

# Ghosts of Alternatives Past

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What echoes and shadows of left experiments of the past haunt us as we embark on a new era opened by the formation of a radical left government in Greece? What is the plot of the longer story in which this new episode is embedded? How has the weight of the wider world, the power of the global system, borne down upon attempts to move from capitalism to socialism, whether in rupturalist projects, stemming from the October Revolution, or more protracted programmes of transformation, such as those set out by the ANC in South Africa in 1994 and by Syriza in Greece in 2015? What are the dynamics of attempting to forge an alternative in the face of the hegemony of there-is-no-alternative? How to make history in conditions not of our making? How, with so much going for it, nationally and internationally, has the ANC failed to achieve, or even approximate, the society that those who fought and died for it set out to achieve? How could Syriza, in the face of far more formidable obstacles, advance both its immediate programme and a new path toward socialism?

There is now a long history of left alternatives, even of left governments. From the Paris in 1871 to Athens 2015, we have seen hopes rise and the prospect of a new order come into view.

Some left governments have come and gone with little attention from outside their borders, such as that of Akel in Cyprus so recently, whereas others have captured the imagination of the world, even to the point crossing borders to be a part in it, eg, to Spain in 1936, to Greece in 2015.

The storyline looming largest in our story is the October revolution of 1917. It went farthest and lasted longest. It is a foundational myth of our movement. We have varying versions of it, not only about what happened, but about what might have happened. I have imagined and written my way through its early decades and witnessed its later decades.

If you looked at a map of the world in 1989, countries defined as socialist covered vast territories of this planet. It is not so now.

Why? Volumes have been written by now answering this question. Through 1989 and 1990 I was often in Eastern Europe, exploring the meaning of this vast overturning in its world historical implications. I never accepted the postmodernist ban on grand narratives. There was a dominant grand narrative in play and I believed it needed to be met with a counter-narrative on the same scale. Their story was one of capitalist triumphalism, captured in the mocking joke that socialism was the longest, most painful, most inefficient path between capitalism and capitalism.

Much of the left retreated in dismay and disarray, unable to overcome confusion and to conceive of an alternative narrative or even to believe in the possibility of an alternative narrative. Others carried on, even though our philosophy of history had been dealt a massive blow. We had believed that history, in however complicated a way, was moving from capitalism to socialism, and then we beheld the opposite happening before our eyes. I saw lives turned upside down and nations disappearing from the map of the world.

So why our defeat? Many reasons have been given. There were monumental mistakes within our own movement. There was murder, treachery, suppression, fear. There were honest voices silenced. There were alternative paths not taken. There was an unfavourable balance of forces. There were conditions of underdevelopment. Socialism was meant to be built on other side of advanced capitalism. Not only its economic productivity, but its parliamentary democracy, mass media and complex civil society. It was meant to be a further development, not a suppression, of these advances in history.

Nevertheless, there had been expropriation of the expropriators, social ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, relative equality of opportunity and a radical shift in the balance of power in the world.

The existence of a socialist bloc made the hegemony of capitalism incomplete, but the intensifying hegemony of capitalism made the existence of a socialist bloc increasingly precarious. An advancing globalisation shaped by capitalism was all the time tightening its grip and extending its hegemony into territories and into psyches previously outside its dominion.

Socialism was all the time in a world dominated by capitalism. It was not only the internal failures of these regimes, which made their populations turn against them, but the lure of an imagined other of freedom and plenty that eluded them in reality when they moved towards it. Most fundamentally, it was the external pressure of an increasingly integrated global capitalism exerted upon an inadequately achieved socialism that brought its downfall.

So what then? We had to re-think and re-coup, to analyse our defeat and to seek a new path. Our glorious and tragic past had to yield to a new paradigm. One thing we had to face was that socialism could only be built on consent and in ever more complex conditions. The left would have to stop dreaming of storming winter palaces, of imagining ruling through decrees, purges, guns and gulags.

We would have to make our case and devise our strategies against enormous odds. We would have to stand in multi-party elections, make the long march through the institutions and make our arguments amidst a welter of other voices. We would have to find a third way between communist and social democratic traditions and also to incorporate the insights and energies of wider social movements. We would have to face a more complex global system, which could dominate through many layers of sophisticated seductions and deceptions, but could also do so through brute force when deemed necessary.

So we had to build again, even as we were surrounded by ruins of what was built and destroyed. In Eastern Europe, parties proliferated. Among these were reformed communist parties, democratic socialist parties, who tried to defend what was defensible and bring something of what had been achieved into this new world. Some won elections and for a time kept at bay the worst of the particularly brutal form of capitalism that overtook the wild east in 1990s. For some, this new world order brought wealth and mobility. For many others, it resulted in material impoverishment, social isolation, loss of purpose, despair, suicide and many forms of excess deaths.

The first indications of a breakthrough for me came from South Africa, where a liberation movement was set to come to power, a victory for our side, raising hopes of something new on the stage of history, something that came from the movements that reshaped power and knowledge in the last century, but knew now the blind alleys and pitfalls and could stake out new paths. Yes, it was a historic compromise and there would be no immediate expropriation of the expropriators, but it held promise of a massive transformation of the state and many institutions of civil society nevertheless.

The new government came to power in 1994 winning a massive majority in multi-party elections, with a parliamentary opposition with no prospect of overtaking it in the near future, and with tremendous international prestige and support.

A new flag flew over the land. New faces populated the parliament. New voices spoke on airwaves. New names appeared on the buildings and roads. Despite layers of deceit, disclaimers of responsibility and destruction of files, many secrets were laid bare and there were new truths in the public domain. Quite a few government ministers were marxists, although it was not always easy to see how this impacted on their governance. The new constitution laid down the law on race and gender, but left class to the political arena.

The new South Africa was a *mélange* of mixed signals, of unreflective and unresolved contradictions. It became a playground for the world's rich and famous to come and rub shoulders with Mandela and invest their conspicuous consumption with the aura of a liberation movement, while those who were supposed to be liberated still lived in shacks made of rubbish and fainted from hunger. The Mandela Rhodes Foundation and Mandel Rhodes Place in Cape Town symbolised the glossing over of glaring contradictions.

There was some upward mobility for a new black bourgeoisie, some of them former leaders of liberation movement. Largely unproductive, they provided black cover for white capital, while engaging in conspicuous consumption, simultaneously representing collusion in the impoverishment of the masses and embodying the secret aspirations of many of them.

There have been many accusations of betrayal, and they are justified, but it is not an adequate explanation. For this, it is necessary to look at the prevailing balance of forces.

It was not only the compromises dictated by national reconciliation, whereby the oppressors of yesterday became the partners of today, allowed to keep their ill-gotten wealth. It was primarily the re-integration into the global system, with its imperatives of neoliberalisation, ie, domination of market logic, privatisation of the public sphere, commodification of knowledge, culture and nature.

The ANC, and the SACP and COSATU within it, were hit hard by downfall of the socialist bloc that had assisted them in their struggle and that they expected would bolster them in their victory. In their efforts to end the isolation of the country and to reintegrate into the global system, they were faced with the ascendancy of neoliberalism and the arguments that there was no alternative. Mandela was wined and dined at Davos, posed with supermodels and spice girls and presided over an authoritarian reversal of ANC policies on nationalisation and radical redistribution and reconstruction.

So the ANC facilitated capital flight, privatisation of public property, regressive taxation and the degeneration of a liberation movement into an instrument of acquisitiveness, celebrity, corruption, venality. Faced with the constant contradiction between their capitulation to the circuitry of capital and the promises made by a liberation movement, they mastered the art of talking left, while walking right. At their basest, they used stale revolutionary rhetoric to accuse their left critics of being counter-revolutionary.

During the long struggle, I aligned myself with the ANC and SACP. Indeed I was a member during 4 of my 5 extended sojourns there. Many who invested far more have sadly turned away. During the last election, a number of activists, including former ANC ministers, asked the electorate not to vote for the ANC and are busy building an alternative that might succeed where other breakaways failed.

So if the ANC, with so much going for it, failed to achieve, or even approximate, the society that those who fought and died for it set out to achieve, what chance was there for Syriza, in the face of far more formidable obstacles, to advance both its immediate programme and a new path toward socialism? So brutal are the economic and political forces bearing down upon them that they have been reduced to struggling for the material basis for a society to survive, never mind thrive, and not even succeeding so well at that.

What is happening here is a radical experiment in expropriation. It is to see how far the expropriation carried out the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> worlds is possible in the 1<sup>st</sup> world, to see how far accumulation by dispossession can go.

From the maximalism of our vision of socialism, we are reduced now to a minimalism of struggling for a standard of living and democracy that we thought we had already achieved. Our previous argument was that this was inadequate and needed to be transcended, whereas now we are struggling to defend it. We wanted to advance, but have been forced back to a place where we never expected to be.

The aim of those who built Syriza was to expropriate the expropriators as the basis for radical transformation of all aspects of society. Yet it has struggled and so far failed to halt the further expropriation of the expropriated. It is in these conditions that resistance must be built. It is here where we strive to make history in conditions not of our own making. It is necessary for socialists to take up this unattractive task and not to say that nothing less than socialism is acceptable.

Here is the crucible where their exploitation and our dreams are in high energy collision with each other. Here we try to forge an alternative in the face of the power of there is no alternative. Here we behold the brute power of their drive, not only to accelerate expropriation, but to crush all dreams of an alternative, to discredit the government elected to be an alternative, to scatter the movement behind it.

My conclusion is that we need to face the weight of the wider world as it has borne down on all of our alternatives. We have been defeated and forced back to fight for terrain we had won instead of advancing. So much power and wealth has been amassed against us. The global system is complex, ever-changing and formidable. The odds against us have mounted.

Yet the current crisis has clarified the nature of the global system, its injustice, its brutality, its destructiveness, its irrationality. There is massive and mounting alienation from it crying out "We are the 99%". It's a rough and ready

number and crude form of class consciousness, but it highlights the truth that there are so many more of us than of them. It is our labour, our hands and our brains, and not their hedge funds, that create whatever is of value in the world.

Once the 99% realise the power of their numbers and find an effective vehicle to operationalise those numbers, we can win. This is where we need to think freshly. We don't really know how to expropriate the expropriators anymore. Neither communist parties nor the occupy movement, and I've been part of both, as well as other formations, none of these meet the needs of the moment. We have worked with a wide range of forms that have been effective in their way, but could not sustain themselves. Never did I see anything rise so high and fall so fast as the occupy movement. I have seen Syriza until now as fashioning the sort of force that is necessary.

The problems we face are systemic and nothing less than a systemic alternative will solve them. We have known this for a long time, but what we need to know now is: How do we get from here to there? How to make the world we know is necessary possible? How do we expropriate the expropriators?

We have to face the sometimes seductive and sometimes brutal power of what stands against us. We have to make the long march through many forms of protests, media critique, multi-party elections, excruciating negotiations with brutal enemies who pretend to be partners, preparing alternatives for when these fail, all the time building the new in the shell of the old.

I have been able in this time to give only the sketchiest of indications and reflections on left alternatives I have studied and seen close up. We have learned much from our past, from our victories as well as our defeats, especially since even our greatest victories have yielded to defeats. We still need to carry the story forward, in continuity with our best traditions, while finding our way in the complex cross-currents of our time, striving to win, but coping with defeat. I'm sorry to end on a negative note, but defeat is where we are now and where we need to find the insight and strength that will lead to victory. Even if we never see victory, we have to carry on anyway, because we cannot the system uncontested.

PS: I want to address the position taken at this morning's session by Aristides Baltas, the Syriza Minister for Education and Culture, justifying the agreement signed in Brussels and passed in the parliament last night. We are both philosophers and I consider him a colleague, comrade and friend. We have formed a strong bond. However, I have to dissent from his speech. His position was based on a conflict a conflict between an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility. Therefore Syriza has to sacrifice its convictions to take responsibility for the nation. I think that this is both philosophically and politically wrong. Along this road lies the death of the left. Convictions are not static forms, but values forged in the choices made by taking responsibility for the world. Another Syriza comrade, Nikos Potamitis, said to me yesterday that, if there is no alternative to this agreement, then why not let New Democracy, Pasok and Potami implement it? Why destroy the left to do it? Without the left, we have no space for systemic critique and exploration of alternatives. There is only capitulation and uncontested expropriation and exploitation.

A longer account of this memorable conference can be found in my subsequent book [The Syriza Wave](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017).

