

Andrew Flood

The Left: Ashes to Phoenix

Contents

The collapse of the left	3
It's not just the party!	4
A new left?	6
What went wrong?	7
Aiding struggle?	8
The 'new left'	9
Shopping trolley	11
The Ivory Tower	11
All action, no talk?	12

It has become something of a cliché to refer to the death or collapse of the left. What's still missing however is an analysis of what went wrong with the left. One that goes beyond surface manifestations, and reaches into its core politics. This lack of analysis means that much of the 'new left' is not that new at all, merely a repackaging of old ideas in new wrappers.

Major changes have occurred in the left throughout its short history. In both numbers and politics there have been wide swings from times of hope and mass numbers to times of despair and collapse. In the late 60's and early 70's the left grew internationally, attracting huge numbers and leading real battles. Today this growth has collapsed almost totally, many of the organisations that led it no longer exist and the ideas of those that survive, have been for the most part so discredited, that it is unlikely they can ever recover.

The collapse of the left

Since the Russian revolution the left has been divided into two great camps. There were those who followed the Bolshevik model of a revolutionary seizure of state power and those who followed the more traditional Marxist model of social democracy, seeking to gain state power electorally where possible. Although there were other significant movements, including the anarchists, what shaped the left today were the splits within those two camps and the perimeter of debate laid down around them.

The Communist parties built real mass parties in many countries, and expanded their influence from Russia to a host of other nations. Along with all those who claimed the Bolshevik legacy, they rode a carpet of triumphalism for many years, one that limited debate around revolution to variations on the Leninist model. Even in countries like Ireland where they never reached significant numbers, the prestige of Russia and the other revolutions enabled them to wield an influence far out of proportion with their numbers, among intellectuals and in the unions. But towards the end of the 1980's the whole edifice crashed to the ground almost overnight. In the east the parties were overthrown, in the west they split into competing and mostly irrelevant factions.

The social-democrats in the years after the First World War expanded on the earlier success of the German SDP and came to power in country after country. Most of the western democracies have had social democratic governments in the intervening period. But the left social-democrats had always looked to the USSR as a guide, while their policies were very much based on ability to control and direct national capital. In the 80's the changed nature of capital, from a national form to an increasingly transnational one made social democratic economic programs

redundant. The control of the national economy needed by the nation state for even the limited reforms of social-democracy is beginning to vanish. Witness how even the threatened election of a Labour government in Britain resulted in rapid capital transfers out of the country. The left within the social democratic parties collapsed due to the increasing impotence of their program and the emerging crisis in the USSR. Their mass membership first dwindled and then collapsed. Today in rhetoric as well as deed they are indistinguishable from the liberal parties.

This twin collapse was international and resulted in the vast bulk of those who called themselves socialist abandoning left politics and activism. As a related consequence the 1980's also saw the 'left' leaning national liberation organisations like the ANC or FMLN come to a compromise with imperialism and reach a settlement. This had a demoralising effect on those whose primary focus was solidarity work for these organisations, one that is still to reach its full consequences as events unfold in South Africa and Palestine.

There were many who saw themselves as outside the Communist parties and the social democrats. Sometimes the differences were real, as with anarchists. Sometimes they were not so real but appeared so because of the very narrowness of debate, as with most Trotskyists. Even with this perceived gap the very fact that huge numbers abandoned politics had a knock on effect. This was demoralising but it also meant that effective action became increasingly impossible. Even if the arguments were won, the networks that could have carried them through no longer existed.

It's not just the party!

All those bodies which could be described as 'left' have seen a collapse in involvement. This effect is seen not just in political organisations but more importantly in all campaigning bodies. The effect is seen in the unions where the number of activists has dwindled to the point where most unpaid positions are uncontested. This has led to the outwardly positive 'election' of revolutionaries to trades councils and branch committees. The reality behind this is more to do with nobody else being willing to take the job. In no sense has the broad layer of activists (who might once have seen far left politics as loony) been won over, rather most have dropped out or come to see revolutionary politics as irrelevant rather than dangerous.

The ability of the left to explain what is happening around it, to intervene in events and to change the course of them has vanished. Although illusions in the state was always the major problem of the left, today the activity of what remains is little more than attempts to get the state to police society for the better.

For example the far-right is to be countered by trying to get the Fascists banned by the state at national and local level. In fact much of the left today see people themselves as the problem and see more police, more intrusive management, more control over what can be said and seen, as the solution. Most notably this has arisen in the focus on censorship as not just a method but almost the only way of fighting both racism and sexism.

The death of the left is also reflected in its lack of hope. Where once the left was all about an exciting vision of a future society now it is pre-occupied with a fear of the future and a longing for the past. New scientific discoveries instead of being seen as part of the process of liberating man from nature, are instead seen as part of a plan to create a Huxley type 'Brave New World'. Hence recent articles in surviving Trotskyist journals argue against Chaos Theory and the Human Genome project as being anti-Marxist. Science once seen as the solution to many of humanity's problems is now seen as a major problem in itself.

This is what is meant by saying the left is dead. Its numbers have collapsed, it has no vision or direction and instead of looking to the future it worships the past.

From one point of view anarchists can in part welcome this collapse, as it is the collapse of authoritarian socialism. Most of the left organisations were social-democratic or Leninist in character and so their ideas were incapable of constructing socialism. The nature of the collapse re-enforces the anarchist rejection of the authoritarian methods of these organisations as it was these methods that destroyed the potential for socialism. After years of being told that compromises and deceit were the fastest (if not only) way to create socialism, anarchists feel entitled to repeat the response of Voline to Trotsky in 1919 at the height of the Russian Civil war:

Trotsky: One can't make an omelette without breaking eggs

Voline: I see the broken eggs now where's this omelette of yours?

In the English speaking countries and in particular Ireland, the anarchist movement is much too small to replace the numbers and influence once held by the left. So the collapse of authoritarian socialism is widely seen as the collapse of socialism and a demonstration that capitalism, whatever its flaws is the best that can be hoped for. Even in the countries where the anarchist movement is substantial (and in many countries it is the main force on the revolutionary left) it is as yet inadequate for its basic task (i.e. revolution). In terms of ideas, the anarchists may have the best ones but as yet they are not capable of winning the masses to overthrowing capitalism and creating anarchism.

In the English speaking countries there is not and has not been a significant anarchist movement with the possible exception of the period up to World War I in the USA. Anarchists have operated as a small section of a larger left. Because

of the small size of the anarchist movement the collapse of this larger left has had profound effects on it, both due to the general climate of demoralisation and also because it is no longer possible to exist purely as an opposition to Leninism and social democracy. This is a good thing because some anarchist organisations had come to limit themselves to explaining ‘Why the left is wrong’ on a whole number of issues rather than trying to construct an alternative themselves.

A new left?

It might be hoped that with the twin collapse of Leninism and authoritarian socialism people would flock to the banner of anarchism. For the most part this has not happened. Instead over the last decade we have seen the emergence of a number of ‘new’ left organisations which claim to represent a decisive break with the past. Sometimes this represents little more than a change of names. In other cases these new organisations arose as splits by members unhappy with the direction of existing organisations, their initial politics coming from ex-members of that organisation. The Committees of Correspondence in the USA was formed by members of the Communist Party USA who lost an internal argument over the direction (‘reforming’) of that party.

Many members of the old left organisations recognised that their ideas were discredited and no longer relevant, and voted with their feet, leaving not only left organisations but oppositional politics in general. But not all vanished, some have made efforts to remain active. Some of these have refused to learn anything, or admit that mistakes were made, instead they carry on activity in a parody of yesteryear. Some of the Communist parties for instance reacted by returning to worshipping the period of Stalin or Brezhnev and blame the ‘reformers’ for all their current woes. The Irish Communist Party responded to the collapse of the USSR by hiring a skip and throwing most of the Gorbachev material from their Dublin bookshop into it. In most Communist parties however the majority came to the conclusion that revolution itself was no longer possible and instead became social democrats or abandoned left politics for ‘progressive’ politics where the working class is seen as just one more pressure group in a rainbow coalition.

Some organisations did become aware of their own death and sensibly dissolved themselves rather than causing damage as they thrashed around in their death agonies. But they were wrong to imagine that just because they could conceive no future relevance for revolutionary politics that revolution was no longer relevant. Instead they were faced with a jump that they were incapable of seeing the other side of. Indeed the upturn in industrial disputes over the last year in Europe, most notably around Air France, indicate that the class conflict goes on and may

even be picking up some of its lost momentum. Unemployment and poverty have again become obvious features of capitalism. To this extent the crisis on the left is mirrored by a crisis in capitalism, its hope of the early 80's of an eternal boom now dashed on the rocks of recession.

What went wrong?

That the left has collapsed is contested by only the most irrelevant sects. But the attempts to explain why it happened are poor, focusing on the surface manifestations; the economic crisis of the USSR in the 80's, or conspiracy theories about the CIA. The right and many on the left went for the simplest explanation of all, socialism cannot work and revolutions have to end in dictatorship. But the failure is not with the idea of socialism but rather with what those who called themselves socialists became. It was not socialism that failed but the socialists! Above all, this failure arose from the left ideologies that looked to good leaders to liberate the rest of us. To these ideologies the role of 'ordinary people' differed, from the tickers of ballot papers to the stormers of barricades. The role of decision makers however was denied, it was to be placed in trust with an intellectual elite until the far off day when this power could be returned.

The tragic part about this is that the warnings about where the statist path would lead have been around since the working class first became a formidable force at the time of the Paris Commune (1871). The debate between the anarchists and Marxists that split the 1st International was fought around this issue. But for various reasons those issuing the warning, the anarchists, failed to convince the rest of the left.

The two major trends of the 20th Century socialist movement, the Leninists and the social-democrats, were not as radically different as it may have seemed but rather represented two sides of the same coin. The actual structure of rule in the Soviet Union was never really a major problem for either of these groupings, their disagreements were over whether such a society had to be established through revolution, or could be 'reformed' into being. Both currents sought to create socialism through the actions of a few, wielding state power, on behalf of the many. Left social-democrats like Tony Benn went further and were commonly happy enough to describe the USSR as actually existing socialism. In Ireland, organisations like the Workers Party held a similar (if quiet) position towards North Korea and, along with members of Labour Left went there on junkets.

The argument between Leninism and social-democracy was not about how a socialist society could be built, both aimed to use state power to do this. Rather

it was whether sufficient control of the state could be gained through the parliamentary system. Many Leninists may have claimed to wish for more democracy in the USSR but they all stood over the Bolshevik destruction of democracy, only moving to opposition when their particular hero was ousted. Organisations like the Socialist Workers Party that claim to stand for 'socialism from below' defend the actions of the Bolsheviks in imposing one man management, crushing workers councils and censoring, imprisoning and executing members of other left tendencies. This has to call into question any claimed commitment to democracy, or socialism from below.

Aiding struggle?

Even in the short term the left commonly offered no way forward. It would be wrong to overstate the case but a large section of the left was not interested in helping workers win struggles except in the most abstract sense. Instead involvement in struggle had just one thing behind it: 'build the party'. This commonly took the form of setting up a party controlled 'front' which would campaign around an issue solely in order to recruit those who were motivated to fight on this issue. Once the potential recruits dried up, then the campaign was quietly wound up. A common response to contacting someone about a new campaign was the question of 'whose front is it'. Anyone who has been involved with left activity for any period of time will have been through meetings and campaigns disrupted and possibly destroyed by different left factions wrestling for control.

The effect this had on activists was seen by the way membership of many left organisations operated like a revolving door, with people interested in socialism walking in one side, only to be thrown out the other, disillusioned and burnt out. 'Everything for the organisation' was the unofficial slogan of the left. This destroyed many peoples' belief in socialism as a source of inspiration as they got sucked into the methods of treachery and deceit that this involved.

Many of today's activists have either come through this mill, or have had bad experiences of the left using them. This has created a legacy of suspicion and even hostility which forms a real barrier in building solidarity today. It also means that many activists have no interest in building revolutionary organisations but instead limit themselves to building campaigns. Revolutionary organisations are seen as self-serving edifices rather than bodies with a positive and vital contribution to make to struggle. The attitude that characterises these activists' view of the revolutionary organisations is suspicion.

So in this way the left has actually played a substantial negative role. It has constructed a monstrous caricature of socialism and the methods of socialism. Rather than bringing people forward, it has sucked the spirit out of them. Not just those parts of the left who created and worshipped the USSR but also those whose methods have alienated tens of thousands of activists. In this context many activists see left organisations as useless barriers, interested only in selling papers and sectarian squabbles.

The 'new left'

This crisis of the left has become increasingly apparent over the last decade and has resulted in the formation of many new groups, including ourselves. As the crisis became particularly obvious, the process of disintegration speeded up and the new organisations if anything became more confused. Most of the more recent ones have no common vision of anything positive in the past but are united solely by a feeling of 'that's not the way to do it' towards the existing left. But consciously or unconsciously, various strategies have been adopted by some as the way forward. It is these strategies that must be examined to judge the potential of such new groups.

Groups whose aim is a new flavour of Leninism or social-democracy can be written off at the start. The record of their strategies for the last century speaks for itself. From the libertarian point of view the fault is in their core politics, that which makes them statist. However many have become aware of these flaws and so many of the groups that have arisen in the last decade would claim to be neither. It is these forces which are important in terms of the emergence of a new left.

Certain limitations have to be recognised from the start. It is inevitable that many of the newer left organisations have a blinkered vision, brought about by their youth and small size. Their memory extends back maybe a decade or so at most. They are unaware of events outside their own country except in the broadest terms, and force events to fit into an analysis generated from their immediate and narrow experience. This is a real if unavoidable problem, but one that is greatly reduced when it is recognised and taken into account. It is also a reason why it is vital to convince many of the older layer of activists that there is still a point in revolutionary politics, but that a thorough re-examination of basic politics is necessary.

It is not intended to discuss organisations claiming to be in the anarchist tradition in this article. What will be discussed is organisations who believe that the wheel needs to be re-invented (i.e. that there is no historical tradition

worth basing themselves on). These see the solution in junking the left to date, and re-building from scratch. This is the most common set of strategies to have emerged in the last few years. What has united these different strategies to date is that although it is pointed out repeatedly that mistakes were made and the old left is irrelevant, there is little analysis as to the cause of this irrelevancy. The assumption is that with the verbal break from the 'old politics', all the problems it created fade away.

This assumption is fundamentally flawed as it assumes that the reasons for the failure of the left to date are understood. In fact for the most part, instead of analysis, all that exists is a set of popular prejudices and some surface understanding of the problem. This approach also assumes that there is little need for newer members to re-discover the cause of the previous problems, that this information will somehow be transmitted down by the older members (leadership?). This in itself is a direct example of the re- appearance of one of the problems associated with the failure of the old left. The division into leaders and paper sellers.

Organisations adopting these strategies are often faced with an additional problem. They attract long time members of various other organisations who have brought a fair amount of political baggage with them. Although they can say 'yes we were wrong' they can't admit the possibility that some of their former critics were right, at least in part. One British group, Analysis, decided that the Russian revolution was not so relevant after all. To them the turning point for the failure of socialism was the support the social democratic parties gave to their various ruling classes in voting for World War I. As they put it "Had the revolution never occurred, had Stalinism never existed, Marxism would still face the crisis it does today." This was a handy way for a bunch of 'ex'-Leninists to avoid facing why they had remained uncritical of the Bolsheviks for so many years.

This political baggage also surfaces in that although many can admit the Russian revolution was in part destroyed by the politics of Bolshevism, they can only do so after first making clear that their critique is not related to the 'moralism' of the anarchists. This is the hallmark of an organisation that never sees itself as addressing 'ordinary people'. Who in their right mind would approach such a discussion with "I've nothing against shooting leftists to achieve revolution, but it does not work". The anarchists were full of moral indignation at the Bolshevik shooting of leftists and workers and quite right too! But they also argued that terror was crushing the revolution by destroying popular initiative and debate. To read Voline's or Maximoff's, (two of the exiled Russian anarchists) accounts, is not to encounter page after page of moralism but to find concrete example after example of the crippling of a revolution by a party obsessed with its need to be in control. It is also fundamentally dishonest and reflects the attitude of the guru

to his followers. It is obviously not expected that anyone will look at the original 'moralism'.

It is the strategies that are based around this method that are looked at here. Strategies based on the premise that little if anything can usefully be salvaged from the left's history. Strategies based above all on the idea that to date nothing useful has been done, except perhaps in the field of theory. And it is in this approach to theory and its perceived relationship to practice that the greatest problems arise.

Shopping trolley

To see nothing coherent in the past but still wish to be active leaves an organisation with an immediate problem. What do you base this activity on? One strategy used in this case, where a wide body of theory is quickly needed, is equivalent to filling a shopping trolley at a car boot sale. What appears to be the most useful ideas from the past are picked up, regardless of their relationship with each other.

The adoption of such a strategy is often characterised by a tendency for the organisation to see itself as the only one capable of understanding what's going on. It's not hard to see how this mentality develops when all around seem to be intent on carrying on regardless on a sinking ship. Apart from this inherent elitism, this strategy carries its own problems.

Chief among these is that, if an organisation places itself in the role as saviour it must be able to provide answers to everything. The development of coherent ideas takes time. This time can be reduced considerably by picking what appear to be the best ideas around. While this approach is highly flawed it can perhaps be feasible if sufficient time is spent re-developing these ideas to fit into the core of the organisations existing politics. (There is also the wider question of 'is it necessary?') In practice however, temptation wins and one gets treated to a frantic super-market spree as the group hurtles around quickly grabbing whatever has the best packaging off the shelves. Unfortunately at some later stage it's discovered all the bits don't quite go together. But by then everybody's got their pet piece and no one has much in common.

The Ivory Tower

Another strategy that is emerging is for organisations to shun activity in favour of a retreat to academia, to re-examine the text books in order to emerge some time in the future with a shiny new theory. This is often the next stop for individuals

who have been in a group where the shopping trolley fell apart. Activity or contact with the outside world is diagnosed as the problem, what's needed is temporary isolation, with your message just being aimed at others on the left who have realised something is wrong.

Their deliberate use of archaic language shows us that what we have is politics designed to impress the existing intellectual left. There is no excuse for putting across simple ideas in complex terms unless you intend your material to be used as a sleeping aid. These may seem like irrelevant stylistic matters but actually they reflect an important point.

This is that the new left is repeating many of the mistakes of the old, in a re-packaged form. The idea that the answers are to be found in text books, that somewhere, there is a magic theory or theories which will show the way forward is just a re-working of the old Trotskyist idea of a 'crisis of leadership'. Ideas are important and the right ideas are vital but it is people who are the life blood of the revolutionary process. Far more people are aware that the current system is offering an inadequate future for themselves and their children than are involved in revolutionary politics. Most people come into conflict with the system at one stage or another. What is lacking is the belief that there can be an alternative, that change is possible.

What's needed are arguments on why revolutions have failed in the past and how they can succeed in the future. But what is also needed is the development of a tradition of success. People must believe that they can win in order for them to start to fight back. This belief can be created by winning small victories. What's more it is only by real experience in struggle, that ideas can be tested, it is only by encountering real life that the ability to convince people can be honed. Those who would retreat to the libraries are like armchair tourists who imagine watching Holiday '95 is the same thing as walking down those far away streets.

All action, no talk?

There is another side to this 'emphasis on theory' coin. Another strategy which has been adopted by some organisations is one in which theory is either discarded beyond rudimentary aims and principles, or left to a small elite. No need is perceived for politics developed beyond a 'we hate capitalism'. Nor is a need seen for politics to be developed within the whole organisation as opposed to a small elite, steering the ship. In many cases this last strategy is not adopted in a conscious fashion but rather is the end result of an anti-organisation attitude. It stems from an alienation from and rejection of the traditional methods of the

left so that these methods themselves rather than just their implementation are rejected. It can perhaps be characterised as 'all action and no talk'!

Such a strategy frequently results in the organisation's activities being limited to cheerleading for others, unwilling and unable to influence the actual course of events. Blind activism is substituted for theoretical discussion. Most of such organisations are short lived, quickly becoming demoralised after finding themselves being used as foot soldiers by some more organised section of the left. Even for those who survive for some considerable period this is often as a result of hermetically sealing themselves off from the rest of the left. This is achieved by dismissing other groups through crude labels whose political content is zero or close to zero (such as 'students', 'trendies', 'sad', 'middle class', 'boring', the reader will probably be familiar with other examples).

This labelling is similar to the technique used by many Leninists and so demonstrates the unconscious vanguardism some of these organisations have assumed. Their publications cover their activities along with those whom they cheer on alone, they also present themselves as the 'only revolutionaries'. They reject attempts to involve wider forces if they are not going to dominate the resulting alliance. This vanguardism, along with the sectarian characterisation of others, in conditions of feared defeat or frustration, has even, with a number of organisations, resulted in poorly excused physical attacks on other leftists!

The last two strategies discussed, the 'Ivory Tower' and the 'all action, no talk' are in fact twins. They share in common the idea that theory and practice can be separated, and perhaps need bear no relationship to one another at all. To believe that one can be developed without the other is a fallacy. So also is the idea that one is the work of intellectuals, the other the work of activists. The two go hand in hand. It may be possible to come up with fine ideas in your back room or carry out actions on the streets but it is only where these two combine that the potential for revolution gains space to emerge. In the development of ideas and the activity of struggle it is not just the results that matter. As important is the process, the development of the ability and confidence to make decisions and carry them through. This ability must be developed not just in the organisation but in every individual, if the division into leader and led is to be avoided.

This is an echo of the anarchist insistence that the end (the revolution) cannot be separated from the means (revolutionary organisation) used to obtain it. The surest safeguard against future hijacking of revolutionary movements by authoritarianism is not to have a golden rule book or a sub group to keep the movement pure but a tradition of self-activity. This is a hint at the direction that needs to be taken.

We are coming through a time of cataclysmic change for the left. The old methods of organisation have failed, the new ones that are evolving are flawed

and sometimes not even all that new. Some of the problems faced have been identified in this article, the more difficult question is how to go about constructing a new left? Part of the answer to this question is the realisation that the problems discussed above have a common solution. Is it necessary to re-invent the wheel? Or is there already a left tradition whose analysis is a starting point explaining the failure of the left in the past. Such a tradition does indeed exist and what's more it also provides from its history a positive model of socialist organisation.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
May 21, 2012



Andrew Flood
The Left: Ashes to Phoenix

Retrieved on January 1, 2005 from www.cat.org.au