NPA: The Reasons for a Failure

The failure of the New Anti-capitalist Party (Nouveau Parti Anti-capitaliste – NPA) raises issues that have significance beyond the story of this party alone. This story is relevant to any activist who believes that building a new anti-capitalist political force is necessary today. Was it feasible to try to build this new force, this new political representation of radical socialism, from a single organization that was clearly attracting new activists in large numbers but from very diverse origins, thereby missing the chance for a political restructuring that would unite various movements and different political and activist backgrounds? Did past divisions justify making a clean break from older political organizations, from the frameworks and structures of the older workers’ movement, to invest only in the newer forms of mobilization and new generations of activists disconnected from past experiences?

From the LCR to the NPA

The NPA was founded in 2009 following a majority decision within the Communist Revolutionary League (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire – LCR). It is important to take a look at what took place in the years preceding this decision, which were eventful for the radical left.

Starting at the end of the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, a majority of LCR members were united around the idea of a political restructuring for the far left (the term used was “alternative”) in an attempt to respond to a number of changes in the political and social environment.

This idea arose from the observation that different activist collectives, social movements, political movements, and labor unions were open to a process of political restructuring that aimed to offer the working class (in the broad sense) and the social transformation movement fresh political representation that would be able to move past the betrayals and bankruptcy of social democracy and its experience in government. In addition, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the resulting political tidal wave had upset past reference frameworks not only in the generally accepted
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This divide needed to be redefined based on more recent experiences by uniting the anti-capitalist forces and all those seeking to change society. No distinction could be made between those who believed in the possibility of gradual change and those who believed that a revolutionary transformation (and in particular the destruction of the bourgeois state) was inevitable. It was increasingly apparent that no one really knew what path revolution could take in an advanced capitalist state with more than a century of experience of democracy because the only real-life examples had taken place in very different settings, including developing countries and autocratic regimes and dictatorships, from czarist Russia to Cuba or Nicaragua.

It was therefore a time for prudent reformulations and the notion that the past can only speak to us when related to today’s activist experiences and the new references they generate. Moreover, the background also included – though perhaps more confusedly – the notion that the party format produced by the twentieth century had many features that were no longer suitable to the current situation and to activists’ new expectations, including its vertical structure and avant-garde elitism.

These strategic reformulations corresponded to changes in the social transformation movement and in the radical left during the 1990s, especially after November-December 1995, when labor strikes spread with a fresh radicalism and under new forms of collective governance. The collectives of the late 1980s appeared first on the scene (nurses, social workers, teachers, students) followed by the regular practice of holding general meetings for labor strikes. Meanwhile, mobilization structures in various shapes took form to address various issues (housing, antiracism, antifascism, women’s rights, unemployment, social insecurity) in highly interconnected form. In addition, a new call to break down traditional barriers between the social and political spheres gained expression, and social activism began demanding full-fledged entry into politics and the right to contribute to reflection over policy and to influence the balance of power, often directly confronting the government but without actually joining the party system.

For its part, neoliberal capitalism was becoming more radicalized as part of an approach of generalized commodification of all human activity that left no room for a viable reformist project. Meanwhile, all social democratic forces in Europe rallied to support liberal policies, and the
The shared melting pot of experience needed to give rise to a political front, perhaps ultimately destined to form a new party but in a way that would unite and rise above past histories without erasing them.
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extreme left, created the illusion among most of the organization’s leaders that conquering this new electoral space and audience would allow them to dispense with addressing certain strategic questions that had been left open in the past. Shortcuts beckoned. A new agreement was reached for the 2004 regional and European elections with Lutte Ouvrière, which remained resolutely opposed to any other unifying agreement among the radical left. Although Lutte Ouvrière theoretically shared the same historical references as the LCR (Trotskyism and opposition to Stalinism), its practice, it was entirely different (no participation in unified collectives, rejection of any alliance policy, elections seen above all as a platform for propaganda).

Next, the leadership of the LCR largely underestimated the considerable political restructuring potential offered by the “No from the Left” (Non de gauche) and its campaign to reject the European Constitutional Treaty (involving broad political and labor union unity, divisions within the Socialist Party (PS) and the Greens, the massive mobilization by militant collectives, and the politicization of the population as well as the strategic scope of the space that opened up to the left of the PS.

The organization thus turned its back on the approach initiated in the 1990s, even as decisive opportunities to implement it were appearing with greater potential than ever. In fact, in 2006, the LCR leadership refused to join with the United Anti-liberal Collectives (Collectifs Unitaires Antilibéraux) that followed the Non de gauche collectives in promoting the need for a shared alternative to social liberalism for the 2007 presidential election. The reason given (and which would continue to be used to reject unity) was the lack of guarantee concerning possible participation in a social-liberal government despite the clear commitment on this topic contained in the movement’s strategy document. Yet a sizable minority within the organization took part in the construction of unified collectives. We know the rest: the unification process fell apart during the 2007 presidential election over the choice of a candidate, with the French Communist Party (PCF) retaining the candidacy of Marie-George Buffet and the anti-liberal faction split between three candidates. From that time on, the majority of LCR members retreated into ever more theory-obsessed isolation, and it is in part on this foundation that the NPA project was built.

*On the Ruins of the Unifying Process*

The project as formulated in the founding documents of the NPA and the slogans summarizing the approach (“a party for revolutionizing society”) were sufficiently vague to meet very diverse expectations at the start.
A large part of the attraction it held for many activists during its first year resided in the following description by Olivier Besancenot: “A party for uniting the best of the socialist, communist, Trotskyist, and libertarian traditions,” which gave rise to hope that different political cultures could truly converge within it. As a result, activists (labor union activists, social activists, collectives) came to join the NPA, counting on the momentum underway and hoping that this new party could be a first step toward the broader unification they wanted.

However, the NPA was quickly overtaken by reality. The majority that formed to found it in 2008, while highly heterogeneous (from supporters of an avant-garde revolutionary organization to activists who hoped that the action of the unified collectives could continue on this new path), started from the hypothesis that nothing remained on the left between the PS and the NPA or that what might exist would not be able to resist the attractions of social liberalism. Thus the founders were overly optimistic about the potential of this situation, concluding that the new party could constitute the sole political response sought by thousands of activists and by resistance forces more generally. In reality, the NPA was built on the ruins of the unifying process.

This was the starting point for a series of positions that gradually led to increasing isolation and difficulty in influencing debate on the left. In particular, a series of opportunities for electoral unity were missed: for the European elections (where independence from the social liberalism of the PS was not even an issue given the type of election and the assurance of participating in an independent group in the European Parliament) except for a few local exceptions (some of them very well known, such as in Limousin), as well as the regional and cantonal elections. The NPA moved forward without taking into account the fact that the landscape to the left of the PS was changing rapidly and in a promising direction. These changes included the creation of the “Federation for a Social and Environmental Alternative” (Fédération pour une Alternative Sociale et Écologique – FASE) in December 2008, which united a portion of the activists from the CUAL, the Alternatifs, the Alterekols, and the Association of Unified Communists (Association des Communistes Unitaires), the creation in January 2009 of the Left-Wing Party (Parti de Gauche – PG), based for the first time on a significant split on the left of the PS, and the creation in March of the same year of Unified Left (Gauche Unitaire – GU) at the meeting launching the “Left Front for a Different Europe” (Front de Gauche pour Changer d’Europe) held at the Zénith Arena. Moreover, the creation of the Left-Wing Front (Front de Gauche) for the European elections, uniting the PCF, the PG, and GU, was an important first collaboration, which was confirmed for the regional election and seemed capable of generating further momentum.

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Fundamentally, however, in addition to a succession of misunderstandings and missed opportunities, the NPA project suffered from a design defect that prevented it from adequately responding to the challenges of its time and from allowing the various activist groups that comprised it from contributing effectively.

The project of building a new party starting from a single organization, the LCR, without other movements that might serve to represent other political affiliations or experiences, prevented it from making it possible to unite the best of the various contributing currents, as had been planned. Even if many new members came from other parties or from a non-party activist experience, they were unable to bring this experience to bear in an existing organization with its own culture, theoretical and political references, and ways of doing things as the disparity of power was too large. It turned out to be impossible to build a new platform, new democratic methods, and a new culture that could unite these various contributors. It was even more difficult for those who had no previous activist experience and who were drawn to the NPA via their attraction to Olivier Besancenot’s message and their hope of something new. For them, disappointment was rife, and many simply slipped away quietly.

In fact, the dominant idea for the majority of the NPA leadership was that the goal of restructuring (which relied on the availability and integration of the historic forces of the workers’ movement) had failed. These forces, and in particular the political parties, were seen as condemned to remain under the hegemony of the PS as a result of their essentially institutional and electoral conception of power relations. From this perspective, only a reconstruction on new foundations could offer promise for the future, one that turned its back on the need to rebuild many of the instruments of the workers’ movement and to take part in debates on restructuring within the traditional or older organizations (including those of the far left). Meanwhile, the NPA’s founding majority, those members who must form the basis for this reconstruction from the bottom up, were not the leaders of the workers’ movement or of social movement organizations but the anonymous activists seen as representing a radical approach, free of the ponderous compromises reached through discussions at the top. In its early days, the NPA tried – however chaotically – to capitalize on the raw social protest movement that could take different paths but struggled to build an overarching political perspective from this basis.
A Headlong Rush

This conceptualization fed into the theory of a party whose anti-capitalism was rooted in being anti-system, in other words anchored by definition outside of the institutions (in contrast to a left characterized as institutional). It was this very conceptualization of radicalism that changed even as thinking about institutional strategy, possible modes of articulation between social and political struggles, and, within this framework, elections, was pushed aside.

In recent months, the NPA’s isolation has worsened, with the notion of an assumed revolutionary foundation for the party coming increasingly to the fore and small far-leftist groups (part of Lutte Ouvrière, Gauche Révolutionnaire) gaining a larger role. The failure of this project caused much upheaval and change among activists. Many activists from the Convergences et Alternative movement, which was formed after the founding congress to promote a single platform for the European elections, left the NPA, particularly after its February 2011 congress and in national convention in June of that year. Structured as an independent political association, Convergences et Alternative joined the Front de Gauche in June, declaring that “all the forces of the Other Left must make progress in drafting a 2012 platform for the social movement, for a majority and a government of the left that rejects the tenets of liberalism and social liberalism defended by the majority of the PS,”¹ and it has taken part in all its activities ever since.

Additionally, NPA activists seeking a unified direction in ever greater numbers,² among them members of Convergences et Alternative who were so inclined, founded “Anti-capitalist Left – Unified Movement for Eco-socialism” (Gauche Anti-capitaliste – Courant Unitaire pour l’Éco-socialisme)³ in November 2011.

What is at stake is how to include the collective experience of NPA activists in the political restructuring that is underway today.

What this predictable failure demonstrates is that given the neoliberal phase of capitalism and a government whose stated purpose is to bring an end to the existence of the organized left in France, the detour taken by the social liberal left, and the difficulty in bridging the gulf that separates social movements from an adequate political response, no organization – whatever its qualities – can claim to be the sole source of renewal or represent an answer all on its own. It also shows the difficulty in articulating what is inherited from past experiences with more recent forms of mobilization as well as the great importance of achieving this in the end.

¹. See the Convergences et Alternative blog at: http://www.convergencesetalternative.org. The motion was adopted by the March 2011 national meeting.
². Around 40% of votes at the NPA national conference in June 2011.

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