

Article

The current crisis and the left, a needed turn to the ordinary

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While in the UK, Europe, and the United States, the looming economic crisis has been met with a forceful and comprehensive policy response, here in Canada the Conservative government's initial answer has been procyclical austerity and the naïve hope of producing balanced budgets in the future. Like Mitterrand's government that tried to convince its citizens that Chernobyl's radioactive cloud somehow circumnavigated France as it drifted west towards England and Portugal from Germany and Italy, the Conservatives would have us believe that Canadians will not be dragged down by this crisis.

However, for those who have been following and studying the mechanisms at the root of the financial crisis over the past year, it appears increasingly obvious that we are at the very beginning of a process that has not only triggered the global recession we are experiencing at the moment, but has the potential of generating a cycle of depression and deflation in North America like the one Japan went through during its lost decade from 1990 to 2000. The political parties that will hold power in six to eighteen months at the national level or in the various provinces will face an economy in crisis, in which the classic strategies for jump starting growth will simply not work. We will find ourselves forced as a society to come up with and debate new, radical solutions to the economic contradictions and social problems generated by a typically Anglo-American financial market capitalism.

Old left, new ideas

It is our conviction that the left that has not succumbed to the third way drift to centrism, what some have called the “old or radical left”, is confronted with a unique occasion of renewal, a “coming out” of the margins of the current political horizon. In the past thirty years, this left has been relatively successful in politicizing two important aspects of social life in Canada, poverty and social exclusion and the one hand, discrimination and cultural oppression or indifference on the other hand. These twin paradigms of the critique of misery (such as homelessness and child poverty) and the politics of identity (multiculturalism and gay rights, for example) that defined the left during the eighties and nineties have served well a number of important causes in our society and have advanced social progress in a neoliberal era marked by a roll back of social justice. The paradigms of misery and identity also explain why the base of left wing organizations has gradually switched from a shrinking industrial working class to a white collar upper middle class. These paradigms frame the left as an ethical and cultural stance appealing to one's individual sense of justice, morality and urbanity but largely disconnected from everyday working peoples experiences. During the last elections the NDP lost working class Oshawa but it did win upper class Outremont.

As progressive as this combination may seem it will prove largely insufficient in giving the left a strong voice in the upcoming months of economic turmoil. This left should add a third paradigm to its politics, and this paradigm must be the backbone of its policy proposals and actions, for lack of a better term I've named this paradigm “a radical turn to the ordinary”. Just as the left has been able to push the debate on misery and identity outside of given limits and accepted solutions, it could be able to accomplish the same as the lives of ordinary Canadians breakdown economically during the current crisis. The left can accomplish this by re-inventing one of its core values, a set of principles that distinguished its older variants from other political currents and perspectives. I'm not thinking of the Old left's commitment to defend and advance the interests of an industrial working class, I'm thinking of the old left's profound distrust, opposition and critique of capitalism.

Why re-activate the old left's anti-capitalism ? First and foremost because it is “capitalism” that the leaders of the G20 want to save and “refound”, not a market economy, not neoliberalism. The left must discard these euphemisms that obscure more than clarify the problems that lie before us. Because it is a financialised version of capitalism that is in crisis and that has largely determined our lives and economy during the last thirty years. Finally, because the scale of the crisis and the effort our society will have to make to reform this capitalism means that we need to ask ourselves some serious questions about the what kind of economic system we really want and can afford socially and ecologically.

Towards “ordinary” anti-capitalism?

The present crisis thus creates room for a discussion that is quite new for our generation, namely a critique of capitalism based on the viability of ordinary lives, in other words, the viability of the lifestyle, daily experience, work, consumption patterns, and economy of those who are generally well integrated into society both economically and socially. A lifestyle, we should point out, that is largely a reflection and the product of an economic growth based on financial accumulation. We submit for debate three groups of questions about this “ordinary” lifestyle, which risks falling into crisis in the coming months.

1. Why stimulate the growth of a capitalism that has increased overall the time society spends working, to the point where reconciling work with family life and parenting has become a political issue? This, despite the fact that in the last 30 years we have continued, admittedly less rapidly, to

make the productivity gains that marked the history of capitalism during the 20th century. Thirty years ago, the social issue that worried the Right and inspired the Left was the end of work and the advent of the leisure society. So what happened? Why did these productivity gains fail to translate into fewer working hours? Are jobs the answer to this crisis? If so, what jobs, and how do we reconcile them with the reorganization of roles in modern families and support a lifestyle that gives people more time off work.

2. Why return to a type of growth that has produced the most glaring inequalities among salaried households since the 1930s? Why stimulate a growth whose economic viability relied on the highest level of household debt in the history of Western society in order to support the demand for articles of mass consumption? Should the economic recovery endorse the replacement of the public debt of the nineties with the private debt of today? Should we relaunch an economy that has seen salaried workers' real income fall systematically, to the benefit of big business? Finally, should we revitalize an economy that requires salaried workers, who are already in debt, to save for their retirement by devoting an increasing share of their income to investments in speculative funds over which they have little control? What does private enterprise really mean when a large part of the share capital and debt of the biggest corporations is held by funds that manage and invest these savings of salaried workers? How should we make the management of these funds, such as Caisse de dépôt et placement, comply with collective goals as well as priorities other than financial yields?

3. Why stimulate a type of growth that has shown itself incapable of responding in any serious way to the ecological threat it itself causes? Why support the recovery of an economic system that proposes managing environmental threats with the same tools that are partly responsible for the present crisis, namely derivative products and the carbon market? If we must recapitalize and support our major industrial sectors, what goals should we, and can we, set for them in terms of product quality and the ecological footprint of their processes and products, as well as the social spinoffs in the communities that depend on these industries? How should we develop a policy of national economic sovereignty that ties these ecological obligations to geographical area while remaining open to international fair trade?

These are three directions for the debate on the pertinence of "reforming" capitalism. I'm not arguing that they are the only directions a left political offensive can take. I've purposefully narrowed down the left's traditionally very wide and generous perspective to these three dimensions of the ordinary because I think they offer the best terrain for a radical agenda that speaks to the working majority's everyday experiences and not only to their ethical beliefs and cultural preferences. The worst thing the left could do in the current circumstances is enter into this debate with a haphazard and seemingly endless list of wrongs to be righted and of necessary emancipations. Though these demands are all in they're own particular way legitimate, this unstructured approach will disserve the left from its social-democratic to its more radical tendencies. The left must rather, in the upcoming crisis, focus on what we think are our economic system's most destabilizing contradictions, the unfulfilled promises the most central to its legitimacy, its most blatant ordinary discrepancies.

On anti-capitalism

In the current and upcoming circumstances, anti-capitalism suddenly appears more reasonable. What dominant form will it take? Nothing in the current crisis allows us to predict that. Will it be conservative and moralistic like anti-liberalism in Quebec during the thirties, or the progressive, pro-government anti-liberalism of the Prairies, out of which sprung the NDP's forebear, the CCF? Will it

be socialist, counter-cultural, or environmentalist? That will depend on the arguments developed outside the framework and limits of current discussions. One thing is certain—we cannot ignore the failure of methods based on the industrial statism of the 20th century, and even less so fall into the trap of marginal radicalism.

Anti-capitalism, too, must become “ordinary.”

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NOTE IMPORTANTE

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