

Book Review

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ANTI-AUSTERITY LEFT PARTIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: COMPETITION, COORDINATION AND INTEGRATION

Author: Enrico Calossi

Abstract

This book aims to define and classify current 'radical left' parties in the European Union, as well as to outline the relations within and between the subfamilies in which the book divides them.

Keywords

European Union; radical left parties; anti-austerity; transnational cooperation

With the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, most European radical left parties became largely irrelevant at both national and European level, which is also reflected in the relative scarcity of academic literature dedicated to this political family. However, the eurozone crisis that started almost ten years ago, and the pan-European politics of austerity that followed, arguably created a fertile ground for radical left parties. Indeed, over the last few years, these parties have made significant electoral breakthroughs in several EU member states, particularly in those most affected by austerity measures, such as Greece, Spain and Portugal. Despite this increasing relevance of RLPs in the European Union, they continue to be a rather under-researched topic in the field of European Studies, even more so when it comes to their transnational cooperation. In this context, Calossi's book comes as a much-needed contribution to the academic literature.

The book is divided in four chapters. The first one is a rather descriptive outline of party cooperation at European level in general, both inside and outside of the EU institutions. The second chapter aims to define contemporary parties in Europe that are situated to the left of social democracy by suggesting a new label to encapsulate them – 'anti-austerity left parties' (AALPs), where austerity is defined as 'as a set of measures implemented with the aim of decreasing budget deficits in public finances' (p. 89). The third chapter makes the case for dividing AALPs – based on their international affiliation, self-definition and ideology – in four subfamilies, which then are discussed in turn. The final chapter deals with the formal transnational cooperation among AALPS, mainly within the institutional framework of the EU.

Perhaps the most interesting and, at the same time, most debatable chapter is the second one. It is here where Calossi puts forward the central argument of the book. According to the author, the collapse of communism was followed by a period of relative electoral and governmental collaboration between the radical left and social democracy (e.g. the participation of the Communist Refoundation Party in centre-left government of Romano Prodi in Italy during the mid-2000s). However, the politics of austerity that has been accompanying the ongoing eurozone crisis produced a new cleavage between the two families of the Left. While most social democratic parties largely endorsed austerity measures and even implemented them when in government, radical left parties fundamentally opposed them. For Calossi, this opposition to austerity is the main defining feature that currently distinguishes radical left parties from social democracy, hence the AALPs label, which he suggests as a replacement for the widely-accepted one of 'radical left parties'.

Calossi advances two main arguments against the use of the currently prevailing label. Firstly, that 'radical' is not used only in reference to the Left, but also to designate 'the high degree of commitment and determination a political actor uses to achieve its goal' (p. 86), as well as a particular subfamily of liberal political parties (e.g. Radical Party in France). Secondly, that 'radical is often used with a pejorative meaning' (p. 88). However, the first argument could be refuted by simply adding 'left' next to 'radical' (which those using this label always do). Indeed, there is a slight contradiction between the two arguments: if 'radical' has a pejorative meaning and should therefore be dismissed, then how come even some liberal parties use it to identify themselves? Indeed, is the term pejorative or it may designate 'the high degree of commitment and determination' that parties of all orientations can display (p. 86)?

All this does not mean that the 'radical left' label is entirely unproblematic, especially when applied to new left parties such as Syriza or Podemos. On the contrary, it should be discussed within the field whether parties that display a Keynesian rather than Marxist economic agenda, such as Podemos, or that are currently implementing austerity measures like the Syriza-led government can be truly considered to be radical left parties, which have historically called for changing society from its roots, i.e. the overthrow of capitalism. It might be argued that these parties have occupied the space and reclaimed the policies abandoned by mainstream social democracy, which has gradually moved to the right over the last few decades. Hence, it might be the case that such parties would be more appropriately defined as 'new left social democracy' rather than 'radical left'.

Indeed, it is questionable whether Syriza is even an anti-austerity party any longer. Calossi would argue that it is, since 'every political actor should be awarded the freedom to choose its own self-definition. And scholars should respect this.' (p. 114) But Calossi appears to be self-contradictory here: if Syriza chooses to define itself as a radical left party (which it does, as its name is the Greek acronym for 'Coalition of the Radical Left' as well as an adverb translating as 'radically'), then why not respect that self-definition instead of re-defining the party as an 'anti-austerity left party'? On the other hand, I would argue that scholars should not simply 'respect' the self-definitions of political actors but critically examine them, depending on the consistency between the actors' self-definitions/self-perceptions and their actions. Otherwise, should we label North Korea as a democratic republic just because it chooses to define itself as such?

The way Calossi divides AALPs is also debatable. The four subfamilies he suggests are the EuroLeft (pro-EU parties, including Syriza, Die Linke or the Left Bloc in Portugal), the Marxist-Leninists ('orthodox' communist parties such as the Greek Communist Party or the Portuguese Communist Party), the Nordic Green Left (left-libertarian parties with a strong focus on post-materialist issues, such as the Left Party in Sweden or the Left Alliance in Finland), and the Anti-Capitalist Left

(revolutionary socialist parties, often of a Trotskyist extraction, such as the Socialist Party in Ireland or the New Anticapitalist Party in France).

There are at least two problematic aspects of this classification. Firstly, the EuroLeft group is more or less overlapping with the Party of the European Left (PEL), thus ignoring the high heterogeneity of the latter, which comprises parties as diverse as the Red Green Alliance in Denmark, the Communist Party of Spain and the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova. Secondly, the distinction between the 'Marxist-Leninist' camp and the 'Anti-Capitalist' one is rather curious given that all the parties belonging to the former consider themselves anti-capitalist too, while some of those belonging to the latter groups explicitly adhere to the tenets of Marxism-Leninism.

Moreover, the discussion of these subfamilies tends to be rather descriptive, having little to say about their internal divisions, particularly prevalent in the case of the 'EuroLeft' regarding the correct strategy towards the European institutions. The dilemma of 'reform or exit' has been increasingly salient since the deal that the Syriza-led government signed with Greece's international creditors in July 2015. Despite the book being published in the second half of 2016, there is very little about the realignments on the European 'left of the left' following that deal, including the emergence of the Plan B project led by the more Eurosceptic sections of the PEL.

Finally, while the last chapter provides a useful mapping of the transnational cooperation of AALS, it only covers formal cooperation, with a focus on the one taking place via GUE/NGL (the group of the 'radical left' in the European Parliament) and the PEL. The informal dimensions of the transnational cooperation of the left of the left thus remain a virtually unaddressed topic in the academic literature. More than that, Calossi does too little in terms of critically assessing even the formal process of cooperation, its limits and challenges in an economic and political context that should have arguably stimulated that process since the start of the eurozone crisis.

Overall, apart from the second chapter, the book is rather descriptive and arguably misses the opportunity to provide a critical account of how 'the anti-austerity left' managed to benefit from the fertile ground provided by the eurozone crisis and thereby challenge the neoliberal paradigm that has arguably been responsible not only for the crisis but also for its management. Given the actuality of these questions, such an account would have made the book significantly more relevant to a wider audience that extends beyond those researching the radical left. Rather than that, the book remains a useful mapping tool for the latter but not much more than that.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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