

# 'Structural Reform' and the Problem of Socialist Strategy Today

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*This paper begins with the observation that the left-wing movements that have enjoyed significant political advances in Europe recently share a broad strategic orientation. They seek, that is, to combine electoral and parliamentary activity on the one hand with extra-parliamentary mobilisation on the other. Crucially, these formations seek to utilise parliamentary channels to introduce radical reforms and thus a central component of their approach is to form a 'left government' within the institutions of the capitalist state. Despite the failure of Syriza in office I argue that the radical left has little option but to work with these ascendant left formations and attempt to radicalise them from within. I suggest that in order to do so the radical left must transcend the twin dead ends of reformism and Leninism and the historical strategic impasse bound up with the counter-position of these strategic poles. I argue that a strategic perspective elaborated by a minority current within Syriza provides useful resources for navigating a route beyond this impasse. I then show that this perspective can be further elaborated and refined by drawing on theoretical resources associated with the concept of 'structural reform' developed in the late 1960s and 1970s. I argue that the work of Nicos Poulantzas and André Gorz is especially useful in this regard.*

*Keywords:* Socialism; Strategy; Reform; State; Poulantzas; Gorz

Despite their many differences, the leftist formations that have made political headway in Europe in recent years—Syriza, Podemos, the Left Bloc, the movement that has cohered around Jeremy Corbyn within and outside the Labour Party—share a key strategic perspective in common. This is an explicit orientation on winning government power by electoral means—to form, that is, a 'left government'—supplemented to some extent by extra-parliamentary mobilisation, in order to implement a series of left social democratic reforms that at least some currents within these formations see as, in some sense, 'transitional'. It is groups and movements operating on the basis of this broad strategic outlook that have most effectively been able to tap into and

articulate a popular anti-austerity mood and their rise has forced the radical left in Europe to confront, for the first time in many years, concrete problems of strategy in relation to the conquest and exercise of political power. Indeed Syriza's general election victory in 2015 posed the question in very immediate terms of how, and to what extent, capitalist state power might be utilised for socialist purposes.

This turn to questions of government power and strategic orientation in relation to the capitalist state manifested, as Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin have pointed out, a marked shift of emphasis on the radical left 'from protest to politics'<sup>1</sup> which in turn reflected a deeper shift in the fundamental coordinates of the political and economic conjuncture. The focus of struggle, that is, shifted away from the 'anti-globalisation' and anti-war demonstrations that had defined radical left organising for the first few years of the 21st century under conditions of 'globalising' capitalist expansion to a new emphasis on the possibilities of winning power directly to resist and reverse the onslaught of capitalist retrenchment in the post-2008 era of crisis and austerity. However, while this change of emphasis brought novelty in some respects, in others of course it represented a return to one of the oldest controversies in socialist thought. Indeed the debate surrounding the strategic approach of these formations—Syriza in particular—was often framed in terms of the classic reform/revolution controversy and the opposing orientations in relation to capitalist state power marked out by the key antagonists in that confrontation—Bernstein, Luxemburg, Lenin and Kautsky.

While the rise of Syriza and its election triumph may initially have seemed to vindicate the general strategic orientation of the ascendant left formations, its ultimate capitulation to the austere demands of 'the Troika'<sup>2</sup> provided a fillip to revolutionary socialist critics of Syriza's 'reformism' or 'left-reformism'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed Syriza's hugely disappointing performance in office became the occasion for the reassertion of Leninist<sup>4</sup> axioms in relation to the necessity of remaining strictly independent of the capitalist state rather than seeking to utilise it as a tool of socialist transformation and to the associated imperative of seeking, instead, to 'smash' it by means of a 'dual power' strategy leading to revolutionary insurrection broadly along the lines of the Bolshevik revolution.

The Leninist critique of reformism is clearly not without merit in relation to the constraints, pressures and obstacles imposed by 'parliamentary statism' as Paul Blackledge puts it.<sup>5</sup> As revolutionary critics such as Blackledge point out, forces seeking to

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, 'Class, Party and the Challenge of State Transformation', *The Socialist Register*, 53 (2017), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> That is, the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund.

<sup>3</sup> On the utility of the latter term see Paul Blackledge, 'Left Reformism, the State and the Problem of Socialist Politics Today', *International Socialism*, 139 (Summer 2013) and my response: Ed Rooksby, "'Left Reformism" and Socialist Strategy', *International Socialism*, 140 (Autumn 2013).

<sup>4</sup> I use the term 'Leninism' to refer to revolutionary socialist organisations that model themselves on Lenin's Bolsheviks. There are different variants of Leninism, but it is fair to say that most share a broad strategic orientation in common.

<sup>5</sup> Blackledge, *op. cit.*

use the existing state for socialist purposes tend to encounter a logic in which they find themselves taking on responsibility for *managing*, rather than seriously *challenging*, capitalism, no matter how radical their original intentions may have been. Indeed this critique resonated closely with Syriza's political trajectory as, on approaching electoral victory, it gradually moderated its policy proposals to present itself as a viable party of government in the eyes of the media and then, on achieving office, rowed back on most of its remaining pledges before eventually capitulating to 'the Troika's' austerity agenda.

The trouble with the Leninist critique however is that, no matter how apposite its diagnosis of the constraints imposed by Syriza's 'parliamentary statism', it remained unable to offer a credible concrete alternative and the political groups that cleaved to this strategic orientation (such as Antarsya) were largely bypassed, winning nothing remotely close to the degree of support that Syriza were able to gather as they approached office. Indeed while Syriza's trajectory mapped on all too closely to the typical pattern of reformist politics, the marginalisation of Leninist politics in Greece, and thus the practical irrelevance of its strategic alternative, was even more predictable, given that Leninist ideas have never won anything close to mass support in any 'advanced' capitalist country.

Thus, after the Syriza experience, the radical left seems to be trapped in a strategic impasse. It is caught between an electoral strategy of reform, on the one hand, that, while it can clearly galvanise mass support, seems unable to break free of the structural limits of 'parliamentary statism' and a revolutionary strategy, on the other, that has very little resonance with workers today and probably never did have beyond the specific conditions of Russia in 1917.

The aim of this paper is to point to a way out of this impasse—to a strategic perspective that resonates with the general orientation of those left formations that have achieved momentum recently and which also navigates a route that avoids the twin dead ends of reformism and Leninism. In what follows I first set out in more detail the terms of the radical left's current strategic impasse, before pointing to a minority current of thought within Syriza which has sketched out an alternative strategic perspective that was neither straightforwardly reformist or revolutionary and which might, if implemented, have worked with the grain of the concrete political dynamic in Greece as Syriza approached and took power in order to radicalise this dynamic from within. It is also a perspective, I suggest, that would have traction in other countries in which the radical left approached power in broadly similar circumstances. I then argue that this embryonic perspective can be enriched and developed by drawing on theoretical resources developed in the late 1960s and 1970s when radical thinkers were attempting to grapple with similar developments.

### **The Strategic Impasse: Two Forms of Socialist Bad Faith**

Arguably, there is nothing particularly new about the strategic impasse of the radical left today—it is just that this predicament has made itself felt more keenly in the

aftermath of the Syriza debacle. Indeed, in his survey of the history of the European socialist movement, *One Hundred Years of Socialism*,<sup>6</sup> Donald Sassoon suggests that the socialist left has *always* been caught in a kind of double bind. Sassoon presents the dilemma in terms of an unbridgeable gap between, on the one hand the ‘end state’ of socialism and, on the other, the immediate demands of the present—as he puts it, a ‘split between “the final aim” and the “everyday struggle”’, between the short-term and the medium- to long-term, existed throughout the socialist movement’.<sup>7</sup> The terms of the problem, briefly, are that there is no realistic way to move straight to the ‘final aim’, but the process of attending to immediate problems—amelioration of the worst effects of capitalism by means of reform—tends to lead to incorporation within a system that has definite structural limits and embedded systemic mechanisms to enforce these (capital flight, inflationary pressure, balance of payments crises for example). Theorists such as Fred Block and Adam Przeworski<sup>8</sup> have described these limits in terms of ‘business confidence’. This is the major structural mechanism that tends systematically to block attempts to transform capitalism fundamentally from within. It is rooted in capitalist control over the investment function which provides the capitalist class with what is effectively power of veto over any government policy that undermines capitalist domination. In this way any government that introduces measures that seriously undermine (or threaten to seriously undermine) capital accumulation will soon be faced with a serious crisis of disinvestment, flight of capital, attacks on the currency and so on and hence comes under enormous pressure to reverse those measures.<sup>9</sup> Thus any government that prefers to avoid such an acute crisis and which, indeed, is not prepared to take on and attempt to expropriate big capital in a full-on and hugely risky confrontation—which, by definition, those committed to a gradual and peaceful process of transition to socialism are not—will find that there are definite limits to reform.

Developing the implications of this double bind we might say that the reformist way of attempting to resolve the problem of capitalist power of veto over reforms that tend to undermine capitalist profitability is essentially to kick the final aim into the long grass. Reformism, that is, busies itself with immediate reforms within the system that do not challenge capitalist limits while, at most, paying lip-service to the idea of eventual transition to socialism at some unspecified time in the future. A hazy connection between immediate reforms and the final aim may be invoked by reference to a path of gradual, incremental transformation of the system, but the process in which *reforms to* the system become *transformation of* the system—in which quantity is

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> See Fred Block, ‘The Ruling Class Does not Rule: Notes on the Marxist Theory of the State’ in Fred Block (ed.) *Revising State Theory: Essays in Politics and Postindustrialism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987) and Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> This was the pattern of events that accompanied, for example, the election of the government headed by Francois Mitterrand in 1981. See Sassoon, *op. cit.*, pp. 534–571.

transformed into quality—is, typically, left only very vaguely described. Thus, for reformism the socialist goal is always-already not just yet, just over the horizon, relegated to a perpetually postponed future. This is, of course, a kind of bad faith. It is all too easy to identify this evasion characteristic of reformism in some of the thinking of key intellectual figures associated with Syriza. It is most obvious, perhaps, in Yanis Varoufakis's comments in 2013 that he saw it as the left's immediate task to 'save European capitalism from itself, given that 'we are just not ready to plug the chasm that a collapsing European capitalism will open up with a functioning socialist system'.<sup>10</sup> One can also see it—whatever the merits of the sophisticated argument he puts forward—in Costas Douzinas's argument in relation to Syriza's predicament in office that the left must operate on 'three different temporalities' once it enters government.<sup>11</sup> He argues, that is, that a left government must operate in 'the time of the present' when it is forced to offer concessions and 'to implement what they fought against', while at the same time striving to activate two other temporalities—a medium-term one in which it seeks to create the space to implement a "parallel" program' comprising 'policies with a clear left direction' and a much longer-term temporality which is 'the time of the radical left vision'. This reads very much like an elaborate rationalisation of capitulation in the present with reference to vaguely defined 'parallel' measures that somehow express fidelity to deferred long-term transformational socialist intent.

There is, however, a revolutionary mirror image to this reformist bad faith too—a 'resolution' of the dilemma that is not really a resolution. This is to avoid the problem of structural limits to reform and the attendant risk of becoming incorporated as a mere manager of the system by repudiating any responsibility for taking on government power within capitalism and, instead, pinning everything on a kind of *deus ex machina*, a semi-millenarianism, in which revolution (always vaguely sketched—necessarily so since the concept of 'the revolution' tends to function as a kind of magic bullet solution to all major problems of transition) emerges as if from nowhere. This mysterious revolutionary irruption, however, is also always-already never quite here. Again, this is a kind of bad faith.<sup>12</sup>

This is not to say, of course, that Leninists are unable to present any vision of the general contours of a revolutionary event. It is to say, however, that this vision remains in key respects rather ethereal. Let me explain. Typically the Leninist

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<sup>10</sup> See Yanis Varoufakis, 'Confessions of an Erratic Marxist in the Midst of a Repugnant European Crisis', Znet, February 2015, <https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/confessions-of-an-erratic-marxist-in-the-midst-of-a-repugnant-european-crisis>. This is the full text of a speech first delivered in 2013. Varoufakis served as the Minister for Finance in the Syriza government from January to July 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Costas Douzinas, 'The Left in Power? Notes on Syriza's Rise, Fall, and (Possible) Second Rise', Near Futures Online, March 2016, <http://nearfuturesonline.org/the-left-in-power-notes-on-syrizas-rise-fall-and-possible-second-rise>. Douzinas is a member of the Greek parliament for Syriza.

<sup>12</sup> Sassoon gives remarkably short shrift to Western European revolutionary socialist groups: 'If there is one single thread in the evolution of Western Europe it is the marked absence of any possibility of a working class revolutionary insurrection on the Bolshevik pattern'. 'Those', he continues, 'who failed to appreciate this fundamental fact were condemned to the most complete political insignificance'. See Sassoon, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

revolutionary sequence is conceived in something like the following terms:<sup>13</sup> workers' struggle throws up soviet-type institutions which, in a situation of dual power, are increasingly federated and integrated together into an embryonic workers' state and which after revolutionary insurrection and the 'smashing of the bourgeois state' become the institutions of democracy through which the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is exercised. However, there are two major problems—two areas of evasion—inherent in this typical sketch of the revolutionary process. The first of these is that the phrases 'smashing of the bourgeois state' and 'dictatorship of the proletariat' are, more often than not, deployed as hand-waving generalities—they are pieces of phraseology that gloss over problems while purporting to be solutions to those problems. What, exactly, does it mean to 'smash the state'? How, exactly, does the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' function and what are the specific institutional forms that it should take? As Nicos Poulantzas points out, these phrases were for Marx and Engels at most 'signposts' indicating *problems* (the class nature of the state, the necessity of a stage of transition towards the process of the state's 'withering'—another signpost)<sup>14</sup> but which have since become transformed in Marxist orthodoxy into apparently definitive answers in themselves to those same problems.

The second area of evasion is that it is never entirely clear how things move from the present situation within bourgeois democracies to one in which a revolutionary scenario comes onto the immediate agenda. Of course, it is true that Leninists tend to propose that revolution emerges organically out of practical struggles by workers for reforms—but there is still something of a mysterious leap here. How *concretely* does a revolutionary situation of dual power emerge from the day-to-day struggles of the working class? The question weighed particularly heavily at the height of Greek workers' struggles against austerity. After all, Greece at this time was surely the site of the most intense popular struggles seen in Europe for decades, and yet nothing like soviet institutions, let alone a situation tending towards dual power, emerged.

Panagiotis Sotiris has pointed out in this regard that the revolutionary left has never managed to close the 'distance' between its focus on everyday tactics and struggles on the one hand and 'an abstract defence of revolutionary strategy' on the other.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, he further suggests that this abstract invocation of revolutionary intent tends to function more 'in terms of identity rather than practice'—that is, the putative revolutionary status of Leninist groups operates for the most part as a rhetorical mark of differentiation from reformist competitors (or those assigned as such) much more than it indicates the possession of any developed perspective on how, actually, to set a revolutionary process in motion. The concrete substance of revolutionary strategy remains at best only vaguely defined.

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<sup>13</sup> See for example, Ernest Mandel, *Revolutionary Marxism Today* (London: New Left Books, 1979), pp. 1–66.

<sup>14</sup> Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 256.

<sup>15</sup> Panagiotis Sotiris, 'How Can We Change the World if We Can't Change Ourselves', RS21, November 2014, <https://rs21.org.uk/2014/11/13/how-can-we-change-the-world-if-we-cant-change-ourselves>.

Underlying these problems of strategy, however, is in my view a deeper problem of theory in relation to the conceptualisation of state power. The traditional Leninist strategic orientation is rooted, as we have seen, in the view that the capitalist state cannot be utilised to any significant extent by socialist forces for socialist ends. The structural limits imposed by the institutional form and systemic functions of the capitalist state are so narrow that any attempt at using that apparatus will necessarily have the effect of reinforcing bourgeois hegemony. Thus, in the Leninist view, the capitalist state cannot be wielded (directly) for socialist purposes (although demands may be forced upon it from the outside)—it must be confronted and destroyed.

The seminal text here, of course, is Lenin's *The State and Revolution*. The various tensions and lacunae in this text are well known.<sup>16</sup> The fundamental problem with *The State and Revolution*, in my view however, is—as Erik Olin Wright has elucidated<sup>17</sup>—that Lenin sets out what is overall a highly functionalist view of the capitalist state. As Wright suggests, Lenin treats the organisational characteristics of the state as conceptually subordinate to the question of its structural function. That is, Lenin is much less interested in identifying the specific institutional mechanisms through which bourgeois hegemony is reproduced within and through the state, than he is in arguing that the state necessarily performs a particular function determined by the class structure in which the state is embedded. Lenin's argument ultimately rests on the assertion as an axiom of the view he draws from Marx that the state is 'an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another'.<sup>18</sup> This line of reasoning, in itself though, explains very little about how, precisely, the state performs the function that has been assigned to it and on what basis it is bound necessarily in every instance and at all times to perform this task. Lenin's reasoning also carries with it an essentialist logic in which the state is assumed to be wholly and in every respect bourgeois to its core—as Nicos Poulantzas puts it, in the Leninist view, 'the State is not traversed by internal contradictions, but is a monolithic bloc without cracks of any kind'.<sup>19</sup> If, after all, the state is merely an organ for the repression of one specific class by another then it cannot be utilised to any extent by the class it functions to repress. It follows from this that political forces seeking to advance working class power can seek to do nothing other in relation to the state than to confront it, 'smash' it and replace it with a completely new apparatus.

This is a view of capitalist state power, however, that has little to offer in terms of practical political guidance in the absence of any emerging organs of soviet counter-power. It provides few resources in terms of thinking about how to engage with actually existing established and rooted forms, institutions and traditions of political activity and democratic expression in advanced liberal democracies. In current

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<sup>16</sup> For a penetrating critique see Ralph Miliband, 'Lenin's *The State and Revolution*', *The Socialist Register* (1970), pp. 309–319.

<sup>17</sup> See Erik Olin Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State* (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 181–225.

<sup>18</sup> V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, in *V.I. Lenin: Selected Works*, Vol. 7 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1937), p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Poulantzas, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

circumstances—which are of course nothing like the circumstances in which Lenin wrote the *State and Revolution*—this is a perspective that simply reinforces the strategic paralysis and longing for an always-already not quite yet fall from the sky of a dual power situation that characterises Leninism today.

Certainly this analysis provided revolutionary groups with little political traction in the context of popular struggles as they developed and intensified in Greece. What emerged, organically, out of the day-to-day struggles of the Greek working class was not a tendency towards direct confrontation with the existing state system as such (although of course there was confrontation in the street with particular repressive apparatuses of the Greek state) but a more or less spontaneous move towards support for the idea of a left government operating within existing parliamentary institutions as the next concrete step in the process of struggle in that country. While Syriza successfully grasped this dynamic (indeed helped to galvanise it), other organisations of the left were unable to relate to it. Indeed, as Antonis Davanellos indicates, while the slogan ‘For a left-wing government!’ raised by Syriza in 2012 resonated deeply with workers (and helped to propel it on its course towards victory in 2015), Antarsya and the KKE (the Communist Party of Greece)—trapped in the logic of a more or less Leninist rejection of any strategy of seeking to take government power within existing bourgeois institutions—could only reply ‘by propagandizing various programs, which included positions on all issues except the crucial one: How were we to confront the current urgent situation?’<sup>20</sup> Or as Sotiris put it:

In a period when weak links of the chain opened the possibility of combining a radical left government with forms of popular power from below, and actually initiating a highly original revolutionary sequence, the position of important segments of the anti-capitalist left in Europe was practically that nothing can be done.<sup>21</sup>

In effect these segments simply waited for Syriza to fail so they could say ‘told you so’ while offering no plausible alternative.

Syriza did, indeed, fail in office, but at least their failure was a failure of some significance, rather than the pre-emptive failure of effectively rejecting in the first place the very possibility of taking power and really starting to confront concrete problems of social transformation. Indeed, Syriza’s message and its approach of tapping into social movements, seeking to articulate them into a coherent political project and orienting on government resonated with the Greek population precisely because Syriza were prepared, no matter how imperfectly, to confront the question of political power rather than dodge it.

Indeed, it seems reasonable to suppose that such a perspective would resonate with workers in heightened conditions of struggle in other situations too—certainly much

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<sup>20</sup> Antonis Davanellos, ‘The Fourth Comintern Congress: “a Way to Claim Victory”’, *International Socialist Review*, 95, <https://isreview.org/issue/95/fourth-comintern-congress>.

<sup>21</sup> Sotiris, ‘How Can We Change the World’, op. cit.

more than the Leninist (non)-alternative. It seems likely, that is, that if further serious challenges from the left emerge in the foreseeable future, they will take a broadly similar path to that trodden initially by Syriza. Certainly, as we have seen, all other left-wing movements that have made headway recently share this general orientation. The clear organic dynamic of contemporary radicalisation across Europe where it achieves momentum is towards the formation of left governments of radical reform. Thus, it seems we have little choice, like it or not, than to seek to work with the grain of this dynamic and to identify the strategic resources that might enable us to radicalise it from within.

The key question here becomes, of course, whether it might be possible to escape Sassoon's double bind. Is it possible, that is, to navigate between the twin pitfalls of infinite gradualism in which the end goal is endlessly kicked into the long grass on the one hand, and of longing for a hazily conceived and perpetually delayed revolutionary event to materialise on the other? I contend that such a path might have been navigated by Syriza and its base of support had a different balance of forces obtained within that party and movement and had different available choices, decisions and gambles been taken, guided by a strategic perspective present among minority elements within Syriza.

### **A Road not Taken: The Perspective of the Left Platform**

As a relatively broad coalition of forces (even after the formal dissolution of participating groups into a unitary party in 2013) Syriza comprised a range of different currents and strategic perspectives—some of which provided a much more radical assessment of the possibilities inherent in the coming to power of a left government in Greece than the more typically reformist outlook held by Tsipras, Varoufakis and much of the core leadership. For those associated with the Left Platform, such as Stathis Kouvelakis for example, the prospect of a Syriza government raised the possibility of a dialectic between the activities of elected representatives within the state and social struggles from below. Kouvelakis hoped that Syriza in office would take initiatives to 'open up a space for social mobilization'<sup>22</sup> and thus catalyse a renewed and radicalised wave of popular mobilisation that would both provide a base of support for the government while also pushing it on in the face of opposition from 'the Troika', forcing it to stick to its promises.

This dialectic, it was envisaged, would interact with a second dynamic in which the government's programme of reforms would soon bring it into direct confrontation with the forces of domestic and international capital, thus necessitating the further radicalisation of this programme—and of popular struggles in support of them— if those initial reforms were to be carried through and defended. This dynamic of permanent revolution Kouvelakis argued:

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<sup>22</sup> See Sebastian Budgen and Stathis Kouvelakis, 'Greece: Phase One', *Jacobin*, January 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/phase-one/>.

would conform I think to a quite familiar in history pattern of processes of social and political change, where the dynamic of the situation, boosted of course by the pressure of popular mobilisation, pushes actors (or at least some of them) beyond their initial intention.<sup>23</sup>

Crucially, this dialectical process of radicalisation would be rooted in—indeed, could only begin from—an initial programme of relatively ‘modest’ policies. Indeed, the defining feature of Syriza’s programme as it entered government was that it corresponded to the immediate and pressing needs and demands of ordinary Greeks—for jobs, better wages, affordable food and housing and so on. It was precisely because of this correspondence that Syriza’s programme resonated so successfully with Greek voters, bringing the party to victory in the 2015 general election and thus putting real change on the agenda in a way that ostensibly ‘radical’ but wholly abstract revolutionary demands with little political traction never could. However, it was also clear to Left Platform thinkers that for all the eminently reasonable and sober pragmatism of the party’s programme, these measures would, if implemented, soon run up against the limits of what European capital and its political representatives would accept. In this respect, Syriza’s programme successfully located what Slavoj Žižek has called a ‘point of the impossible’.<sup>24</sup> This is something in the field of politics or the economy that ‘you can (in principle) do but de facto you cannot or should not do it—you are free to choose it *on condition you do not actually choose it*’.<sup>25</sup> Pressing forward on such a ‘point of the impossible’, Žižek suggests, has a kind of demystifying effect that reveals the limits of a system and the relations of unfreedom and domination that undergird it.

The vision of militants such as Kouvelakis, then, was that by carrying through on these ‘point of the impossible’ demands, a struggle for ‘modest’ reforms within capitalism would escalate organically into a more and more consciously and openly anti-capitalist struggle. Further, this process, it was hoped, would possess an internationally ‘expansive capacity’, triggering an ‘enormous wave of support by very large sectors of public opinion in Europe’,<sup>26</sup> thus potentially spreading this wave of radical struggle to other states in the EU’s southern periphery—and even into its core.

Clearly the leadership of Syriza did little to set in motion the dialectic that Kouvelakis and others had envisaged. Indeed in an insightful reflection on the experience of Syriza in government,<sup>27</sup> Kouvelakis points out that what had been tried and had failed in Greece was an entirely different strategy altogether and that, as such, the strategic vision of the Left Platform remained untested. It is impossible to know, of course, whether this perspective, if put into practice, would have been successful—but

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<sup>23</sup> Stathis Kouvelakis, ‘An Open Letter Regarding the Greek Left’, *Socialist Worker*, 29 May 2012, <http://socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=28641>.

<sup>24</sup> Slavoj Žižek ‘Addressing the Impossible’, *The Socialist Register*, 53 (2017).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

<sup>26</sup> Budgen and Kouvelakis, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Stathis Kouvelakis, ‘Greece: Turning “No” into a Political Front’, in Catarina Príncipe and Bhaskar Sunkara (eds) *Europe in Revolt* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2016), pp. 18–19.

certainly Kouvelakis believes that had a different strategic outlook prevailed among the leading forces in Syriza, the coming to power of a left government in Greece might have opened up a process of radical social change in that country and beyond.<sup>28</sup>

What is more, this strategic outlook appears to offer the prospect of a way out of the strategic impasse identified by Sassoon—it seems to provide, that is, a possible route to bridge the gulf between immediate demands and the end goal of socialist transformation, between reform and revolution. Moreover, this strategic approach resonates with the organic dynamic of contemporary leftist upsurges towards the formation of left governments—it would provide us with a way of working with this dynamic to radicalise it from within. Nevertheless, the strategic approach formulated by Kouvelakis remains fairly sketchily drawn—clearly much more work needs to be done in terms of thinking seriously about the possibilities for, and limits to, radical reform. Indeed, this may be a matter of some urgency given the volatility of the current political conjuncture. It is not beyond the bounds of reason to believe that we may see a political formation broadly similar to Syriza approaching government in the next few years, whether in Europe or beyond. Yet there is a conspicuous lack of such thinking on the left today.

However, I suggest that it is useful in this regard to draw on resources produced in what was in some ways a very similar conjuncture when a range of political currents and thinkers were forced to confront many of the same urgent questions about the possibilities of government power in the context of a deep and long-running capitalist crisis. Specifically, we can draw on ideas that gained currency in the late 1960s and 1970s. There was an attempt in this period to think creatively beyond sterile orthodoxies, and to transcend the polarity of reformism vs 1917 redux dual power perspectives. Much of this thinking cohered around the concept of ‘structural reform’, attempting to map out the possibilities of using capitalist state power to prepare the political terrain for a radical rupture with capitalism. This kind of approach took root in a range of different political formations and there were various iterations of the broad idea of structural reform. It was probably most closely associated with the strategic thinking of groups such as the PSU (Unified Socialist Party) and CERES (Centre for Socialist Study, Research and Education) in France, and with ‘left Eurocommunist’ currents within the broader phenomenon of Eurocommunism that took hold within the PCI, PCE and PCF (respectively, the Italian Communist Party, Communist Party of Spain and French Communist Party) in particular as these groups attempted to grapple with the complex question of how to formulate a revolutionary strategy applicable to and adequate for conditions encountered in ‘advanced’ capitalist societies. However, two figures in particular (one of whom is commonly associated with left Eurocommunism and the other had a significant impact on the PSU) provide especially valuable conceptual and theoretical resources in this respect: Nicos Poulantzas and Andre Gorz. Let us look at some of the key ideas of

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<sup>28</sup> He restates his commitment to such a strategy in the aforementioned essay.

these two thinkers in order to extrapolate useful resources for a left government strategy today.

### Nicos Poulantzas's 'Revolutionary Road to Democratic Socialism'

In the last chapter of his final, and what is widely regarded as his greatest, book, *State, Power, Socialism*, Poulantzas sets out some ideas for a 'democratic road to socialism' (or what he perhaps rather provocatively calls the 'revolutionary road to democratic socialism' in his fascinating 1977 interview/argument with one time Leninist revolutionary, Henri Weber).<sup>29</sup> This strategic perspective flows from the theory of capitalist state power he formulates in the main part of the book.

Poulantzas's basic point of departure in *State, Power, Socialism* (in contradistinction to his earlier theory—and also to Lenin's approach) is that the practices, activities and institutional structures of the state cannot simply be read off in functional terms—i.e. the tautological method of reasoning in which the structural function of the state to reproduce the class hegemony of the bourgeoisie is first identified and then taken, in itself, as sufficient explanation for the successful performance of this imperative. Instead, Poulantzas argues that the state should be conceptualised in terms analogous to Marx's conceptualisation of capital. He analyses the state, that is, as a social relation. It should be seen, he argues, as 'the *specific material condensation* of a relationship of forces among classes and class fractions'.<sup>30</sup> Simplifying greatly, the state is, in effect, an ever-changing material reflection or expression of the class balance of forces—the institutional accretion of the cumulative effects of past class struggles. As such it is a terrain of struggles traversed by social antagonism. The state's structure and internal organisation (what Poulantzas terms its 'institutional materiality') and indeed its activities and specific functions, are constantly battled over, modified and reshaped by struggles between classes and class fractions.

So it follows from this, of course, that the state is not a monolithic unified apparatus—it is a fractured ensemble of apparatuses, riven with contradictions and fissures. Neither is it an apparatus which is entirely controlled by, or which exclusively represents the interests of, the bourgeoisie. The struggles of the working class traverse the institutional materiality of the state, shaping and reconfiguring its structures and therefore working class power is always to some extent manifested and embedded within the state and their interests reflected in aspects of state policy. The state's internal class divisions become most obvious when public sector workers strike, but it is also clear that state policy is moulded in response to competing class pressures that are brought to bear on it—including pressures that emanate from the working class. It is hard to explain the provision of 'welfare' measures, for example, without

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<sup>29</sup> See Nicos Poulantzas and Henri Weber, 'The State and the Transition to Socialism' in James Martin (ed.) *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law and the State* (London: Verso, 2008), pp. 334–360.

<sup>30</sup> Poulantzas, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

reference to working class interests, demands and mobilisation<sup>31</sup> (even if these measures are subordinated to the imperatives of capital accumulation).

This is not to say that the state is a merely passive entity—as Alexander Gallas points out, for Poulantzas, the ‘term “material condensation” not only implies that the state reflects class relations, but also that it has effects actively shaping these relations’.<sup>32</sup> There are several dimensions to this, but the overall thrust of Poulantzas’s argument is that via a process of what Bob Jessop has termed ‘structural selectivity’<sup>33</sup> the state tends to organise the overall hegemony of the capitalist class (while disorganising the working class) under the leadership of a constantly rearticulated and reorganised ‘power bloc’. Nevertheless, Poulantzas’s analysis suggests that this tendency to organise bourgeois hegemony is exactly that—a *tendency* and nothing more. It is always contingent, vulnerable and never a foregone conclusion. Indeed, the manifestation of working class power on the contested terrain of the state brings with it the threat that leftist forces might build up powerful ‘centres of resistance’ within state apparatuses in order to disrupt bourgeois hegemony and to repurpose state power, within definite limits and constraints, to advance socialist objectives.

Although certainly not without difficulties or unanswered questions, *State, Power, Socialism* sets out an extraordinarily rich and sophisticated analysis of the capitalist state as a contested site of power that is far superior to the Leninist approach which, as we have seen, pivots on the view that the state is simply an organ of class repression. It allows us to account for the evident contradictions and tensions that traverse the modern state while also—as against social democratic and liberal assumptions of the state’s essential ‘neutrality’—situating the state as a set of ‘political’ apparatuses rooted firmly in the ‘economic’ context of capitalist relations of production.

Further Poulantzas’s theorisation of the ‘extensive, complex, uneven and ridden-with-contradictions character of state power as class power, as the material condensation of class strategies and resistances’, as Sotiris remarks, opens up and ‘makes necessary a more complex conception of revolutionary practice’.<sup>34</sup> Famously, Poulantzas rejects the traditional Leninist conception of the ‘dual power scenario’ as inadequate for advanced capitalist democracies since it operates, he argues, on the basic assumption that the capitalist state is a sort of impenetrable fortress—the ‘Thing-instrument’ of the bourgeoisie—which must (and can) be surrounded and besieged by forces wholly external to it before finally being stormed and razed to the ground.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, his analysis, of the state as a material condensation of

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Ian Gough, *The Political Economy of the Welfare State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979).

<sup>32</sup> Alexander Gallas, *The Thatcherite Offensive: A Neo-Poulantzasian Analysis* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2015), p. 40.

<sup>33</sup> See Bob Jessop, *Nicos Poulantzas: Marxist Theory and Political Strategy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 125–128.

<sup>34</sup> Panagiotis Sotiris, ‘Neither an Instrument nor a Fortress: Poulantzas’s Theory of the State and his Dialogue with Gramsci’, *Historical Materialism*, 22:2 (2014), pp. 154–155.

<sup>35</sup> See, Poulantzas, op. cit., p. 253–255.

social relations of force makes it plain that no political strategy could possibly bypass it—all social struggles are by definition articulated in relation to the field of state power.

Poulantzas's sketch of the 'revolutionary road to democratic socialism' in the last part of the book is directly extrapolated from this analysis. It rests on the possibility that the cracks, fissures and internal contradictions within the contested terrain of the state might be amplified and exploited by socialist forces. Again, simplifying greatly, the idea of this strategic approach is to combine struggle within the state—conquering positions of strength within representative bodies and 'centres of resistance' (and Poulantzas is clear that a necessary part of this must be the election of a left government)—with a parallel struggle of the popular masses outside the state (that is to say, in relation to the state) 'giving rise to a whole series of instruments, means of coordination, organs of popular power ... structures of direct democracy at the base'.<sup>36</sup> This strategic approach, that is, 'comprises *two* articulated processes: transformation of the State and unfurling of direct, rank-and-file democracy'.<sup>37</sup> There is, for Poulantzas, a complex dialectical relationship between these two processes. Struggle at a distance from the state helps to modify the relationship of class forces within its apparatuses, transform its 'institutional materiality' and open up space for further experimentation with forms of self-management, while conquering positions of strength within the state provides a sort of protective shield for that experimentation, in part because it neutralises, disrupts and divides the core centres of bourgeois power within it.

Poulantzas is clear that the 'revolutionary road to democratic socialism' cannot be a smooth, gradualist one of generally tranquil transformation. On the contrary it must incorporate 'a *stage of real breaks*, the climax of which—and there has to be one—is reached when the relationship of forces on the strategic terrain of the State swings over to the side of the popular masses'.<sup>38</sup> Poulantzas is quite open in his interview with Weber that he does not know whether this process would involve 'one big rupture' or, in fact, a 'series of ruptures'.<sup>39</sup> However he is clear that 'the moment of decisive confrontation' would pass *through* the state. That is, it would be unlikely to take the form of the popular movement 'confronting the state ... *en bloc*' (as in the classic dual power conception of revolution)—instead, he suggests, popular struggle would:

bring about a differentiation inside the state apparatuses, a polarization by the popular movement of a large fraction of these apparatuses. This fraction, in alliance with the movement, will confront the reactionary, counter-revolutionary sectors of the state apparatus backed up by the ruling classes.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Poulantzas and Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

<sup>37</sup> Poulantzas, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 258–259.

<sup>39</sup> Poulantzas and Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 341.

The revolutionary process thus involves not the ‘smashing’ of the state as such but, at most the ‘smashing’ of particular apparatuses (something akin to Engels’s remark in his introduction to the 1891 edition of *The Civil War in France* that the proletariat would have to ‘lop off’ the ‘worst sides’ of the state) alongside the radical reconfiguration and democratisation of other apparatuses and their increasing articulation with organs of direct democracy. Indeed, it is only such an approach, Poulantzas insists, that could set in motion a transformation of the state tending towards its eventual ‘withering away’.<sup>41</sup> There is much about Poulantzas’s strategy that remains rather vaguely formulated, but there is little sense, in my view, that this springs from any deliberate evasiveness. On the contrary Poulantzas is quite frank, especially in his interview with Weber, that he remains unsure about the details of how the broad transitional process he envisages would unfold. He remains unsure, however, precisely because he does not believe it is possible to know in advance. Indeed his perspective is rooted in a lucid—and, again, openly stated—grasp of the *unavoidable uncertainty* of the socialist endeavour itself. There are, after all, no blueprints or fool-proof strategies—there is only, as Poulantzas repeatedly insists, knowledge of a series of ‘sign-posts’ and lessons from the past pointing out the various traps along the way that we must seek to negotiate. As he puts it in *State, Power, Socialism*, ‘History has not yet given us a successful experience of the democratic road to socialism: what it has provided—and that is not insignificant—is some negative examples to avoid and some mistakes upon which to reflect’<sup>42</sup>—and nothing more than that.

He is lucid and direct, too, about the dilemmas and risks attendant on such a strategy—not least the danger that the bourgeoisie and the repressive apparatuses of the state might resort to counter-revolutionary repression and the strong possibility, too, of degeneration of the process into mere social democratic reformism. The only preventive against such dangers would be ‘continuous support of a mass movement founded on broad popular alliances’ linked to ‘sweeping transformations of the State’.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the full and consistent implementation of the strategy Poulantzas outlines would in itself generate the best defence against these latent dangers. Nevertheless, there could be no guarantees. The ‘revolutionary road to democratic socialism’ could never be considered a ‘royal road, smooth and free of risk’—it is just that, for Poulantzas, there is no other realistic option other than, as he puts it in the remarkably candid final lines of his book, ‘to keep quiet and march ahead under the tutelage and the rod of advanced liberal democracy’.<sup>44</sup>

Poulantzas’s innovative and clear-sighted approach constitutes in Sotiris’s words ‘the most advanced attempt to rethink revolutionary politics not in terms of “articles of faith” but of actual apprehension of the complex materiality of political power in

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<sup>41</sup> Poulantzas, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

advanced capitalist formations'.<sup>45</sup> It is clear that his thinking—which represented a dramatic shift from the more orthodox Leninist perspective on transition that he cleaved to in much of his earlier work—was at least partially prompted and shaped (as brought out in interview with Weber)<sup>46</sup> by concrete political developments in France—the growing rapprochement between the PS (Socialist Party) and PCF and their joint formulation of the Common Programme for a government of the left in the 1970s.<sup>47</sup> That is, the perspective that he develops in *State, Power, Socialism* seems to have been significantly conditioned by the real movement of things and the urgency of the moment—the pressing need to think beyond strategic orthodoxies that provided little theoretical or practical leverage and to interrogate instead the concrete possibilities of a situation in which a left government comes to office.

There are clear parallels here with the situation today and indeed Poulantzas's thought resonates closely with the organic dynamic of contemporary radicalisation in Europe and with Kouvelakis's sketch of the path that might have been taken by Syriza. As such Poulantzas provides us with useful resources for the current conjuncture. In particular his analysis allows us to ground a left government perspective in a sophisticated account of state power. His theory shows us how and why the state, as a contested site of power, constitutes potentially fertile terrain upon which to focus a strategy of transformation and indeed why it would be impossible in any case to refuse to engage with this terrain in any meaningful sense. Further, his analysis reveals the crucial importance of seeking to transform the state's internal structures and indicates how mass struggles at a distance to the state, coupled with direct intervention by socialist forces within it, could have this effect.

### **André Gorz and Structural Reform**

While Poulantzas provides an outline of the general contours of a strategy of radical reform on the part of a government of the left, rooted in a rich analysis of capitalist state power, we should turn to André Gorz's slightly earlier thought on structural reform or 'non-reformist reform' which he sketches out in *Strategy for Labour*<sup>48</sup> and *Socialism and Revolution*<sup>49</sup> to add further detail to our emerging left government perspective. Gorz provides, in particular, a more fully worked out conceptualisation of the necessary dynamic of interaction between government and mass movement and of the kinds of reforms upon which such a process must pivot.

Gorz's thought was, like Poulantzas's, formulated in a specific conjuncture where a Provisional Union of the Left government in France was a distinct possibility. He wrote his key essay on 'Reform and Revolution',<sup>50</sup> later published in *Socialism and*

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<sup>45</sup> Sotiris, 'Neither an Instrument nor a Fortress', op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>46</sup> See Poulantzas and Weber, op. cit., p. 351.

<sup>47</sup> See Sassoon, op. cit., pp. 536–538.

<sup>48</sup> André Gorz, *Strategy for Labor: a Radical Proposal* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968).

<sup>49</sup> André Gorz, *Socialism and Revolution* (New York: Anchor Press, 1973).

<sup>50</sup> The work from which the following account of Gorz's thought draws most heavily.

*Revolution*, in the immediate aftermath of May 1968—an event many believed at the time might have toppled de Gaulle and swept an ‘exceptional’ left-wing government to power in a sort of pre-revolutionary situation.<sup>51</sup> Clearly Gorz thought that a similar situation might be repeated and tries, in this essay, to think through what a government of this kind, borne forward by waves of popular mobilisation, might accomplish and how this might be steered in the direction of radical social transformation.

Gorz’s argument begins from the observation that traditional reformism and Leninism<sup>52</sup> are both strategic dead ends. On the one hand, reformism fails to recognise that ‘the bourgeoisie will never relinquish power without a struggle and without being compelled to do so by revolutionary action on the part of the masses’<sup>53</sup> while, on the other, the traditional revolutionary strategy is premised on the erroneous idea that a more or less *immediate* insurrectionary transition to socialism is possible. The way out of this dilemma, Gorz suggests, is to reject the prevailing assumption that reform and revolution are necessarily counter-posed alternatives and to grasp, instead, the possibility of a dialectical unity between them. Indeed, we must understand, he argues, that revolution can only emerge organically and dialectically through a process of struggle for reform. Thus socialists need a transitional strategy of reform that provides us with a bridge from the present condition to a situation in which revolution becomes actually possible.

Such a strategy must pivot on the view that socialist revolutionary consciousness can be built only through a pedagogical process of mass ‘struggle for feasible objectives corresponding to the experience, needs and aspirations of workers’.<sup>54</sup> At first the ‘feasible’ will, by necessity, be limited to measures of reform within capitalism, but as the working class engages in struggle, however, the anti-capitalist implications of its needs and aspirations are gradually revealed. At the same time, through its experience of struggle, the working class learns about its capacity for ‘self-management, initiative and collective decision’ and can have ‘a foretaste of what emancipation means’.<sup>55</sup> Thus struggle for reform can help prepare the working class psychologically, ideologically and materially for the revolutionary seizure of power—it can have the effect of ‘*creating the conditions*, both objective and subjective, in which mass revolutionary action becomes possible and in which the bourgeoisie may be engaged and defeated in a trial of strength’.<sup>56</sup>

This strategy is rooted in the observation that mobilisation ‘for the conquest of power and of socialism—abstract terms which no longer in themselves serve to

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<sup>51</sup> See Sassoon, *op. cit.*, pp. 397–400.

<sup>52</sup> Gorz does not use this term. He writes, instead, of the ‘maximalist position’ and ‘maximalist tendencies’ (see Gorz, *Socialism and Revolution*, *op. cit.*, pp. 153 and 154 for example), but it is clear that he uses these terms to designate the same strategic approach that I have called Leninism in this paper.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

mobilize the masses—must pass through the “mediation” of intermediate, mobilizing objectives<sup>57</sup> which assist:

in the training and education of the masses, making it possible for them to see socialism not as something in the transcendental beyond, in an indefinite future, but as the visible goal of a praxis already at work; not a goal which the masses are supposed to wish for abstractly, but one to aim for by means of partial objectives in which it is foreshadowed.<sup>58</sup>

Gorz is clear that this process depends on the election of a left government—the working class require, after all, a political instrument to lead in carrying these reforms out. This, for Gorz, must be a government whose perspective is not limited to merely ‘reformist reform’. As Gorz puts it in *Strategy for Labor* a ‘reformist reform is one which subordinates its objectives to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system’.<sup>59</sup> In contrast ‘non-reformist reforms’ or structural reforms are designed to break out of this logic. As he explains further in *Socialism and Revolution*:

What in practice distinguishes a genuinely socialist policy of reforms from reformism of the ... “social democratic” type is ... first, the presence or absence of organic links between the various reforms, second, the tempo and method of their implementation and, third, the resolve, or absence of resolve, to take advantage of the imbalance created by the initial reforms to promote further disruptive action.<sup>60</sup>

Whereas ‘reformist reforms’ are designed to be inserted within the capitalist system without significantly disrupting it, structural reforms are deliberately intended to break the ‘equilibrium’ of the system. Each such reform brings concrete gains for the working class but also opens up the possibility of further changes. In fact, precisely because they destabilise capitalism, each structural reform necessitates the implementation of further measures to deal with the effects of this destabilisation—measures which themselves run counter to the logic of capitalism and which will thus, in turn, stimulate further reforms and so on in a radicalising dynamic of cumulative change. Structural reforms, Gorz remarks, must be seen as ‘means and not an end, as dynamic phases in a progressive struggle, not as stopping places’.<sup>61</sup>

Gorz suggests that the impetus behind the dynamic of structural reform will flow in significant part from the bourgeois resistance each reform will encounter. The reaction of the capitalist class to each reform—expressed for example through capital flight—may have the effect of further radicalising the rank-and-file of the movement as it realises that the initial reforms are insufficient and must be followed by further, more far-reaching, measures of change. In this way, the inevitable reaction of the

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<sup>57</sup> Gorz, *Strategy for Labor*, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> Gorz, *Socialism and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 141.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

bourgeoisie to socialist encroachment of its power and privilege can be used as a weapon against it. Eventually, Gorz suggests, the mass movement must come to the conclusion that reform is not enough and that a revolutionary rupture is necessary.

Crucially, the impetus also flows, however, from the growing empowerment of the movement outside the state. Gorz suggests that the extension and consolidation of popular power and forms of direct democracy will develop the mass movement's confidence in relation to its own capacities for self-government, thus increasing its appetite for further democratic empowerment and encouraging it to put pressure on its leaders and representatives to drive forward and deepen the process of structural reform. Indeed Gorz emphasises that it is a *sine qua non* of a project of structural reform that the changes it brings in to effect must be rooted in popular initiatives. They must always involve an extension of popular power, but also—and crucially—they must, wherever possible, be 'dictated, effected and controlled by the masses themselves based on their capacity for self-management and their own initiative'.<sup>62</sup> In more concrete terms, a programme of structural reform would include, then, measures to encourage, implant and empower organs of direct democracy in communities and in workplaces. It would seek to decommodify collective services and exert democratic control over the economy through forms of workers' control, the formulation and implementation of workers' 'alternative plans' for (socially useful) production, and through socialisation of the investment function, for example.

Although the major driving force for the unfolding dynamic of structural reform would come 'from below', Gorz does not imagine, however, that this process could unfold in a wholly spontaneous manner. The *raison d'être* for this strategy, as we have seen, flows from the observation that socialist consciousness and revolutionary democratic capacities among the working class must be built and nurtured in struggle, but Gorz is clear that 'the dialectical development of the struggle presupposes an already existing socialist intention' among 'the vanguard of the workers' movement and among its leaders'.<sup>63</sup> The task of this organised section (which would encompass, of course, those representatives in government) would be to guide the process of the movement's radicalisation, plan the reforms to be implemented and ensure that each measure is integrated into an overall strategic whole. As Gorz puts it, their major role would be to 'grade the objectives, to raise the struggle to a constantly higher plane and to set "intermediary" targets, paving the way for worker power, which must be necessarily surpassed as soon as they have been achieved'.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless this would be a vanguard that sought to abolish itself as the democratic capacities of the people developed and which sought to transfer power from the summits of the bourgeois state to the emerging organs of popular democracy. Having 'unleashed or stimulated a mass movement', Gorz remarks, this leadership must seek to 'dissolve into it' and, simultaneously, to liquidate existing institutions of state power, substituting for these

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

‘those organs of self-government and self-administration which the sovereign base has evolved for the perpetuation of its sovereignty’.<sup>65</sup> Much like Poulantzas, Gorz is here attempting to think through the process of the ‘withering away of the state’ as this might be effected by a movement that sought to utilise state power in order to build the capacities to surpass and abolish it.

Another perspective that unites Gorz and Poulantzas is their shared understanding of the radical uncertainty of any such undertaking. Gorz is clear that there can be no guarantees of success and that the strategy runs a very real risk of degeneration into reformism (i.e. ‘reformist reform’). Structural reform, after all, inhabits a space of tension between mere reformism on the one hand and revolutionary rupture on the other—indeed it is precisely a strategic perspective that seeks to negotiate a course of transition from one to the other—but there can be no guarantee of the direction of travel. The point is, however, that since immediate ‘[s]eizure of power by insurrection is out of the question’ there is no other option but to seek to seek move towards socialist transformation via a series of intermediate steps—the ‘risk must be run, for there is no other way’.<sup>66</sup>

Gorz’s thought manifests a radical uncertainty of another sort too. Although, as we have seen, he specifies the crucial and indispensable features of structural reform and provides some examples, he is also clear, like Poulantzas, that it is impossible to know in advance in anything more than broad outline what an escalating series of reforms would comprise, at what point this process would morph into revolution or, indeed, in any detail, what a revolution would look like. This is precisely because a strategy of structural reform would be a process of experimentation, contestation and learning by doing that would pivot on the stimulation of mass participation and debate in developing organs of grass-roots democracy and the development of popular capacities for self-management, initiative and collective decision. Gorz is clear that the strategy would rely in great part on workers themselves formulating their own demands and these would, of course, be conditioned by the specific circumstances in which they were elaborated. Further it is impossible to predict exactly the limits to reform—we can know them only by pushing against them and we can only develop the means to go beyond these limits by building popular capacities for socialism in and through a process of struggle for transitional measures. Indeed the question that a strategy of structural reform pivots on is, in Wright’s words, ‘less “how to make a revolution”, but rather “how to create the social conditions within which we can *know* how to make a revolution”’.<sup>67</sup>

So, like Poulantzas’s ‘revolutionary road to democratic socialism’, Gorz’s strategic vision involves dynamic interplay between a mobilised mass movement rooted in emerging organs of popular democracy and a left government operating within the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 176–177.

<sup>66</sup> Gorz, *Strategy for Labor*, op. cit., p 8.

<sup>67</sup> Erik Olin Wright, op. cit., p. 233, n. 11. Wright is not referring to Gorz here specifically. Nevertheless Wright takes a broadly similar strategic perspective and his words seem applicable.

structures of the capitalist state. As for Poulantzas, this process would begin with reforms within capitalism but would build towards revolutionary rupture, and although Gorz seems to envisage a much more dramatic liquidation of existing state institutions than Poulantzas, both see this process as tending towards the state's 'withering'. Both theorists too, emphasise the unavoidable risk and uncertainty of such a project. What Gorz adds, however, is a much richer theorisation of the dynamic of structural reform, of the essential and necessary characteristics of such transitional measures and of the process by which revolutionary rupture could emerge dialectically from a pedagogical process of mass struggle for 'intermediate objectives' in an escalating dynamic of permanent revolution.

Moreover, it is clear that Gorz's perspective maps closely onto the prevailing dynamic of radicalisation today. Indeed, Gorz's account of structural reform resonates very closely indeed with Kouvelakis's sketch of the (squandered) possibilities inherent in Syriza's election victory. As such Gorz's thought on structural reform, like Poulantzas's vision, provides hugely valuable conceptual resources for us today in seeking to elaborate a strategy for socialism that coheres with the concrete tendency for radical struggle, wherever it makes significant advances, to develop towards the formation of a left government supported by a substantial degree of popular mobilisation.

## Conclusion

This paper began by noting that the radical left formations that have made political headway in Europe recently have all shared a strategic orientation that seeks to combine electoral and parliamentary activity on the one hand with extra-parliamentary mobilisation on the other and that, crucially, a central component of this approach is to seek to form a left government within the institutions of the capitalist state. It was argued that, for the most part, however, the wider radical left—trapped in a false dichotomy of 'reform versus revolution' in which two forms of bad faith are pitted against each other—has been unable to grasp the opportunities opened up by the advance of these formations. I suggested that the perspective elaborated by the Left Platform in Syriza most fully grasped the anti-capitalist potential inherent within these ascendant formations and offered a way of radicalising their development from within.

It was then argued that this strategic perspective could be developed and enriched by drawing on theoretical resources developed in the late 1960s and 1970s. It was argued that Poulantzas and Gorz, in particular, provided especially valuable resources in this regard that resonate strongly with current circumstances. Poulantzas's thought in *State, Power, Socialism* enables us to situate a left government perspective in a rich analysis of capitalist state power that would provide us with a sophisticated understanding of the possibilities for engagement on the contested terrain of the state and of the possibilities, too, for its (at least partial) reconfiguration in line with socialist objectives. Gorz's thought in *Strategy for Labor* and *Socialism and Revolution*, furthermore, presents us with useful resources in relation to the concept of transitional

'non-reformist reforms' and in relation to the dialectical process in which revolutionary rupture might emerge from their implementation. Both theorists present us with a strategic perspective that pivots on an experimental process of probing the limits of reform that, by its very nature, can offer no guarantees of success and for which there can be no detailed route map in advance. It is a perspective, however, that could provide the radical left with a strategy for socialism that sidesteps the twin pitfalls of reformist and Leninist bad faith in which the socialist horizon is infinitely postponed to some indefinite future and provide us with traction in relation to concrete processes of political radicalisation as they are actually developing in Europe.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.