

# The New Politics Research Agenda Workshop Report

## Amsterdam, 13-14 February

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#### **THE NEW POLITICS RESEARCH AGENDA WORKSHOP REPORT**

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This document summarises the objectives, presentations and discussions of the New Politics Research Agenda Workshop, organised by the Public Alternatives Project of the Transnational Institute (TNI) on 13-14 February 2016, in Amsterdam.

## Introduction

On 13-14 February 2016, a group of researchers and activists from fifteen countries met in Amsterdam. The aim was to jointly draft the research agenda of the *New Politics Project*, an initiative promoted by the Transnational Institute (TNI) in partnership with several other organisations and individuals from around the world. The invited participants came from political parties, trade unions, social movements, universities, research centres and universities in Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia.

The New Politics Project has been conceived as a decentralised think tank on counter-hegemonic politics that will support the joint production of ideas to: (a) boost the development of desirable, viable and achievable alternatives aimed at transcending current oppressive and exploitative structures; (b) acknowledge the diversity of knowledge as a source of inspiration for the co-creation of alternatives; and (c) promote fruitful collaboration and exchanges among researchers and activists from different regions of the world.

This report offers highlights from the discussions and presentations and underlines key questions and issues to be addressed by the project's research agenda.

## The global context

The reasons why TNI decided to relaunch the New Politics Project are many. It is increasingly clear that the converging crises of global capitalism threaten the survival of people and planet. Throughout the world, climate change is causing catastrophic environmental and social impacts. In recent years, the global financial crisis that exploded in 2008 has led to reinforced neoliberalism, weaker democracies, and more austerity and dispossession, not only in countries of the South but also in the richer societies of the European Union and other countries of the North. Wealth and power are increasingly concentrated in fewer hands, and consequently inequality has become the new buzzword.

Even social-democratic parties and governments face an identity crisis, as corporate interests are dismantling the concept and the structures of the welfare state and governments tend to focus on surveillance and repression. National borders are knocked down by secretive trade and investment deals, while militarised walls keep unwanted people out. Around the world, the breakdown of the Fordist model that prevailed in the previous century, paired with technological innovations, have led to a more decentralised configuration of both capital and social and political opposition to it. Meanwhile, the left faces the threats of deeper fragmentation, organisational crisis and ideological disorientation.

In the opening session, Christophe Aguiton – a researcher and trade unionist linked to Attac France and other social organisations – offered an introductory analysis of the main characteristics, challenges and

opportunities for New Politics internationally, focusing on two key questions: “What has changed in the profile of the left since the start of the century? Is the left today weaker or stronger than a decade and a half ago?” On the one hand, today’s global political landscape does not seem to be much different, as the left continues to battle the same trends: a globalised economy that leads to growing inequality and concentration of wealth, austerity policies (two decades ago in Latin America and other regions of the South, today in Europe), climate change, and constant warfare in many parts of Africa and Asia.

Global changes are easily recognisable and have big implications for the left. Among others, the profile of imperialism is shifting, as the military and economic hegemony of the United States is nowadays much weaker today than just a decade ago, which makes world politics and world economics more fragmented and unstable. In the political terrain, we can also observe a generalised crisis of the ruling parties, which affects not only progressive or left parties in government, but also Social Democrats, Conservatives, Liberals and Christian Democrats, which all face the rise of a new type of far right parties as a common threat. Within the radical left, “there is a permanent oscillation between two postures: substantial critiques and transformative proposals while the left is in the opposition, and an apparent incapacity to implement different politics and policies once it gains access to national office”.

Aguiton also argued that despite setbacks in some countries, the left might be actually stronger today than before the eruption of the economic and financial crisis of 2008-2009. This greater strength would be visible, for instance, in the rise of new counter-hegemonic parties and movements in Europe (even though not all explicitly identify themselves as part of the left, as the case of Podemos in Spain illustrates), and in the emergence of dissident voices within the establishment, such as Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the British Labour Party, or Bernie Sanders as contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in the United States. Aguiton’s assertion generated a strong response from many participants who argued that in many countries around the left is today weaker than ever before. Beyond abstract discussions about its relative strength, the left is any case “still very much tied to the doctrinaire framework of the past century, and that is the real problem”, Aguiton affirmed.

At the beginning of the 20th century, after the industrial revolution, it was very difficult for the left to reorganise and rethink itself. The working class was perceived as the central agent of change, and the vanguard party was the favourite choice for political organisation. Left theories born in Europe were then disseminated and replicated in other parts of the globe. After World War II, the European left became at the same time critical and supportive of the welfare state, while in Latin America the left had a similar contradictory relationship with the policies of import substitution. In more recent years, particularly in Latin America, “the left has been experimenting with new forms of redistribution, but in essence it remained productivist and developmentalist while progressive

governments could benefit from a cycle of high priced commodities, which has already ended. Meanwhile, in Greece, the Syriza-led administration attempted to apply the traditional programme of the left, but the European Union (EU) did not allow it”, Aguiton explained.

Nowadays, around the world, the left faces identity dilemmas somehow similar to those of a century ago, as it must adjust to the emergence of new political agents and new social, economic and political forms of organisation, according to Aguiton. For example, in the energy sector, particularly in some European countries such as Germany, cooperatives are becoming an essential actor for the provision of electricity, modifying the traditional definition of consumers and producers. “Related transformations are also evident in the farming sector, and even more radical changes can be observed in knowledge-intensive sectors and around what has been called the ‘sharing economy’. But not every change is inherently progressive and many new contradictions can be identified in the context of new left debates and proposals”, which suggest the need for a proper appraisal of its potentials vis-à-vis concrete realities (for instance, around the way Uber, Airbnb and other initiatives are exploiting the ‘sharing economy’ to reinforce market relations)”.

The left also needs to reappraise the real significance of Occupy, Quebec Solidaire and other similar horizontalist movements, which while rightly challenging the vanguardism of the old left and bringing much needed diversity and convergence of actors – workers, the unemployed, students, women, farmers, indigenous peoples, etc.– have not being able to produce significant change in institutional politics. In the same sense, the left needs to rediscuss the potential and constraints of urban mobilisations like those that have occurred in recent years in countries as different as Brazil and Turkey around public services, the right to the city, and environmental demands. In conclusion, Aguiton suggested “to rethink the alliance between the diverse victims of neoliberalism in terms of a ‘new social class’, which points to many crucial issues that could be addressed by the New Politics research agenda”.

## New Politics in Europe and North America

Analysing the prospects for New Politics in Europe, Vedran Horvat – the Director of the Institute for Political Ecology (IPE), a Zagreb-based think tank – stressed the importance of taking into account identity politics and the resurgence of what he calls ‘cultural wars’, in light of the current state of public debates and the ongoing reduction of rights and freedoms across the region. Moreover, he said that “the left must review the real significance of the rise of the European Union as a neoliberal project, prioritising the formulation of progressive alternatives”.

This also implies “challenging current assumptions about the viability of permanent growth and taking into account the planetary boundaries, reappraising the significance of the environmental dimension”.

Another feature of contemporary European politics is the aggressive expansion of identity politics, which shifts the attention away from social and economic struggles, Horvat argued. This is fuelled by today's immigration crisis, which is being used by authoritarian forces and corporate interests to strengthen their power. "The renationalisation of politics is used by the dominant powers to avoid open class conflict, which remains the fundamental contradiction in the region".

In recent months the world has witnessed a very belligerent deployment of power against the Greek left, while throughout the European Union there is a growing trend to shift from a neoliberal to an illiberal phase. The process of neoliberalisation during the past decade has resulted in the institutionalisation of market rules and the erosion of democracy. Bluntly speaking, "this means 'protect yourself at home and privatise your neighbour'", with diminishing levels of trust among the different countries that compose the Union, in particular since the crisis that erupted in 2008. Therefore, "even the Keynesian paradigm seems 'radical' in the context of the current shift to the right", Horvat claimed.

Reflecting on the role of Europe at the global level, Horvat contended that the left should analyse the rise of asymmetrical powers both within the EU and across regions. It should also develop a new approach to peace policy, not less militant in its approach whilst not falling into the trap of renationalised politics. The left must recover the internationalist tradition as a crucial legacy, as it does not seem to be keeping up with the urgency of the issues, for instance in the context of resistance against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and similar corporate-driven initiatives. "This also means focusing on ideas and imaginaries that can mobilise different constituencies and become a constituent power, for instance by developing a new narrative around the notion of the commons".

The European left also needs to rethink the problem of political organisation. According to Horvat, the concept of 'fluidity' might be quite helpful as a way to transcend the usual fetishisation of the organisation. The left should also produce new thinking about the nature and significance of the state in the current regional and global contexts.

In terms of future perspectives, Horvat does not see the younger generation as a real source of political hope. Although having been targeted by austerity policies, they do not perceive the left as the preferred channel for mobilisation. "In fact, the extreme right is quite good in exploiting the rising discontent of the youth. The left must develop new strategies to reach the youth; Bernie Sanders' campaign in the US might be a read as a good example of how to get the attention of millennials. But in Europe, the older generations still value the memory and ideals of Europe as a social project, therefore it is still worthwhile for the left to pay attention to those feelings, as well", he argued.

The second presentation on New Politics in Europe, by Andreas Karitzis – a philosopher, a former Syriza central committee member and coordinator

of the party's think tank on digital policies – focused on the needs and the options for building popular power, in order to enable the left to bring substantial change, instead of just handling the remaining – “and seriously depleted, if not already exhausted” – traditional political institutions. Based on the recent experience of the Greek left in government, Karitzis explained how throughout Europe (and within the Eurozone, in particular) the scope of democracy has been greatly limited, as the elites manage to regain total and unchecked control over the basic functions of society. Without a degree of autonomy in terms of performing basic social functions, the European peoples will not be able to confront the hostile actions of the elites and their willingness to crash governments, parties or movements that dare to defy their decisions. Therefore, Karitzis reasoned, the left needs “to reboot its operating system” by shifting its priorities “from political representation to setting up autonomous networks of production of economic and social power” (NESP).

Rebooting the left's operating system would also mean profound alterations in its profile and functions, changing the balance between representing people's beliefs and demands – on the one hand – and coordinating, facilitating, connecting, supporting and nurturing people's actions – on the other. As Karitzis explained it, the constitution and expansion of the NESPs implies embedding the function of political representation within their coordinating structures. This also means the need to work towards a multi-level strategy to transform the state, building effective interconnections between the state apparatus and the NESPs.

Karitzis made a very concrete proposal to advance the New Politics research agenda in the form of four concrete research projects. The first project would focus on rethinking the 'operating system' of the left, including an in-depth reassessment of the notion of political party. The second project would explore new processes of building power today (NESPs), looking at new practices of cooperation, the facilitation and coordination of different parts of the network, and the operational requirements of the major 'nodes' of the network. The third project would explore new processes for doing politics, systematising practices of furthering and interconnecting the quest for economic and political democracy, the institutionalization of solidarity economy initiatives without losing self-management motivation and social innovation, and modes for unification of disparate initiatives into a common political imagery. The fourth project would explore new processes of democratic transformation of the state, looking at new modes of articulation of state and autonomous initiatives, forms of preservation of the universality of the welfare state while fostering social control, and conceptions and practices of state institutions as 'new commons'.

Two participants analysed current changes in left (or at least 'progressive') politics in the United States. Patrick Barrett, from the Havens Center for Social Justice – based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison – focused on the meaning and prospects of Bernie Sanders' electoral campaign. “While

difficult not to be enthused, there are serious limitations and risks posed by Bernie's politics", Barrett said. Sanders' rise is symptomatic of a political crisis (likewise Donald Trump's on the opposite side), and significant for two reasons. On the one hand, Bernie's supporters express an extended outrage on class inequality and corporate power. On the other hand, "Bernie's campaign is rooted in deepening insecurities in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, but building on ground work laid by Occupy NY, the Wisconsin protests against conservative policies, the campaign around the 15\$ minimum wage, and before all that the mobilisations that followed the demonstrations against the WTO summit in 1999 and and the Ralph Nader's presidential campaigns of 2004 and 2008". Bernie is running against Hilary Clinton, "who is highly vulnerable, being the embodiment of the establishment Bernie is railing against. The Sanders' campaign has offered a so far a limited analysis of the crisis, with little to say about labour and other crucial social issues. Bernie himself is not a hawk in foreign policy, but neither is he an anti-imperialist", Barrett concluded.

Barrett also explained the many limitations and shortcomings of the Democratic Party, which "by no means should be perceived as a progressive force". Bernie's denunciation of the establishment implicates those very same people he will have to depend on should he win the presidential nomination. Bernie's campaign is "becoming a referendum on Clintonism, and the more he exposes Bill and Hilary, the more he exposes everyone else, including Obama. So he will have to placate all those he is now attacking". Moreover, "there are not a lot of little Bernies running for Congress, so if he wins he will have no guaranteed support in Washington". In this context, taking over and transforming the Democratic Party from within is not a viable long term objective, while the preservation of the two party-system secures a permanent and radical imbalance between the interests of capital and the interest of people. Bernie has already pledged to support Hilary if she wins the nomination, yet she has become the main target of his campaign. Barrett concluded that "there will not be a change in American politics without building a movement independent of the two traditional parties".

Laura Flanders – a journalist and political commentator, the host of *The Laura Flanders Show* – agreed with Barrett that "there will be no Sanders' Revolution". Counter-hegemonic politics in the United States seem to be shifting from disruption to convergence, but there is no clarity around the focus of convergence. "The protests in Wisconsin, first, and then Occupy in New York and other US cities, were real spaces for convergence, but there is still no common agenda. But there are positive trends in social mobilisations across the country, as evident in processes such as last winter's protests in Minnesota, the series of urban demonstrations on wages, the rise of the Black Lives Matter initiative, new kinds of labour practices and the emergence of leftist unions, the convergence of social and environmental movements against the Keystone Pipeline, the expansion of the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina, and multiple other examples of social mobilisation against white supremacy,



corporate power, and austerity and conservative policies". Some of these processes are led by Church leaders, others by black people organisations, but also labour unions and other social groups that have not worked together before are getting closer and closer. In this context, support for both Sanders and Trump means the expression of frustration, Flanders said.

Flanders also agreed with Barrett in the interpretation of Sanders' views on foreign policy, which are not that different from Hilary's. Sanders' records as a US Senator indicates that he tends to oppose wars and has condemned U.S. involvement in Latin American conflicts, but on the other hand he has also supported interventions in Libya and Afghanistan, on supposedly humanitarian grounds. He also publicly opposed state surveillance, but has not presented any truly progressive alternative to the current 'war on terror'. "Obviously, Bernie Sanders is on the opposite side of Donald Trump, who has succeeded in exploiting the fears of a paranoid society that is constantly fearing the external world by focusing on the alleged threats of terrorism and immigration. But Bernie's discourse also represents the failure of the American left to offer an effective and progressive response to such fears".

Across the country, Americans are talking about economic democracy, local alternatives, public and employee-owned banks, cooperatives and other advanced ideas, but according to Flanders they are "still lacking what was the essence of 'new politics' in the 1970s: a new and shared sense of liberation. There is a clear need for "a 'new politics' for our times, which would enable new spaces and processes for different communities and social interests, demands and proposals to converge".

## New Politics in Africa and Asia

"One might get the impression that the left is still strong in sub-Saharan Africa, because many former militants are now in power across the region, but in fact the left is today weaker than ever", according to Olmo von Meijenfeldt, the Executive Director of the Democracy Works Foundation – a Johannesburg-based political think-tank. This is reflected in the lack of capacity to support critical thinking and alternative policy formulation, and the fact that politics is increasingly used for populist goals and ambitions. Throughout Africa, "the left is no longer perceived as an emancipatory force", as radical discourses are being used "more as a marketing tool than as an agenda for progressive change". In this context, former national liberation movements currently in government have implemented a shallow form of democracy, while the state continues to be configured around the same structures of the colonial period.

The political stagnation, or even regression, is aggravated by the growing inequality and the youth's lack of access to both economic opportunities and political spaces for meaningful engagement, which leads to permanent instability, von Meijenfeldt reasoned.

There might be no room for optimism on the side of political movements and parties, but there is reason for hope coming from the progressive intelligentsia and civil society organisations, including labour and new social movements, as evident today in Southern Africa. But that does not translate into political movements for meaningful political change in the short term. The rising unemployment might turn into youth-led uprisings similar to that of Egypt and Tunisia in recent years, but most likely they will be subject to heavy state repression. Some labour activists have been busy trying to build new political parties in countries, such as Malawi and Zambia, but these parties are essentially not different from other already existing parties, von Meijenfeldt concluded.

Focusing on the specific reality of South Africa, Dinga Sikwebu, the Coordinator of the United Front (UF) – an emerging coalition of social organisations and left movements – and a member of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), analysed the country's development path and the current unravelling of the national liberation project. "The meaning of 'development' in South Africa has been reduced to exacerbated mineral extraction and energy production controlled by a few corporations, in the framework of the so-called mineral-energy complex. In recent years South Africa has suffered the ups and downs in the international price of commodities, followed by a severe electricity crisis. In this context, this country is witnessing the fracture of both the ruling party and the labour movement, triggered by the mine workers' struggles and the Marikana massacre in 2012, among other factors". NUMSA has been expelled from the main union federation, COSATU, and together with other unions is building a new federation. Across the country there's a wide wave of struggles by workers and university students, which show the need for a new form of convergence of social movements and the creation of new political organisations to take power away from the ANC.

Sikwebu offered a summary of what he perceives as the five main New Politics challenges in South Africa: (1) Although the ruling party has been politically challenged, it is still very strong. "Quite often we, as the left, don't understand how power is exercised symbolically and otherwise". (2) South Africa has a strong but unreconstructed left, including segments of the ANC and the Communist Party, so "in order to move forward we need to engage in serious debate about the meaning of developmentalism, political agency and alliances, the role of the middle classes, our ideas of democracy and political instruments, and the meaning of violence in politics, going beyond old and sectarian discussions". (3) The left needs "to agree a platform around winnable demands to build organisations, offer something and win something". (4) The left should be aware of the generational cycles of resistance visible in the miners' strikes and Marikana, the creation of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), and the current wave of students' protests, as all these processes have been led by mainly young activists trying to find new ways for political expression. "Our analysis has been focused on class, and we have not taken into account

the importance of generations. We need to understand their new language; for instance, the youth do not talk about neoliberalism, but they do talk about decolonisation, and we can certainly relate to it". (5) The left needs to care about its collective historical memory. "The party was meant to do that, but that task had its own challenges and limitations, and at the end of the day we have not been able to pass on important lessons of the past to the new generations".

Sikwebu finished his presentation suggesting three focal points for the New Politics Project's research agenda: research agenda: (a) the characteristics and prospects of post-national liberation politics; (b) the practices of winnable and survivalist politics, and (c) the significance and requirements for generational cycles of resistance.

According to Brian Ashley, the Director of the Alternative Information and Development Centre – a research and advocacy institute based in Cape Town – "the agenda and the flow of ideas that we're having in this New Politics seminar feels like coming to a different planet. In Africa we don't have this type and level of discussion. The left is still very much in the 20th century in our countries". Africa is "a huge and internally disconnected continent, in which there is a resurgence of civil society mobilisations, including many and significant struggles, but mediated by the neoliberal agenda. Some organisations linked to La Via Campesina and other international activist networks, as well as new solidarity economy networks, are quite strong. There are some new left parties, but not necessarily 'new left', and the platform of most or all class-based parties still conceive the state as the main and practically only focus of political action", he explained. Across the region there are constant references to "Africa rising, the development of the productive forces, new infrastructure and launch of new stock markets, but many years after national liberation the state remains rooted in the same neo-colonial logic dissected by Frantz Fanon and other thinkers of the colonial period. The interests of the comprador-bourgeoisie are now shifting towards the intensification of extractivism, with many mining projects jointly controlled by the imperial powers (including Chinese companies) and the indigenous new bourgeoisie". The issues of class formation have always been complex in sub-Saharan Africa, but nowadays is even more difficult than ever to make general assumptions about the region, Ashley argued.

Ashley analysed how "in the context of the ongoing rupture with the ANC and the already evident exhaustion of the national liberation project, the current struggles of mineworkers, farmworkers, students and the unemployed constitute the space for the emergence of new social and political actors". The legitimacy and hegemony of the ruling party are increasingly questioned, creating new political opportunities for the left, but the issue of leadership remains unsolved. The new social and political scenario also implies new challenges for the South African left, such as "understanding the rise of new cultural politics or the actual dynamics of the EFF". "Today we need to include in our agenda very urgent debates about patriarchy and gender, and at the same time we need to face the

rapidly changing social formation: how to work on 'new politics' in countries that have a class dynamic that is at the core of the original programme of the left, whilst taking into account the deep racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural divisions that are being created today? How does one promote 'new politics' at the popular level, with huge layers of people with no prospect of ever having a job". The left must understand the political significance of subsistence economies; organisations such as EEF have understood the importance of economics in the new African context, but without proposing a viable political project, and we can see similar situations in countries such as Tanzania, Kenya or Senegal, Ashley concluded.

In Asia, and more specifically in India, the left is currently facing a serious crisis, as parties and movements "are moving from a position of strength to having very little political influence", according to Meena Menon – a writer and political analyst focusing on South Asian politics, environment, gender and human rights. India is now coping with a right wing government, while the left has almost no electoral presence across the subcontinent any more. There are, however, a lot of progressive movements active at the grassroots level, ranging from radical Dalit activists to feminist organisations and farmers fighting land grabs. The current political picture also includes Maoist guerrilla groups and right-wing movements structured around religious beliefs.

Menon described how "it would seem that people do not want a radical agenda any longer; not only in the national Parliament, but also in regional governments". This might relate to the fact that when left parties gain state power there is usually no coherent relationship between their ideology and vision and how to implement them. In this context, "social movements become watch dogs and are prone to constant and serious fractures". As the right moves forward in capturing every institution across India and gaining social support, "it becomes clear that the left urgently needs to move beyond protest and be able to propose concrete and viable alternatives. Left parties have to articulate not just a vision, but be concerned about policy implementation, as well".

Menon also explained the need for the democratisation of the Indian left, as "the practices of democratic centralism are no longer working and internal democracy does not exist in left parties". The parties are also very reluctant to work together, unlike social movements, which are more inclined to converge. The practices of the labour movement must also change, since "unions are not good at organising the informal sector, but a new generation of labour activists is emerging".

The prospects of the left are also highly influenced by the current changes in the class structure. The new middle classes are not necessarily progressive, but do come forward on issues such as democracy or violence against women. One of the most radical forces today are the Dalit activists, mobilised against the social exclusion based on caste, including students and highly educated young people. But the Indian left is just

learning to deal with social changes and caste issues, even though “the cultural agenda is more important today than economics”. In short, Menon argued that the Indian left must rethink its traditional understanding of socialism, “not focusing on a purely abstract framework, but on changing realities on the ground that point to a just and more democratic society”. This means to design “a new operating strategy, with clear ideas for implementation, addressing cultural and social issues and opening spaces for young people in order to learn from them, not just try to teach them”. To conclude, Menon highlighted the importance of initiatives such as the New Politics Project, as there is little flow of information and ideas across world regions.

Benny Kuruvilla – an activist and researcher previously linked to Focus on the Global South and Action Aid, now working for TNI – provided additional information to the analysis offered by Menon. Kuruvilla agreed with her that the left needs to pay more attention to the problems of policy design and implementation, including matters like industrial policy, which are vital for a country such as India, currently going through an acute process of deindustrialisation and jobless growth. Benny also explained that the left has a long experience of government: in Kerala, the Left Democratic Front (LDF), a progressive coalition that includes the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Communist Party of India[Marxist] (CPI(M) and others, has been in and out government in the state since 1957, where they have pioneered innovative strategies such as decentralised planning and workers’ cooperatives.

## New Politics in Latin America

According to Edgardo Lander – a Social Science professor at the Central University of Venezuela and a TNI Fellow – to talk about the left in Latin America today is not an easy task, because the subject of analysis is internally contradictory. At the start of his presentation, Lander identified several types of struggle that do not necessarily converge into a common vision: “we can distinguish anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist tendencies, as well as another that focuses on the search for *alternatives to development*”. In recent years, the region has also witnessed the rise of “national-popular projects that give priority to industrialisation, democratisation, inclusion, and redistribution, which together could be characterised as the pending tasks of the project to establish truly national and democratic states”. Lander clarified that these different types of struggles are not necessarily mutually-exclusive, as they represent tendencies and imaginaries that are closely intertwined in current political confrontations.

In the framework of the current heterogeneity of the Latin American left, the debates about *neoextractivism* have generated the deepest divisions within progressives in the region during the last decade. Lander summarised the main confrontations as, “on the one hand, popular organisations, parties and movements that prioritise anti-imperialism, the

rejection of neoliberal economic policies, the recovery of the state, national sovereignty and economic growth as the way to overcome poverty and inequality. On the other hand, there is a variety of perspectives which, without denying the importance of the above, affirm the need to simultaneously confront racism, patriarchy, coloniality, extractivism, climate change and the anthropocentric nature of capitalism”.

Lander exposed his disagreement with Bolivia’s Vice President Alvaro García Linera and other left thinkers who perceive extractivism as “a technical form of production compatible with any model of society”. On the contrary, he argued, “extractivism in its current grand scale is not just an economic model, but a type of society that tends to mould political regimes characterised by rent-seeking and patronage, generating a perverse reliance of the popular sectors on government transfers that weakens their autonomous capabilities, and thus democracy”. According to Lander, “the long history of oil production in Venezuela conclusively demonstrates that once an extractive rentier logic has been installed in a society, it is extremely difficult to dismantle it”.

With the end of the current cycle of high commodity prices, the continuity of social and redistributive policies of recent years is far from guaranteed and Latin America is suffering “a significant shift to the right throughout the region”. Lander concluded his presentation with a very important question relevant for the left not only in Latin America, but also in other regions of the world: “all these accelerated political displacements reopen theoretical debates about how to respond to less favourable conditions; to what extent is the crisis of progressive governments also a crisis of the cycle of popular struggles of the last two decades?”

Mabel Thwaites-Rey – the Director of the University of Buenos Aires’s Institute for Latin American and Caribbean Studies – also reflected on the apparent closure of the cycle of progressive governance in the region. She focused on the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Nicaragua, El Salvador and (for a brief period) Paraguay, all of which have been characterised as “new left, progressive, post-neoliberal, popular-nationalist, neo-developmental or neo-extractivist”. She argued that all these labels are not politically neutral and remain the subject of heated debates among researchers and activists. That is why she opts for referring to them as components of the “*ciclo de impugnación al neoliberalismo en América Latina*” (leading to the acronym CINAL in Spanish, meaning “cycle of impugnation of neoliberalism in Latin America”) as a way to include more dimensions for a regional comparative analysis beyond national specificities.

Thwaites-Rey emphasised “the idea of process, as a moment of dispute for hegemony that cannot be understood as a completed stage”. Moreover, she criticised characterisations focused on the ‘post’ preposition (as in *post-neoliberalism*): “if the emphasis is simply put on the end of the commodities super-cycle, the foretold conclusion will be the

end of progressive governments, but the current Latin American reality is much more complex than that, and the many and complex characteristics of governments opposed to neoliberalism are linked to political and social factors beyond pure economics". In that sense, she clarified that she did not agree with the approach that places the continuity of extractivism as the single and definitive feature used to describe the Latin American governments. The environmental impacts of development and the reliance on extractivism "should be considered important components of a regional trend, but not be read as the essential factors that define the political profile of each government". Thwaites-Rey argued in favour of including other elements in the analytical framework, such as class hierarchies, the social distribution of power, and the geopolitical alliances favoured by each government, which should be understood as "more influential factors than those considered by the critics who focus mainly on neoextractivism, who usually only take into account the exploitation of raw materials".

Thwaites-Rey also referred to current debates within the Latin American left about the nature and roles of the state. She claimed that the governments included within the CINAL adapted the state apparatus to implement some new policies, but without substantially transforming the essential features of capitalist social reproduction mediated by the state. A relevant question for the New Politics Project's research agenda is therefore "whether it could be possible to promote radical social, economic and political change within the inherited state structure", she said. The Latin American experiences tend to show that "a substantial transformation of the state apparatus is only compatible with profound changes in social relations and, vice versa, only the articulation of new ways of production and consumption will change the political and administrative structures of the state". It is necessary, therefore, "to transcend certain rudimentary conceptions that understand the state as a monolithic bloc and a tool for the ruling classes, and move toward a conceptualisation that takes into consideration the complexities of class relations".

In Latin America, this implies "understanding contradiction and asymmetry as two constituent elements of state configurations, to avoid falling both into an understanding of the state as an enemy fortress to be assaulted or as a virgin territory to be colonised". In this sense, the Gramscian strategy of "war of positions" is a useful metaphor to analyse many political processes that have sprouted in recent years in the region, "which have managed to distance itself from the prototypical formats of vanguardism and the old strategy of assaulting the site of power". The recent Latin American experiences demonstrate that "revolution should be understood as a long process of formation of new political subjects, even though based on a multifaceted dispute within civil society and not ruling out the possibilities of actively engaging in policy-making within the state, even if only from an 'antagonist perspective', as suggested by the Italian thinker Lelio Basso, thus moving towards a comprehensive and substantive

democratisation not only of the state but of the whole social life". At a more concrete level, this also means "a transformative project aimed at dismantling the bureaucratic dynamics of inefficiency and corruption, which demobilises popular participation, captures public officials and converts them into new bureaucrats suitable to consolidate their own positions, silence criticism and annihilate transformative projects", Thwaites-Rey concluded.

Ana Dinerstein – an Argentinean academic based at the Centre for Development Studies of the University of Bath – addressed the dichotomy 'autonomy versus statism' that is very visible in today's Latin American left politics (as well as in other regions of the world). "We need to recast the question of autonomy beyond binary thinking", she argued. Since John Holloway published his famous book in 2002 inspired by the *Zapatistas'* experience, two antagonistic approaches divide the left. On the one hand, "the advocates of autonomy as a political strategy, who emphasise the significance of grassroots and communitarian practices of direct democracy and anti-bureaucratic forms of self-management, and reject both the notion of development as a political and economic project and the state as the main locus of political change". On the other hand, "the defenders of the strategy of 'taking the power of the state', who portray autonomy as a weak tool to fight against the power of the elites and transnational capital". Dinerstein reasoned that "this divide replicates the historical left debate between anarchists and Marxists, yet there is potential for cross-fertilisation".

Dinerstein suggested "to invert the terms of Holloway's well-known question, from 'can we change the world without taking the power of the state' to asking instead 'how does the capitalist state deal with the potential for radical change that autonomous organising brings about?' In other words, how does the state 'translate' autonomous organising into law and policy? Does this translation lead to de-radicalisation? What are the limits of the appropriation and institutionalisation of autonomy by the state?". Reinforcing Mabel's reflection about the intrinsically contradictory nature of the state, Dinerstein underlined that "the state is not a set of institutions or fixed arrangements, but a social process, a social relation, an open process". Based on this understanding, "autonomous praxis should not be read as simply being 'against' or 'outside' the state, since it is internal to the world of capital and therefore it is mediated by the state, which is the most important form of political organisation in capitalist societies".

Drawing on the tradition of Open Marxism, Dinerstein rejected the possibility of attaining a post-capitalist future as envisioned by Paul Mason and other authors who underscore the emancipatory potential of technology (automation) and exhibit a naïve understanding of 'money' and the 'state'. In addition to this, Dinerstein engaged in a profound criticism of Euro-centrism in critical thinking, including Open Marxism, referring to "the fondness that radical activists and scholar-activists have grown for autonomous movements", which has led to "interpretations of autonomy



where the specificity of the region and of indigenous autonomy are neglected and/or overlooked". While for non-indigenous thinkers and activists autonomy might be understood as an 'emancipatory' project, "for indigenous people emancipation is inevitably a decolonising project, which not only rejects the state and capital but internal colonialism and coloniality as well". She proposed to develop further theoretical work around what she calls Decolonial Marxism, in order to comprehend (and eventually overcome) current differences among different forms of resistance to capital and coloniality.

Recalling a concept originally proposed by David Harvey, Dinerstein argued that "accumulation by dispossession is creating common grounds for diverse struggles that are finding unity in diversity, as made clear in the Zapatistas' characterisation of neoliberal globalisation as a war against humanity and their proposal that we should all ask ourselves what is it that oppresses *us*, here and now?"

## The left in government and the importance of the public sector

Several presentations at the New Politics workshop focused on the left's diverse interpretations and approaches towards the state and its implications for transformative and emancipatory action. Drawing on his personal experience as an activist now in government, Ioannis Margaritis – an electric engineer currently working for the Syriza-led administration as Vice Chairman of HEDNO, the state-owned company responsible for power distribution and network operations in Greece – focused his presentations on the specific challenges of the left once it assumes national office. Margaritis focused on what he calls "Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF) hints for New Politics", concentrating on three challenges. First, "the need to pay attention to management methods, organisational tools, rules and behaviours" that are essential to run any government. Second, the need to implement left public policies using the existing and neoliberalised structure of the state, which according to Margaritis can be compared "to trying to repair an airplane in mid-flight". Third, the need to frame these challenges "in the context of extremely urgent survival modes of existence, which in the case of Greece means responding to massive unemployment and a social situation similar to those of countries at war, aggravated by a growing refugee crisis and the militarisation of the European borders".

Margaritis explained how Syriza's access to government has exhibited the limitations of the nation-state to manage public finances, resources and capital-labour relations. The neoliberalisation of the state has become very visible in terms of market penetration in strategic sectors, the de-legitimatisation of the public sector, the inherently clientelistic functioning and structure of public agencies, and the weakening and/or suppression of public institutions responsible for long-term strategic planning. According to Margaritis, most likely future progressive governments in Europe will have face a hostile reality similar to that encountered by the

Greek left. This suggests the necessity to respond to the current crisis of organisational models, since “traditional left parties are becoming irrelevant as a tool for building social and political power that produces material results”. Beyond parties, the social left is also in crisis and increasingly fragmented; “in Greece, as in many other countries, the labour unions tend to further bureaucratisation and diminished power, which highlights the need to rediscuss the real nature of ‘activism’ and avoid fetishising the ‘movements’ in its classical forms”.

As a contribution to the collective design of the New Politics Project’s agenda, Margaris proposed to conduct evidence-based research on “how the modern state functions and how modern societies conceptualise the future”. He also suggested to theorise the meaning and prospects of left governments, systematising real-world experiences of progressive public policies: “We, the Europeans, must exchange knowledge and experiences with our friends in Latin America, to learn from both their achievements and their failures”. To conclude, Margaris proposed to develop “new left ideas for the education and training of future public sector administrators and executives of state-owned companies”, as well as “new organisational instruments and tools to build social and political power, including a reconsideration of the roles of unions and other forms of social organisation”.

From a similar standpoint, being also an activist turned government official, Sebastián Torres – an economist currently serving as Uruguay’s National Planning Director – reflected on the challenges faced by the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) left coalition after more than a decade in national office. He began his presentation with a quote extracted from Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* documentary film: “Rumour has it that every third world leader coined the same phrase the morning after independence: now the real problems start... Rather unexciting problems for revolutionary romanticism: to work, to produce, to distribute, to overcome post-war exhaustion, temptations of power and privilege”. Torres argued that this quote captures quite precisely the situation faced by left activists once they join a government, “who are forced to shift from abstract theoretical debates to having to make concrete decisions on not always so thrilling but yet urgent issues”.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of deepening the theoretical and abstract exchanges about the nature and roles of the state, as proposed by other participants at the New Politics workshop, Torres reasoned that “the left should embrace the tension between dream and practice, actively engage in electoral politics and eventually governments, being aware of both the limitations and the opportunities posed by state institutions for social, economic and political change”. This implies “including in the New Politics research agenda issues such as the promotion of worker-owned cooperatives, the progressive reform of state-owned enterprises, left perspectives on production and distribution, ways to overcome the temptations and privilege that come with public office, or how to support open-innovation communities”.

Based on his personal experience in government, in particular in the field of industrial policy planning and implementation, Torres listed eight concrete policy questions around which the New Politics Project could contribute much-needed new thinking. These were: “(1) how left governments should intervene in the economy in targeted areas that are not interesting for the market; (2) how to funnel public investment in priority areas, often associated with high levels of what mainstream economist call ‘positive economic externalities’; (3) how to build partnerships with workers’ cooperatives, in order to ‘crowd-in’ investments; (4) how to ensure a more equitable delivery of public services; (5) how to democratise and increase the efficiency of state-owned enterprises; (6) how to ensure that the economy grows at a rate that facilitates jobs and welfare for all sectors of society, in particular for the most marginalised communities; (7) how to respond to the previous six challenges while protecting the environment and maximising the returns generated by the exploitations of natural resources; and (8) how to promote economic and social transformations coherent with a more balanced correlation of political power”.

Tom Marois – an activist-scholar based at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London – also focused his presentation on the importance of the public sector, and particularly of public banks, for rethinking left theories and practices. “The left should pay much more attention to the question of public finances, as it is at the core of some key transformations of capitalism in its current phase of financialisation”. “Money has penetrated our daily lives and every aspect of modern societies. This is really a transformation of social relations that have become deeply institutionalised, but not many people in the left understand this issue, and therefore we have failed to move forward and create alternatives, Marois argued. “In the framework of the New Politics Project we should definitely think together about policy alternatives. We must think about the changed nature of the capitalist state and reverse neoliberalism by reclaiming the public sector. In the case of public banks, there is latent capacity for progressive change. Financialisation has grown bigger and bigger, but the capacity of the state is still a back door for transformation”.

Marois described how state-owned banks play a major role in global finance and how they could be used begin to erode the power of capital. Due to the existence of strong public banks, several countries have been able to withstand the worst effects of the current financial crisis, whilst in some others cases public banks have proven to be not only a tool for economic stability, but also a source of innovation and the foundation for more inclusive social and productive policies. “The recent history of neoliberalism has demonstrated that there is no economic reason, only political reasons, for privatising the banks. We in the left should understand the progressive potential of public banks, but also be aware of their shortcomings and limitations”. Marois explained that, at present, there is no perfect example to be mentioned, “but we can refer to lots of

interesting cases, ranging from green lending in Germany to workers-managed public banks in Costa Rica, as well as positive experiences of banks addressing issues of gender, environmental sustainability, and redistribution of profits to sustain solidarity economy projects". Marois concluded that "from a left perspective, it is not enough to reclaim public banks to kick-start the economy; we have to think how to build new social relations and how to use public banks and finance as a lever for emancipatory change".

From a similar perspective, Daniel Díaz-Fuentes – a professor of Economics at the University of Cantabria – explained why progressive thinkers and activists should care about the way public services are delivered. Díaz-Fuentes described a major transformation brought forward by neoliberalism: the increasing use of lawsuits by corporations, against states around the world, as a tool for advancing private interests and dismantling the public sector. This process is not really new, as it started with the economic crisis of the seventies and eighties, based on the neoliberal assumption that a change in ownership and the market forces would lead to greater economic efficiency. Today there is plenty of evidence that the approach propagated by Margaret Thatcher and her followers around the world carried "a deep misrepresentation of what public services and public enterprises really are". Currently, the state is once again perceived as the entrepreneur of last resort, able to socialise risk and losses and guarantee private profits, including the bailout of failed private companies. In this context, "progressives should review their classic views on the nature and roles of the state and the public sector, including a better understanding of the new rules of market competition and how the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and similar treaties will make everything even more complicated", he argued.

## The strategic project of the left

Erik Olin Wright – Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and past President of the American Sociological Association – provided a summary of the main ideas to be presented in his forthcoming book *How to be an Anticapitalist for the 21st Century*. Wright highlighted "the need to rediscuss the question of strategies", rethinking "what we might achieve, what is our primary goal, what is the scope and the ambition of anticapitalist strategies".

Wright identified four logics of anticapitalism: "smashing, taming, alleviating and eroding capitalism, which often co-exist". In order to understand the differences, "we can use the metaphor of building a different society as a game. What kind of game should we play, what are the rules and the moves of that game? Smashing capitalism is about the game itself, it focuses on revolution; the central idea is that in order to transform capitalism you have to hit the core of the current system and seize state power to play a whole different game. Taming capitalism means a reformist strategy, changing the rules that regulate how

capitalism operates to mitigate the worst of its harms, so that capitalism remains capitalism but less damaging. Reforms can differ a lot, as we can see in the platform of social-democratic parties around the world, but the idea is always to neutralise the harm. Alleviating capitalism operates at the level of the moods of the game, focusing on the players and changing the rules to alleviate some of the harm, but not aiming to change the game in itself. Eroding capitalism is a less familiar form; it addresses the problem of transforming the game, the rules and the moves, enabling us to build alternatives”.

Eroding capitalism, as Wright explained, “recognises the fact that all socioeconomic systems constitute a complex mix of many diverse types of economic and political structures, relations, and activities. There has never been anywhere in the world a purely capitalist society fully structured around the three critical components of capitalism: private ownership of capital, profit-oriented market production, and employment of workers who do not own the means of production”. Since every socioeconomic system is a hybrid that includes some entirely non-capitalist and even anticapitalist structures, “we can erode capitalism by developing more democratic, participatory and egalitarian relations in the spaces and cracks of the system and struggling to expand and defend those alternatives”. Wright argued that “the idea of eroding capitalism is not a mere fantasy, but only becomes plausible when it is combined with the idea of taming capitalism. This is what some of us understand as *Real Utopias*, which allow us to transform the no-where of utopia into the now-here of creating emancipatory alternatives”.

Wright referred to worker-owned cooperatives as a concrete example of Real Utopias. “They emerged alongside within the framework of capitalism, but rooted in the emancipatory values of equality, democracy, and solidarity. They often embody contradictory ideals; for instance, sometimes they hire temporary workers under different labour conditions or might be unfriendly to potential members of specific ethnic or racial groups. They are far from perfect; still, they have the potential to erode the dominance of capitalism by expanding the economic space within which anticapitalist ideals operate”. Another manifestation of Real Utopias mentioned by Wright was public libraries, “which might be perceived like a weird example, since they are present in all capitalist societies; nevertheless, these libraries embody profoundly anticapitalist principles of access and distribution”.

Wright clarified that Real Utopias can also be found in initiatives and mobilisations for social change and within state policies, and both in actually existing and imagined institutions. This also means the “the contrast between a protest movement and an alternative-building movement is not always clear-cut or dichotomous”. Addressing the issue of how to relate with state power, Wright concluded that “ultimately what is needed is a state that provides a range of important public goods along with social movements that build alternatives from below, alternatives that might be anchored in the expansive idea of the *commons*”.

Tomislav Tomasevic – an activist-scholar working for the Institute for Political Ecology, in Croatia – also highlighted the importance the commons for reinventing the left, internationally. Tomasevic described how the idea of the commons is expanding as a very useful framework for emancipatory struggles that integrates the essential values of the left with environmental concerns and other urgent issues of our times. He explained how this concept was rediscovered by activists after some non-radical thinkers, in particular the 2009 Nobel Prize winner in Economics Elinor Ostrom, “had empirically demonstrated how natural resources can be fairly and sustainably sustained without the market and the state”. The new and autonomist left has expanded the original and narrow understanding of the commons “well beyond natural resources, to include cultural, knowledge and digital commons”. At present, there are many different understandings and approaches to the idea of the commons: “supposedly apolitical perspectives, institutionalist economics, post-political visions, constructivist approaches, confrontational, and even some revision of old Marxist ideas”. Tomasevic also said that “the commons is now a buzzword concept that is used by everybody in their discourse, but with many different connotations, since it has been incorporated into the discourse of big name theorists such as Michael Hardt, David Harvey or Noam Chomsky”.

“Beyond diverse interpretations, the concept of the commons is rapidly becoming an essential component of any radical left project. Among those us living in Eastern Europe, *commonism* is replacing the old idea of communism”. Quite often it is perceived as a politically-neutral concept, which greatly contributes to its expansion. “In particular, this concept is used by environmentalists and activists of the climate justice movement.

Tomasevic also argued in favour of incorporating the environmental agenda as a key component of the New Politics Project. “One of the biggest challenges that the climate justice movement faces today is how to communicate the urgency without falling into catastrophism or technofixes”. This also implies the need to engage in a serious debate about the meaning of growth and degrowth beyond the usual oversimplifications. “In current discussions within the left some thinkers and activists focus on the question of sufficiency (how much is enough?), while others focus in efficiency (how to do more with less?). This is an unproductive dichotomy, as we need both”. Tomasevic also referred to current debates on the meaning of modernity, which often go to extreme ends: “one side celebrates pre-modern economic and political structures and the scale of communities, while the other side celebrates the state or exaggerates their hopes on science and technology. One camp talks about de-industrialisation and the other about re-industrialisation. We need to understand the complexity of arguments that shape current debates and try to integrate, as much as possible, the currently polarised perspectives”.

“The New Politics agenda should also avoid idealising the idea of the commons”, Tomasevic said. “We need more research about the importance of scale, since at present we hardly see more than a few

thousand people managing commons-centred initiatives. We should also be aware that the idea of the commons can be easily co-opted by big private corporations, as it has happened already with the free software movement; Harvey calls this ‘the real tragedy of the commons’. Nevertheless, there is great potential to integrate an emancipatory notion of the commons into current struggles around climate justice, free internet, against the commodification of nature, or economic democracy”. Tomasevic concluded with the observation that “current discussions around the commons also relate to ongoing theoretical developments and new movements focused on social reproduction and participatory democracy. We need to think about how to commonise the market and how we could commonise the state, in order to build public service alternatives and reclaim social and democratic control over public resources”.

From a similar perspective, Sol Trumbo – a Spanish TNI researcher based in Amsterdam, active in a wide range of European networks – focused his presentations on his personal experience and understanding of New Politics from the perspective of a young activist. “In the same way that some older activists present themselves as members of the *Generation of 1968* I recognise myself as somebody who belongs to the *Generation of 2011*”. Trumbo highlighted many social and political events that have taken place since 2011 until the present day, which should be considered by the New Politics Project in order to understand the new meanings of activism and emancipation for the new generations, in particular in Europe. “We must re-evaluate the significance of the ‘Arab Spring’ revolts, the 15-M movement in Spain, the Occupy mobilisations in the United States, the rise of the radical Greek left, and the global narrative built around the *we are the 99%* protests”. Trumbo recalled that “this time the media took it up and the issue of inequality became the subject of debate at the Davos meeting and articles in *The Economist*, the *Financial Times* and other media channels”. According to him, “what we saw were movements with similar features in very different contexts, based on common practices rather than a shared ideological framework. This implies a profound change from previous waves of global activism”.

Trumbo proposed to include in the New Politics agenda research about the nature and potential of these practices, such as the network-based politics enabled by the information and communication technologies. He argued that easier and faster access to knowledge is facilitating the rise of new and still misunderstood forms of activism. “The new generation of activists tend to favour direct action rather than long political manifestos. These include actions that range from blocking European Union institutions in Brussels or Frankfurt to street mobilisations to stop evictions in European cities, combining online and offline tools for communication and coordination”. Other differences from the type of activism that prevailed in previous decades are “new strategies for media outreach and forms of decision-making that are more horizontal, not based on the closed meetings of central committees but on open

assemblies that everyone can join". In reality, however, "not everyone is free to join physically or online; migrants are often reluctant to participate, because they risk being put in jail or worse. Also there is a technological gap in certain areas of the world". Building broad coalitions is also quite difficult, taking into account the current criminalisation of social movements. "Young activists are aware of the importance of Internet tools such as live-streaming and Wikileaks, since they perceive them as a defence against abuses".

Trumbo argued that these expressions of New Politics cannot be circumscribed to the narrow realm of 'the left'. "Many young activists identify with struggles for social rights or common goods. In Spain, Podemos was criticised by the traditional left for not declaring itself 'left' and proposing a transversal and more inclusive strategy. "This indicates the need to rethink the classic ideological lines and understanding of parties and movements", Trumbo concluded.

Another Spanish activist – Alfredo Ramos, currently working as an advisor for the Podemos' bloc at the Legislative Assembly of Madrid – also analysed the characteristics and significance of new forms of social mobilisation and political organisation, in particular in metropolitan contexts. Ramos began his presentation clarifying that he would not "attempt to provide a full assessment of the experiences of progressive municipal governance of Barcelona and Madrid, which would be impossible after only six months in office". Instead, he focused on political developments in Spain since 2011 that led to the current situation, identifying some possible elements that might contribute to the design of the New Politics research agenda.

Ramos rejected "romantic interpretations of the rise of Podemos that explain the creation of the new party as a direct result of the 15M and other related movements". He reasoned that "there is no natural relationship between movements and the Podemos party. Why? Because the social movement that erupted in Spain in 2011 were in crisis after the collapse of the *Indignados*".

Ramos also referred to the importance of leadership and convergence of social forces in the context of urban politics: "The social organisations (including those from which many Podemos activists and leaders emerged) and the *candidaturas de unidad popular* (popular unity candidacies) that won the municipal elections in Barcelona, Madrid and other Spanish cities, are not the same thing". And Barcelona and Madrid are also different in the profile and type of leadership: "in Barcelona, the leadership of Ada Colau, who came from the anti-evictions movement, facilitated the confluence of social forces, but convergence was already evolving in the city well before the election". In Madrid, "the issue of leadership appeared in the context of the elections and was resolved with the appointment of Manuela Carmena, a retired lawyer and emeritus judge of the Spanish Supreme Court, as the consensus candidate for the May 2015 municipal election".



Based on the Spanish experience, Ramos proposed “to rediscuss whether political parties are still necessary to represent social interests and address the issue of internal democracy in left parties, including those who are supposedly more democratic than the traditional socialist or communist parties”. He also proposed to rethink the meaning of populism: “I defend the populist left, even though I am not very fond of the Ernesto Laclau’s writings on populism so influential today within Podemos”.

To conclude, Ramos proposed to reincorporate into the New Politics research agenda the issue of citizens’ participation and participatory democracy, which has been one of the main focus of the project in its previous phase. “In Madrid we face a very weird phenomenon. In our City Council we have an internationally recognised hacker and expert in Internet-driven peer to peer initiatives. He has developed a very innovative system of participation focused on Internet, which enables anybody with access to the web to make proposals on how to spend the municipal budget. If a proposal gets the support of 2 per cent the population (around 56.000 supporters) it directly goes to the city council for approval. But until now we have not received any proposal with the required level of support. It has been a failure. My main criticism is that the system has been based on individual participation, with too high expectations on the potentials of technology”. Ramos added that in Spain there were many previous and rather successful processes of participatory budgeting inspired by the Brazilian experience initially developed by the Workers’ Party (PT). “Maybe we need to revisit old and new experiences and learn the proper lessons from both achievements and failures”, he said.

Hilary Wainwright – the Research Director of the New Politics Project in its previous phase, editor of the Red Pepper magazine in Britain and a TNI Fellow – began her presentation proudly presenting herself, tongue-in-cheek, “as a representative of the generation of 1968”, nodding to Trumbo’s prior reference. Wainwright emphasised “the importance of memory, of critical memory”, suggesting to “to think together about how we could reinforce the process of crowd-sourcing our collective history”. She also agreed with Trumbo that the context in which the New Politics Project operates has changed: “When TNI launched the previous phase of the project, in 2001, at the World Social Forum, the focus of debate and research was the relationship between parties and movements. Now we clearly see more hybridity and complexity, which require a better and deeper understanding of new movements and new parties”.

Wainwright proposed to focus not only on the dimension of protest, but also on the productive capacity of movements, in the sense suggested by Andreas. She also proposed to strengthen the feminist perspectives within the New Politics Project, not just by incorporating more women to the project’s activities but by reinforcing gender and power relations as a key area of analysis. Wainwright also suggested to have an honest discussion about the new meaning of ‘old’ words, such as *socialism*, in the current global political context, as well as doing in-depth research around ‘new’

concepts, such as the commons, as proposed by Tomasevic and others. Wainwright also agreed with Margaris' suggestion to systematise the experience of previous left governments in Latin America and elsewhere, extending this suggestion to the lessons to be learned from European political parties that in the previous phase of the project were researched with a high degree of hope, such as Rifondazione Comunista in Italy or Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal. "These parties declared themselves open to the movements, but in reality they made compromises to get into government that contradicted movements' perspectives. The leaders of the Greek left publicly declared that they had learned from the Italians, but clearly they did not. Now, after the failure of Syriza, we must learn from Greece in a critical way".

We must rethink the meaning of power not only as domination, but also in terms of transformative capacity, as the former can be a resource for the latter", she said.

Wainwright also proposed to carry out further research on the meanings and prospects of productive democracy, "not just as virtuous and morally right, but as a source of transformative efficiency". This would mean linking our analyses to key issues we face today, such as the disintegration of the old working class movement and the emergence of new types of unions. "Many of us are convinced that the nation state is not irrelevant, as some people believe, but there is no agreements among us about the role it should play in the framework of New Politics alternatives", so clearly we need further exchanges and collective thinking", she added.

## The participants

- **Alberto Cortes Costa** – University of Costa Rica
- **Ana Cecilia Dinerstein** – University of Bath
- **Andreas Karitzis** – Independent researcher
- **Benny Kuruvilla** – Transnational Institute
- **Brian Ashley** – Alternative Information and Development Centre
- **Christophe Aguiton** – Attac France
- **Daniel Chavez** – Transnational Institute
- **Daniel Diaz-Fuentes** – University of Cantabria
- **Dinga Sikwebu** – National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa
- **Edgardo Lander** – Transnational Institute
- **Erik Olin Wright** – Havens Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- **Fiona Dove** – Transnational Institute
- **Hilary Wainwright** – Transnational Institute
- **Ioannis Margaris** – Hellenic Electricity Distribution Network Operator
- **Jose Deras** – Central American Bank for Economic Integration
- **Laura Flanders** – The Laura Flanders Show
- **Lavinia Steinfort** – Transnational Institute
- **Lyda Fernanda Forero** – Transnational Institute
- **Mabel Thwaites-Rey** – University of Buenos Aires
- **Matthijs Peters** – Transnational Institute
- **Meena Menon** – Independent researcher
- **Nicola Bullard** – Terre Solidaire
- **Nick Buxton** – Transnational Institute
- **Olmo von Meijenfeldt** – Democracy Works
- **Patrick Barrett** – Havens Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- **Satoko Kishimoto** – Transnational Institute
- **Sebastian Torres** – National Direction of Planning, Government of Uruguay
- **Sol Trumbo Vila** – Transnational Institute
- **Thomas Marois** – School of Oriental and African Studies)
- **Tomislav Tomasevic** – Institute for Political Ecology
- **Vedran Horvat** – Institute for Political Ecology

On 13-14 February 2016, a group of researchers and activists from fifteen countries met in Amsterdam. The aim was to jointly draft the research agenda of the *New Politics Project*, an initiative promoted by the Transnational Institute (TNI) in partnership with several other organisations and individuals from around the world. The invited participants came from political parties, trade unions, social movements, universities, research centres and universities in Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia.

The New Politics Project has been conceived as a decentralised think tank on counter-hegemonic politics that will support the joint production of ideas to: (a) boost the development of desirable, viable and achievable alternatives aimed at transcending current oppressive and exploitative structures; (b) acknowledge the diversity of knowledge as a source of inspiration for the co-creation of alternatives; and (c) promote fruitful collaboration and exchanges among researchers and activists from different regions of the world.

This report offers highlights from the discussions and presentations and underlines key questions and issues to be addressed by the project's research agenda.

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