

The Long Search for a 3rd Way: From the 2½ International until Now

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As I flew for the first time from Dublin to Vienna, I reviewed my images of the city: from the centre of an oppressive empire to an experiment in municipal socialism to a front of fascist terror to a crossroads between east and west, a locus of cold war plots and counter-plots. There was heavy security at the airport, because it so happened that Carter and Brezhnev also arrived on that day in June 1979.

I walked around the city seeing the traces of many eras of history and thinking how different forces came to ascendancy. Grandiose cathedrals of Catholicism and palaces of the Austro-Hungarian empire mingled with the traces of Red Vienna. Streets named after monarchs criss-crossed streets named after socialists. I was especially interested in the legacy of Austro-Marxism and I wondered what everyday life was like in Red Vienna.

What most captured my imagination was the formation of the 2½ International. In the turbulent period in which the international socialist movement was torn between the re-organised 2nd International, the Socialist International, and the newly-formed 3rd International, the Communist International, Austro-Marxism attempted to forge a path “between terrorist Moscow and impotent Bern”. This search for a third way between the social democratic and communist traditions rose and fell and took many forms through the decades up to our times.

In this presentation, I want to explore the key ideas and manifestations of this trajectory and my own engagement with it at crucial turning points

In 1979, my mind was focused on the legacy of the 3rd International. I had worked my way through the history of the communist movement from within it. I was a member of the CPI. I was troubled by much that I learned and experienced: from the purges of the most committed communists in the USSR to my texts being eviscerated by Soviet editors in Prague to scathing confrontations at a party congress in Belfast.

I came to Vienna to see Adam Schaff, one of the most honest communists and rigorous thinkers I have ever known. Unlike many in Eastern Europe who joined communist parties because they were parties in power, he was a communist before and after it was in power in Poland. Over several days, we talked for hours about the current state of Marxist philosophy and of communist movement. He was devastatingly direct in answering all the most difficult questions. He took me through his experience of all the upheavals in the movement over the decades and his own developing position in relation to them.

He had come to believe that Eurocommunism was the way. It was necessary to have support before taking power. There had to be multi-party elections with real parties that could take power. Otherwise, it was rule by terror. Life in countries of ‘really existing socialism’ was surreal, he said. People were afraid to speak freely in their homes and workplaces. Philosophers spoke sense, but then wrote nonsense. Moreover, he argued, socialism could only be built in advanced societies. There had been an attempt to impose socialism on countries not ready for it, which brought incompetence, compulsion, deceit, corruption. He had written a book called *The Communist Movement at the Crossroads*, but wondered if it would be suicide to publish it.

Some of what he was saying was what I already at I passionately believed, but other arguments came to conclusions that I was approaching, but still resisting. I argued back that communist parties were right to take power in whatever way was possible and to use this to win people to communism, that we needed to stand by such socialist countries as existed, imperfect as they were. He replied that the method of taking power was linked to how power was exercised. He was still a communist and believed that communism was the future, but it was necessary to be honest about where the communist movement was at present. He advised me in not to let them break me. My duty, he advised, was to keep Marxism alive, to stand by real knowledge and higher values. If the CP stood in the way of this, I had to make my choice.

In all these hours, he also told me many stories from the hidden history of the communist movement. Whenever I left him, I was in a heightened and turbulent state, struggling to come to terms with all that we had discussed, which corresponded exactly to all that was already troubling me. So much that had been whirling around in me crystallised during these days. I had been thinking that there was some piece of the puzzle that I was missing, some factor that I would discover that would explain all that I found inexplicable. Now I felt that I knew, that I was finally facing the worse, and I felt the cold comfort of clarity.

During one of my walks around Vienna, I came upon a park, where an Austrian band was playing the Soviet national anthem and then the US one. There stood Brezhnev and Carter at some ceremony and I walked up quite close, as there were not so many people there. I thought of this great divide symbolised by these two men, these two nations, these two blocs. I felt my whole life pass before me. I had grown up in the USA and I had studied in the USSR. I was on the one side and then I was on the other, but where was I now? I had rejected capitalism and I was still a communist, but could I be a communist without a communist party?

I had yet another series of intense encounters while in Vienna. I met Wolfgang Harich, another communist and philosopher. He had been imprisoned in the GDR and defended his imprisonment to me. At the time of his arrest, he had been advocating a third way, between Stalinism and capitalism, a democratic and humanistic socialism. Now he thought that such ideas were dangerous, especially in the context of Hungarian events in 1956 when he was arrested. He put the problematic quite starkly. In countries of existing socialism, communists were only a tiny minority of the population and could only maintain power through ruthless suppression of opposition. It was what Schaff had also been saying, but drawing the exact opposite conclusions.

Harich had no sympathy for Eurocommunism or interest in problems of alienation or socialist democracy. He felt no common cause with dissidents under socialism and refused any connection with Havemann, Bahro or Biermann. The ecological crisis added another dimension to this, he argued, because it necessitated centralised and compulsory action to be solved. On his relationship with the communist movement, he defined it as no longer like a new marriage, so he expected less and was disappointed less.

He asked me about my own life, my politics, my philosophy. When I told him of my recent problems in Dublin, Belfast and Prague, he was sympathetic, although what was happening to me seemed so tame compared to what had happened to him. He then came out with a sentence that stunned and then haunted me for many years: "The communist movement is like a dragon. It eats enthusiastic young communists and it expels cynics, careerists, broken personalities".

I walked away grieving for all who had been broken and for all who had been annihilated, whose lives had been ripped from them, especially the honest communists who were executed in the name of communism. I was filled with sorrow and rage, which never left me during these months.

I left the CPI. A year later I joined the Labour Party and, along with other ex-CPI comrades, formed Labour Left, which had significant impact in the LP for the next decade. I had been a member of a communist party and then a social democratic party, but what I wanted was to be in a party that combined the best features of both. I was a Marxist in the tradition of left Eurocommunism.

I followed debates within the CPGB and other parties and dissented from a version of Eurocommunism, what I would now call right Eurocommunism, that rejected economic determinism, historical materialism, vanguard parties, class struggle, truth criteria and was critical to the point of hostility to the socialist countries of Easter Europe. It instead opted for pluralism (epistemological as well as political), new social movements, broad democratic alliances, and even NATO. It proclaimed the autonomy of all spheres and asserted that all struggles were equal. It assumed a

pluralist 'factors' theory of history with no pattern, no explanatory core, no particular role played by mode of production or the working class. There were constant swipes at economic reductionism, which was fair enough, but it often translated into an impatience with any talk of economics whatsoever, as well as class analysis. I thought that *Marxism Today*, once it went in that direction, was ceasing to be Marxist. Right Eurocommunism became indistinguishable from social democracy.

My position was one of critical defense of the socialist countries, a historical materialist theory of history, with strong emphasis on truth criteria, mode of production, class analysis, a systemic critique of capitalism and a movement toward socialism, a democratic form of socialism, a 3rd way between Soviet-dominated CP communism and SI social democracy.

I regretted the defeat of such a 3rd way in the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia 1968 and felt hopes revived in the period of perestroika in the USSR, hopes that the time had come for socialism with a human face, socialism with a fresh and truthful voice, socialism with democracy, socialism with economic efficiency, socialism with a flourishing civil society. But this too was defeated. I was often in Eastern Europe as this was happening and engaged with the debates taking place on the left, particularly within the communist movement. It became clear that that the trajectory of history taking shape was a transition from socialism to capitalism. We had built our world view on a vision of history as moving, in however complicated a way, in the direction of capitalism to socialism, and here was the opposite happening before our eyes. I felt as if the world turned upside down.

I identified most strongly with parties that emerged out of this turmoil, particularly the PDS in Germany and Synaspismos in Greece, parties of the 3rd way that I was seeking.

In the midst of all this, I came again to Vienna in 1990. I wondered what was left of the tradition of Austro-Marxism, which seemed so relevant at this juncture. The two streams the socialist movement seemed to be converging again at this new turn in the historical process. People who had come through each of these two traditions were coming here to Vienna to assess the meaning of the events in Eastern Europe and to discuss a way forward from them.

From east and west, former communists and current social democrats were arriving for a conference on "The Democratic Revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe: The Challenge for Social Democracy" hosted by the Renner Institute and the SPO, which was in government at the time. They were MPs, party leaders, academics and writers. They were from old social democratic and labour parties from the west and new socialist parties, resurrected social democratic parties and reformed communist parties from the east. From some ex-socialist countries, there were competing parties seeking affiliation to the SI.

There was a discernable gulf between east and west. Western social democrats were a bit bewildered by their eastern counterparts. They had somehow expected when these new social democratic parties had been formed that they would be just like them. It did not occur to them that the rhythms of a different history had cut too deeply into the society and into the psyche for them to be the same, that these people might bring not only problems but positive traditions, that they might bring not only new numbers but distinctive perceptions. Social democrats were wary. Old wounds had not yet healed and new ones had opened. They felt that the backlash against communists had rebounded on them. They were at pains to distance themselves in the eyes of electorates who had not distinguished among the forces of the left and swung to the right.

Franz Vranitzky, Chancellor of Austria, put strong emphasis on the divide between communists and social democrats in his opening address to the conference. "Between these two standpoints there can be no compromise, no third way", he declared, repudiating the earlier traditions of his party. Austria was in the middle of an election campaign and his face was on election posters everywhere. The Socialist Party had been in power a long time and there were anti-socialist slogans on the posters of the other parties. Willy Brandt, the distinguished president of the SI, was there and poignantly expressed a certain bitterness at democratic socialists having to pay the price for the crimes of communists.

There were a range of positions taken by subsequent speakers. Yuri Afanasiev, a high profile member of the Supreme Soviet, struck a bleak tone. He had left the CPSU, but could not see his way to joining another party. He did not consider himself a social democrat. Nor could he see the possibility of instilling new life into socialism as tried by Gomulka, Dubcek and Gorbachev. Perestroika had failed. He believed that the influence of Marxism would continue and the vision of socialism would serve humanity by generating contradictions in capitalism without being able to

transcend it. There was a role for social democracy in maintaining equilibrium in an ocean of interests. That was all. Others were equally bleak. One declared "There is no great paradigm for Slovenia, only clearing away rubble."

Others were more positive, envisioning a chance for socialism on the other side of all this. Silviu Brucan from Romania argued that there had never been a true choice between capitalism and socialism, because socialism was always under the global domination of capitalism. Not that he approved of capitulating to this domination. Others also asked if they had gone through all this only to restore capitalism.

The most searching speakers were from the east, whereas many from the west were cliched and self-righteous. A young Austrian woman in the ruling party's Socialist Youth told me that they often found reformed communists much more interesting than social democrats. I agreed.

The best of these were honest communists who did not come cap in hand, begging for acceptance on any terms to become identikit social democrats. However, others who had made their careers as conformist members of communist parties as long as they were in power, now denounced everything about the communist tradition and grovelled before the social democratic one.

I was appalled listening to them. When I got up to speak, I said so. It was a strong polemic against social democratic triumphalism and a passionate defense of what was defensible in the communist tradition. It was a plea for a new intellectual synthesis and political convergence of the best of the social democratic and communist traditions. I evoked the tradition of Austro-Marxism, taking an opposite view of it from what Vranitsky had taken in his opening address.

Looking back on it, the communist movement was too perfectionist, too adventurist, too maximalist, too coercive, too willing to sacrifice means to ends. Yet there was something of value in it that should not disappear without trace. Our species would not have achieved the possible without attempting the impossible. Moreover, it did make possible the expropriation of the expropriators, the social ownership of the means of social production, distribution and exchange, relative equality of opportunity, a shift in the balance of power in the world. This should never be forgotten or dishonoured.

Social democrats, by contrast, had not dared as much as communists, but their achievements, while not invulnerable, nevertheless seemed more secure.

The communist movement was dying, but the social democratic movement looked then as if it would not only survive, but surge. Even so, I did not want to see all left traditions collapse into it, which is how some at that conference saw it.

I argued that the same critical standards that were being applied to the communist movement should be applied to the social democratic tradition. Social democracy was on higher ground in its willingness to struggle for power in multi-party elections and in attention to the task of transforming capitalism from within. However, it erred on the other side from the communists. It was too unadventurous, too minimalist, too eclectic, too myopic, too pedestrian, too parliamentarist, too opportunist, too accommodating to capitalism, too willing to sacrifice ends to means. It was not been good enough.

Gunter Grass called it a snail's journey and admitted that the runaway stallion of the Weltgeist was more compelling. By contrast:

"Even in our dreams we sighted no new land...
Where is the push if nothing pulls?"

I believed that we needed a new third way between the traditions of communism and social democracy, which took something from each of these older traditions of the left, and combined them with insights of the (now old) new left from the 1960s and the waves of new social movements, to create the basis of a (new) new left. This would be the way of democratic socialism. I believed that it was only by constructing this new third way on the left that we could open a new third way for history, a third way between the capitalism we have known until now and the socialism we have known until now.

It is what I have believed in all the years since then, even if my life on the left was filled with protesting v US foreign policy, Irish economic inequality, the marketisation of universities, while arguing for a broader vision, while failing to build a party embodying that vision.

It was this vision that made me focus so strongly on Syriza and the new energy and hope it was bringing not only to Greece, but to the international left. I saw Syriza as synthesis. It was a new convergence of the old and new left. Gathered up into Syriza were ex-CP communists, Trotskyists, Maoists and left social democrats as well as independent leftists, feminists, ecologists, alter-globalisation activists and indignados. It was my dream of a party.

Not content to cheer it on from afar, I went often to Greece from 2012 on to test my perceptions, to feel the pulse of it, to involve myself with it, to write about it for those who did not have the opportunity to do this. This resulted in my book *The Syriza Wave*, which began in surging hope and ended in crushing sorrow. The weight of international capital, the most powerful system the world has ever known, was brutally brought to bear on this fragile experiment. Syriza gathered strength, won a national election and faced their creditors who were humiliating their people and expropriating their nation.

The left government of Greece was not only defeated but capitulated in that defeat in a way that destroyed Syriza and betrayed all those who had placed their trust in them. The brave and brilliant Greek left is now in despair and disarray. Meanwhile, the government of the party still calling itself Syriza cuts public services, wages and pensions, raises taxes, extends privatization, splurges on military spending, acquiesces in imperial alliances, and brings the repressive apparatus of the state to bear upon those protesting against cuts and resisting evictions while criminalising former comrades. Basically, talking left while walking right (which is the title of my final chapter).

Syriza was the flagship project in the strategy of building broad left parties to merge the best of older left traditions with the energies and insights of newer social movements, to open a third way, to challenge for state power, to initiate concrete reforms within capitalism with a view to transcending it in the direction of socialism. The capitulation of Syriza had dealt this strategy a bitter blow, but it had not invalidated it. It remains for me the way to go.

When one wave crashes, forces gather and surge elsewhere – currently in the Corbynista version of Labour left in Britain and the resistance and new support for the idea of democratic socialism in the USA among other places.

There is also a rise of populism on both right and left, but these lack systemic analysis and enduring form, ie, they lack precisely what the left tradition of a third way has to offer. I hope it may find a new way forward.

Notes:

I have developed these ideas further in previous and future publications, most notably in *European Socialism: A Blind Alley or a Long and Winding Road?* Dublin 1992
Navigating the Zeitgeist New York 2019
Living Eons in Decades New York 2021

Bio:

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