Europe: The Years of Trying

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Two recent books exploring the post-crash 'mass protest decade' and the Left's 'populist moment' present a vital — but sobering — assessment of the Left's consistent failures and potential prospects.

On 17 December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight in a government office in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. Regularly harassed by the police, the street vendor's self-immolation tapped into widespread discontent against the government; shared widely on social media, it sparked the first protests of what was to become the Arab Spring — a movement which, within a month, toppled the 23-year regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

This is the optimistic first episode of what Vincent Bevins' new book, *If We Burn,* describes as 'the mass protest decade'. In many cases inspired by the Arab Spring, the years 2010-2020 saw millions take to the streets across the world in demonstrations that in several cases overthrew their country's government or reset their constitutional order.

Despite their scale and initial successes, however, Bevins observes that nowhere did they fully realise their ambitions. Instead, he develops a pessimistic schema: protests, often organised by small left-wing groups, ultimately swelled beyond their control, leaving activists sidelined in movements they had started and sometimes in more repressive states than before.

While Tunisia (until recently) appeared to have come out of the Arab Spring well, the story was different in Egypt where left-wing activists inspired to protest 18 days after the fall of Ben Ali saw themselves out-organised by the Muslim Brotherhood who, having won the elections following the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, were in turn overthrown in a military coup. In Brazil, the anarchist free fare campaign Movimento Passe Livre (MPL) was supplanted by a right-wing movement which put left-wing radicals in physical danger at demonstrations they themselves had called. In Hong Kong, Bevins argues that protesters who assumed the loose organisational mantra 'Be water!' were unable to censure right-wing and racist outriders, losing both sympathy and momentum in the process.

For Bevins, the answer to the question of why these movements failed is to be found in their tactics and organisational structure, which he links to a corresponding philosophy. He argues that the strain running through these protests is a failure to consider — or an active rejection of — the question of political representation. Many activists, rather than treating demonstrations as a means to an end, saw them as the horizon of their politics.

For some, the presence of thousands in the street was a moral statement that could not be ignored: the power of social and mainstream media coverage would demonstrate to both the government and millions of disaffected but passive citizens that the former no longer had popular legitimacy. For others, the protest was more profound. Mass-participatory and democratic, it was a prefigurative event by which the society the protesters wished to create might emerge, embryonically, from within capitalist society. Whatever their reasons, the failure to look beyond the demonstration and think

about what came next is a regret many interviewees express.

Bevins is sceptical that foresight would have helped. One gets the impression that even if these protesters had a plan, their horizontalist organisational models — leaderless and without much internal structure — would have been incapable of organising the newly politicised in the short term or absorbing them into a coherent political group in the long run. Rather, Bevins concludes that formal and strategic organisation, with representatives and leaders to boot, is necessary to achieve and maintain political power.

The stories Bevin has assembled will be familiar to many readers who, in this decade and the last, will have seen gigantic protests leave little in their wake. But when it comes to the question of representation, many Europeans and Americans politicised in the mid-2010s may be surprised that the idea of representation is politically contentious at all. The experience and lessons of Occupy will have barely registered for activists who, either previously apolitical or simply a few years younger than millennials, came to politics and suffered defeat within formal, and larger, populist political movements. Populism's track record, however, indicates that things might be bleaker for the Left than naive philosophy and weak organisational structure.

From Daring to Risk Management

Arthur Borriello & Anton Jäger's *The Populist Moment: the Left After the Great Recession* tracks five political movements — Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, Corbynism in Britain as well as Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Bernie Sanders' presidential campaigns in France and the USA, which sought to move beyond extra-parliamentary movements and 'dare to govern'. Attempting to carve out a new political space to the left of social democracy following the 2008 crash, these groupings tried to electorally surpass or internally reconstitute centre-left parties which had been hollowed out from the 1980s and discredited by their willingness to accommodate or implement austerity.

The 'mass protest decade' and the 'populist moment' both neatly slot into the 2010s, and their similarities go beyond chronological coincidence. Drawing disproportionately and sometimes primarily from the universities, these movements were in terms of both membership and support base demographically aligned. Often sharing leadership, they drew from similar ideological traditions accordingly, with many leading activists owing a greater debt to the alter-globalisation movements of the 1990s and 2000s than the historic labour movement.

Their political demands, therefore, often mirrored one another. American, European and Middle Eastern protesters often framed themselves as neither-right-nor-left, populists — with varying degrees of cynicism — often centred an anti-corruption narrative. Spain's leading protest group (of 'normal and common people') attacked the 'corruption among politicians, businessmen, bankers', while Podemos maintained that the primary divide in society was between an honest 'people' and a sinister 'caste'. In both cases, inequality and stagnation were symptoms of their prime target: a malfunctioning political, rather than economic, system.

Likewise, populism owed the movements an apparent organisational debt. Often framing themselves as 'movements', populist parties prided themselves on their participatory structures, which allowed members to vote on policy, help write their party manifestoes, and endorse representatives. With power resting firmly in the hands of their members, some denied being parties at all. Echoing Hong Kong, Mélenchon stated that La France Insoumise (LFI) was not a party but a 'gaseous formation', while Podemos defined itself by its 'indistinction between who is a militant and a cadre and who is civil society'.

Yet despite the similarities, it's easy to exaggerate a direct link between the two movements — something that Boriello & Jäger avoid. Only Podemos and Syriza could trace their formation, personnel and philosophy back to mass protests. Corbynism, by contrast, owed more both in terms of leadership and self-conception to what Podemos condemned as the 'senile' Left of the 1980s than it did to Occupy or the student movement. Despite its aggressively populist language and style, it seems reasonable to assume that LFI — Mélenchon's second electoral outfit after the long-term Parti Socialiste politician founded Parti de Gauche — owed more to electoral expediency than political philosophy.

And, despite their claims to be participative, populist parties often more closely resembled media campaigns than they did mass movements. Podemos' brag about the indistinction between member and supporter belied not the inclusion of the latter but the powerlessness of the former. As Boriello & Jäger point out, the participatory scope of members was often constrained to ratification of policy formulated by an opaque party centre which, in turn, revolved around a charismatic 'hyperleader' (in Podemos' case, a former TV presenter), whose position as a political celebrity could mobilise the base of the party into action in his defence. In the meantime, member and supporter alike were essentially members of an email list.

Coming off larger and smaller protest movements, left-wing politics in the 2010s found its electoral expression in top-down organisations built around one man upon whom the movement was seen to (and in many cases did) live or die. The consequences of this were that, while these tightly controlled parties were able to campaign effectively in elections and crises, they wasted away in the intervening period. Mélenchon, Sanders and Corbyn all saw their popularity spike at election time, but in no case was this enough to make up for the fact that they'd slumped in the intervening period.

This problem came to define left populism, which has now run its course. Corbyn and Sanders both went from near-misses in their first runs to decisive losses in the second. In Spain and France, the strategy has been sidelined or diluted. Having failed to supersede the social democratic PSOE, Podemos has lost votes every year since 2015, and now sits as a junior partner in the former's government, running in an electoral alliance with the Communists, from whom it draws its present leader.

LFI has come out of left populism best. Having taken a combative stance against the Parti Socialiste at the height of the populist moment, LFI has become the dominant force on the French left. Since the near-miss of the 2022 presidential elections, however, it has opted for a more coalitional strategy, with LFI this month leading a 'new popular front' of Socialists, Communists and Greens to defeat the post-fascist Rassemblement National (RN) and become France's largest parliamentary grouping. With its strategy no longer premised on direct conflict with the centre-left, however, LFI now faces the task of translating gains made through its adversarial style into a parliamentary coalition with those in their own grouping who remain opposed to them politically and resent their figurehead personally.

Syriza offers a much bleaker record. The only left-populist party to form a government, after its election in 2015, it launched an austerity package more stern than its social democratic predecessors in PASOK. Now led by a former 'risk management department' employee from Goldman Sachs, Syriza has replaced what it hoped to surpass.

Swallowed by the Void

Why did this happen? Whereas Bevins provides a rich account of the motives, rationale, and justifications of individual protesters as to why they did what they did, Borriello & Jäger take a more detached view. Placing less emphasis on the philosophy of populism, which varied in content, strength and sincerity from country to country, they instead trace its origins, form and demands to the context of a stripped-out polity, or 'void'.

Just as the hollowing out of social democratic parties can explain the rise of significant left-wing challengers, the decline of participative political institutions such as unions, parties and mass organisations can explain widespread demands for democratic rejuvenation, both in parties and in protest. In this context, populism might be understood more clearly not as a direct descendant of the protest movements, but as a different response to the same crisis.

The conditions that engendered the rise of populism, however, hamstrung it. While the undemocratic void threw up socialist politicians on democratising platforms, they found themselves — sometimes after decades-long struggles for party democracy and union militancy — in leadership positions at a time where union density were at a historic low and where members of both were not that fussed about either. In this context, the media strategising and tech-optimism central to both movements appears, like hyperleadership, to be less ideological than it was a means to cope with the ironic fact that left populism's calls for greater democracy had gained traction at a time where democratic participation was at its lowest.

The attempt to adapt socialist politics to the reality of the void meant abdicating internal democracy in favour of the hyperleader playing an affective role to a demobilised but impassioned support base. Ultimately, this reconciliation would come back to bite left populism. Lacking neither the access mainstream parties could offer nor the participation mass parties once could, they either cartelised in office or dried up when they didn't make it. It is perhaps reflective of the strategy as a whole that, outside minority parliamentary groups, populism's most significant discernible legacy in Britain and the US is not in participative institutions, but left-wing media.

Where *If We Burn* demonstrates the shortcomings of a strategy that neglects political leadership, *The Populist Moment* indicates the dangers of pursuing shortcuts into power. Another lesson from the populist experiment might be that organisational fixes can only take us so far. Left populism showed that the Left still represents a constituency, but without the organisations that traditionally formed the socialist movement, it is reduced to relations of individuals rather than coherent and organised groups.

In this context, the gap between the ideas and social makeup of a highly-educated Left and its historic working-class constituency, already established by the 2010s, has continued to widen, while the union movement has declined in membership, influence, and self-belief. Without addressing this problem, there is no way forward. One could have the most participative institution in the world, but when an activist core represents a minority, the question must be asked: who is participating? And whose interests do you want representing?

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