states where conservative's elites would be quite dominant and atrocities of ethnic cleaning might happen or should we build new alliances? For example – rebuild Yugoslavia?*

**Richard:** The difference between Quebec with other movements is that they were able to, precisely as a matter of strategy, consciously bring together diverse constituencies, students, sections of labour, just ordinary people in the streets. They tried to reach out to anybody that could potentially become an ally, but they did so in a way that wasn't as we often hear about building alliances and what it actually means is making friends with the rich and the bourgeoisie and the media and so on. There is some friends that you don't need. So they didn't make friends to the media, they didn't care what the media said, maybe they cared but they didn't sort of pandered to the media they didn't pandered to the rich, they didn't try to make themselves presentable, they were interested in being effective, this comes back to the communicative or disruptive choice. I think that the main thing is that they formed a hegemonic, or contra-hegemonic, in what way you want to fraise it, alliance that was simultaneously majoritarian, and disruptive, disobedient and capable of shutting down the government's plans.

On the matter of the Left and European Union, or even rebuilding Yugoslavia. Nobody is going to rebuild Yugoslavia. If we had the material resources or people to rebuild anything like that, I think we'd had socialism already. The fact of the matter is that we would be lucky to build a local community centre, we'd be lucky to have a parish commune that would remind us of

the Paris Commune. We don't have much choice at the moment about whether to act on the national state or the European Union. But we do have a choice about how we relate to these institutions, and what, my suggestion is that if there is an argument about whether to enter the European Union, don't embrace it, don't say "this could be a way forward for us." It might be, it might, despite everything, hold opportunities for you but the dangers are, actually, I think much more severe. The dangers of being co-opted into the institutional format that actually, more fundamentally and at the more severe scale and long term way stretch your politics. We have this thing, a situation in the UK which is slightly different, we are in the EU but we are not in the Eurozone, and the dominant sort of tendency is eurosceptic. The majority of people in the UK would walk out of the EU because they believe that somehow Britain can return to the glorious private hedges of the 1950es. So we are in a slight different situation, but when pressed on this issue, it is possible to say – "neither the European Union, nor the United Kingdom, neither London, nor Berlin," and I think that you might find that a kind of slogan like that might work for you. In other words, you are not in a position to propose a concrete organization of political authority. Were you in that position, we'd be having a different kind of discussion. But it is about how you relate to propaganda, and I think defining independent niche for yourself which is distinct from nationalism, but also distinct from being servant to the European Union, dependant to the European Union, keeping the independence would be a good approach to that. That's what I suggest.

**Q5:** *Do you think that anarchist practices are disruptive for a social movement?*

**Q6:** *I am wondering with all the new talk of the left, on the issue of the new language of the left, one which will not be elitist and "intellectualized" and will communicate with the ordinary people, those with not too much access in this society, who I believe to be the base of voters for the new left*

**Richard:** I think that anarchist tactics are effective, but I think that some time they can be disruptive in a way that is not useful for the movement. One way in which it can be disruptive is the tendency towards elite actions – "we are going to have an action!" – What does that mean? – well, "there is a group of protesters, we are going to march in the centre and a bunch of anarchist are going to sit down in the middle of the march, we are going to have a sit-down, we are not going to move, and the police is going to have to come down and fight us, and we are going to try to radicalize the march." Now, this is done without any reference to the rest of the march, it's done in an elitist way, it's quite macho and is unhelpful, even if the march from A to B is boring, predictable, easily contained, this way of trying to radicalize the situation doesn't work and is not helpful. That said, I know a lot of anarchists in the United Kingdom and I know the kinds of ways that they are effective, for example there is a lot of road campaigns, and one of the ways that they are good at, I don't know why anarchist are so good at arts and crafts and technology and so on. They form little communities and they are impossible to borrow out and companies who try to sort of build the road find them very difficult to move. Now, they cannot alt their nature and found a mass movement or something like that, they just can't, because it's very individualistic, is very elitist it's a small group of people substituting themselves for a

mass, but they can be effective in certain contexts. Also there are other kinds of anarchists that are very labour oriented and who are also about building up strength from below, I am very much in favour of this. So, I don't want to be indiscriminate about this in condemning anarchists or something, but I just think in general that the anarchist tactics are unworkable, and I do prefer to have forms of centralized organization. There I said it – centralized!

It was said that the Left has lost the fight to connect to the poor, the Left has lost the fight to connect to the ordinary people, to the uneducated, to those that don't speak so well. First of all, the Right does very effectively manipulate the people in a certain way, I think this slogan in the United Kingdom is “treat them like mushrooms, keep them in the dark and feed them shit.” I think we shouldn't overestimate things, but, I can say that in the United Kingdom at least it is not the poorest workers who gravitate to the Right, it is actually a sector of the skilled working class who are not very well educated by large, but they are relatively, within the working class, I don't want to say privileged, but they are better from the most. And a certain petty bourgeois mentality gets in there. So, that's the one way in which the Right can penetrate the working class. There's also a large sector of the working class that is not Right wing, but is politically passive and it's very difficult for the Left to relate do them.

In South Africa there was an experiment in the 70es in which the Communist Party tried to reach out the gangsters, with a feeling that they are the authentic workers, or whatever. It didn't work, it was catastrophic, these well-read communist intellectuals going like – “hello, oh, you got no eye, you've been shot and... well done.” There was a complete cultural gap, no way to relate, it didn't work, so it wasn't effective. In the United

States they tried the same thing, they always talk about the “urban poor,” the idea that we're going to reach out, “maybe we could reach out to gang members,” there was a talk about this during the Occupy thing, - “maybe we could reach out to them, maybe they could organize the community” – gang leaders don't care about organizing the community, they care about exploiting people and murdering them! I don't mean to caricature your argument, I mean what you are saying is a serious thing; there are real objective difficulties in reaching out to sectors of the working class and sectors of the poor who are out of the reach of the Left. The other thing is – we shouldn't be too worried about reaching to the people who are educated, The trend is for larger and larger sectors of the working class to be educated to at least university degree and therefore the social basis of the leftism is changing, so we shouldn't be afraid of being too intellectual, we should be worried if the only people we talk to are the intellectuals.

Were the Right has been able to reach to the poor, I think what they do is to create chains of equivalence, linking the interests of the poor, through nationalism to those big business and to the lower middle class and thus diverse ideological domains can be pulled together through this nationalist project. In the United Kingdom it has to do with immigration, they can reach out to the poor by saying: “these immigrants are coming over here and you know what they are doing– they are taking your jobs and they are pushing down your wages, and even if they are not, we don't want them here, they smell!” – This kind of thing. How do you disrupt that?! How do you pull apart that chain of equivalence? I think you need very precise interventions. Don't ever think that you have to capitulate to these ideas, don't ever think that you have to put a “softer version” of nationalism, you don't have to, it doesn't work anyway, and it only validates the Right

wing when you do that. But the other thing is – there are always antagonisms, these chains of equivalence are very fragile, there are always points where they are weak, so the working class, sectors of the working class are racists, sectors of the working class are nationalists, you can bet on that, that's always going to be that case, some of them are Right wing and buying to competitive ideology. But there is always going to be something, whether it's a privatisation of a key industry or whether there is shocking state of wages, or whether it's the energy prices or something, something that people are angry about, and that's where you can intervene and you can say – that's your strategic moment, you can say: "no! We are not in it together. This is not one big happy nation, we are not a family, this is a struggle, and the people who have been making up, like bandits are the rich, and we need too stand to the poor together, wherever they come from" and that's when you have moments of intervention. So that would be my advice.

*Q7: Can we consider that the last two decades of neoliberalism have changed completely the social environment where the Left cannot find an easy way to mobilize and organize a new project?*

**Richard:** Neoliberalism has brought real changes in the work force, in behaviour, in terms of governmentality, of the way in which people understand themselves. I think that's very true. Actually, because of neoliberalism, the real forces for opposing the system will come from the people that are immersed in that ideology and immersed in that tradition, and who are disaffected and breaking with that, disappointed in some way. We see this in countries with a neoliberal development project like in Turkey, Egypt, Brazil, and to an extent in China. And there are various contradictions arising there resulting in serious social struggle. And there is the other group of

states which are mainly southern European states, where the contradictions of the Europeanization and austerity have reached their highest level. Elsewhere it's not kicking off, it really isn't, and the situation is notorious for the complete lack of any kicking off that takes place as a struggle. And what is the result of everything being left to unorganized and dispersed groups of young people who are basically not rooted in any institutional form, who are not rooted in any party and who don't have any permanent apparatus to relate to, to mobilize?! It is that they get the crap kicked out of by the Police and then they go home and they stop going to protest and they walk away demoralized. The movement dies, and all that it leaves behind is a scar, an intense psychological scar. It's not just the student protests, we saw that the environmental movement, there was a big massive green camp very much organized around NGO's actually, the well-meaning, sort of left wing activists, who went out and formed a green camp. The police infiltrated them, they broke up their organisation and they framed them for conspiracy. And the process of dragging them across the courts, it just ruined them, their organisation and left them at the end of it demoralized and not wanting to do anything. So, I think you need something resilient and therefore although it seems like I am hawking back to a past, some glorious past or something, I can see no alternative but building something of a form of a party and something like a trade union, even if the types and the ways in which they are organized today might have to be quite fundamentally different to the way in which they were organized in the past. That's why, coming from a Marxist background, coming from the revolutionary left, I am very much in favour of rethinking and trying to break with this tendency to solve everything by quoting someone, somebody from the 1920es, 1930es, like they have all the strategic answers to today. They don't!