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Portugal

The Left Bloc 20 years on

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This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the foundation in Portugal of the Bloco de Esquerda (BE – Left Bloc), which was created as a unique political movement and not as a unified political party or as a coalition. Its constitution and evolution, for those of us who have closely followed this experience with interest and passion from other political contexts, is paradigmatic. A unique experience that is not free of paradoxes, challenges and risks. A revolutionary left that does not want to limit itself to a testimonial practice and self-affirmation has to reflect on these.

Twenty years after its foundation, the first thing that catches our attention is the small area occupied by the Bloco in the thinking of our political current. However, there have been occasional ruthless criticisms when evaluating certain initiatives or positions of the BE, without waiting to find out the reasons and the concrete terms of the position adopted - for example, regarding the agreement with the Socialist Party in 2015.

One of the reasons for this “forgetfulness” may be the country’s size in terms of population (10.3 million) and the weight of its GDP with respect to that of the European Union. Even so, given its activist structure and the political and social dimension that the Bloco has acquired on the Portuguese political scene, it is difficult to understand. Therefore, we take advantage of this 20th anniversary of its foundation to revisit the history of the Bloco and highlight what we find the most interesting aspects of this experience.

By borrowing - and transferring with great caution to the socio-political field - Thomas Kuhn’s concept of paradigm, the Bloco as an organization has obtained more success than other different and alternative proposals in constituting a mass anti-capitalist force with electoral and social weight in one country. Throughout these twenty years it has been able to solve some of the main problems that leftist groups encounter in moving from a propaganda group to a party with mass influence. This is verifiable in Portugal, where none of the political formations located on the same spectrum at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th have survived, while the different splits that the Bloco has experienced *to the left* (a good part of them sectarian and doctrinal variants) or *to the right* (in search of an arrangement and alignment with the Socialist Party) have ended up irrelevant or disappearing. But also, in other European countries where throughout these twenty years we have experienced the implosion of important experiences such as Italy’s Partito della Rifondazione Comunista or the striking emergence of the NPA which is, however, currently going through a period of significant difficulties, or the rise and decline of the Left Front, in France.

Therefore, this 20th anniversary is a good opportunity to question the characteristics of this experience that, with its ups and downs, presents elements of interest to those from currently marginalised revolutionary alternatives that seek to transform themselves into political forces capable of acting in the social and electoral sphere, appealing to activists, but above all to broad social sectors, as an alternative to the existing parties.

This dimension of credible alternative was the driving force of experiences like Podemos or la France Insoumise. Experiences that are currently in difficulty due to both the model of organization chosen and its erratic political wanderings, and the absence of links with the social movement.

Therefore, the first feature that stands out from the Bloco is its resilience, understood as the ability to overcome critical moments and adapt to unexpected and unusual situations, which has allowed its continuity and development during the twenty years of its existence. And which explains currently why the *Geringonça* or, the “contraption”, a contemptuous expression used to refer to the agreement between the Portuguese Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Bloco and the Greens – has lasted three years in spite of the attacks of the oligarchy.

But, as in science, the fact that a paradigm is more successful does not mean that it can obtain satisfactory results faced with all problems or obtain complete success, nor that it retains its status indefinitely.

Against all odds

The foundation of the Bloco took place in 1999 after an unforeseen defeat the previous year of the mass movement in the referendum on abortion, precisely when the end of the long political cycle opened on 25 April 1974 was already obvious. It is not usual that new parties emerge in times of regression and defeat. They usually emerge at times of advance and after the scent of possible victories. The constitution of the Bloco was made by the agreement of three organizations with different ideological roots and little practical experience in common: the PSR (Partido Socialista Revolucionário, the Portuguese section of the Fourth International) the UDP (União Democrática Popular, of Maoist origin) and PXXI (21st Century Politics, a split from the PCP. And it happened in a country with a great tradition of politicization and militancy in parties, but with a notable weakness and fragility (in comparison with, for example, France, Italy or the Spanish state) of the social movements and organizations that give them shape Even in the trade union sphere, which is very important, Portuguese trade unionism does not have the capacity for affiliation and political autonomy existing in other countries.

Thus, in 1999 the political situation in Portugal had no parallels with the conditions that, in 2014, for example, allowed the emergence of Podemos in the Spanish state, with the window of opportunity opened by the mobilization of 15M. And yet the agreement of these three forces made it possible. What was the element that allowed this step to be taken by three political forces, with distanced ideological origins and very little experience in common?

Taking up the explanations of Francisco Louçã in his interview with Miguel Romero, after the defeat in the referendum on abortion, there was a very general perception that an era had ended, and a bold proposal emerged: to create a political movement whose strength and unity would be established going beyond ideology. [\[1\]](#)

It is worth lingering over this explanation, because it is the keystone of the project. The central issue was not to agree on ideological questions or on the interpretation of the history of the workers' movement (the Russian or Chinese revolutions). The main thing was to concentrate, according to Louçã, on defining the political tasks and the constitution of the political culture of the new movement. A proposal that met with internal resistance in the forces that merged, but that was gaining ground and came to fruition. Secondly, the resilience of the Bloco could not be understood without starting from a key element in the construction of a political movement: a leadership capable of articulating the process; of understanding the conjuncture and setting the tone for political action.

Everyone knows that building a new political movement in a reactionary period is a risky task. And in 1999 in Portugal it was not easy to create a fifth party in a consolidated structure of four. The result was not guaranteed in advance. Yet the initiative managed to attract close to 1,300 members in a short time (in 2019 there are 8,000), which for a country of the size of Portugal is an estimable political capital and which, according to Louçã, offered the Bloco enough strength to act and confirmation that there was a new political and electoral space prior to the subsequent legislative elections, in which the Bloco won two seats.

In spite of this, as we have indicated above, the Bloco was launched in the midst of weak social movements and a context of political defeat. The audacity was in understanding the need to build what Pierre Rousset defines as a "necessary party" or which in other contexts is defined as a "useful party" for the working class, women, peasants and youth. According to Rousset: "In a number of countries – beginning with the countries of Europe – there just isn't the level and quality of social struggle to breathe life into a revolutionary organization... The main ways activists understand the world are not necessarily equal to certain present tasks and coming challenges. But political work is

conducted on the basis of “actually existing” levels of consciousness and not categorical imperatives. So even when people genuinely want to build a party, there may be a gap between the party that is possible (given the level of consciousness) and the one that is necessary (given the tasks of the day).” [2]

How did the Bloco approach this challenge? With a simple but powerful idea, as Louça recalls in the aforementioned interview: the basic idea was to reject the Bloco as a mere *aggiornamento* of the left. Strength could only be gained by pursuing a global recomposition of the left. Jorge Costa defined the goal in *International Viewpoint* “The struggle of the Bloco is to destroy the traditional political map of the country”. [3] They indicated the objective and did not attempt to compete with other parties. The success of the constitution of the Bloco was to base the merger and the subsequent functioning of the governing bodies on an agreement on tasks, not putting ideological debate first or imposing a discourse on identity. A reading of the founding text “Começar de novo” helps us understand this.

And for this it was necessary to build a Bloco with mass influence that, according to Louça, represents an important social force with an anti-capitalist consciousness and a socialist politics, devoting a central attention to its tactical intervention – which is where the usefulness of the project is demonstrated – and avoids affirmations of identity, more concerned with being right above all else than extending influence by promoting convergent dynamics and being a necessary reference point in the political debates that took place in Portugal.

As Daniel BensaÃd once pointed out, a party has political influence when it becomes a mandatory reference point in all national debates. Something that goes far beyond programmatic or identitarian affirmations and that requires especial attention to political tactics and ways of communicating that politics. Hence, communications policy is a central concern in the daily activities of the Bloco.

Now, a party based more on the development of a precise tactic on tasks than self-affirmation cannot go far without a solid leadership. A party without a viable leadership is a party doomed to failure. Hence the importance of the collective construction of this “general staff” that instils confidence in its militancy, both by the politics it develops and by the internal dynamics that it promotes. In the case of the Bloco this was necessarily oriented to creating a common culture and a corpus of shared ideas based on experience, political intervention and debate about program, understood as a concretization of the socialist proposal based on the real conditions of the needs of the subaltern classes and the oppressed sectors.

Declared goal: turning the Bloco into a central actor

Given the democratic opportunities (access to media, proportional representation and so on) bequeathed by the April Revolution and taking into account that parliamentary confrontation is very important in the confrontation between the Portuguese social classes, the Bloco was able to develop an intervention from the representative positions obtained that had interesting forms: high tactical initiative capacity in a kind of war of movement in the institutions, political autonomy with respect to the other forces on the ground, tactical flexibility and the ability to be a disruptor of capitalist logic and political oligarchy.

In order to turn the Bloco into the centre of the national debate, the leadership developed a methodology based on:

1. Taking advantage of institutional posts, legislative initiatives and motions of censure to bring popular demands to parliaments and municipal chambers and, at the same time, to create, consolidate and expand the organization and strength of the movements. Somehow the Bloco has generated the social from the political, knowing that political progress towards a left government that has a socialist project requires a strong social movement, an active working

class as a sine qua non condition. Very interesting campaigns of this type were those promoted against precariousness in work and life (March 2011), against the Troika (March 2013) or those of support for union struggles, for example, in teaching, which are the expression of the Bloco's concern to generate social movements.

2. Reflecting on all the problems of Portuguese society and offering clear and viable anti-neoliberal and democratic responses. And doing so by adapting to the 21st century what Karl Marx had formulated in 1852 in *The 18th Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte*: "The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past." This has involved developing innovative proposals on debt, finance, social services or the treatment of layoffs by profit-making companies, typical of the current phase. of globalized capitalism, finding formulas of intervention and communication in accordance with the new cultural and technological realities, turning communications into a weapon of war against the oligarchy which owns the media.

3. Appearing as a non-subaltern force that contests for hegemony and leadership on the left because it aspires to represent/organize the people of the left with a logic that goes further. And to do so, as Alda Sousa affirms, through audacity and the political initiative to turn the Bloco into an influential party because its opinion is at the centre of the political agenda and debate and cannot be ignored, even if it is rejected, fought or slandered. All this is guided by two premises: first (again Marx) to place the Bloco as the central axis in the social conflict, updating the old terms of the *German Ideology* referring to the working class appearing "as the whole mass of society confronting the one ruling class." Secondly, breaking the consensuses of the political system on fundamental issues such as the disciplinarian austerity of the Treaties of the European Union and denouncing the grossly unfair conditions of the Euro, demolishing popular sovereignty. Precisely because the Bloco's guide was not simply to make propaganda but to link the positive proposals for the working class with the recovery and improvement of the conditions of struggle and turn debt and austerity into a democratic problem; in the words of Marisa Matias in her speech at the 9th Convention of the BE, "we defend the recuperation of the instruments of economic policy for the field of democratic sovereignty."

To achieve this, Francisco Louçã argues that an alternative strategy of social struggle without institutional representation would be little more than a justification for isolation. In the opinion of the BE leader, a socialist left party struggles to hegemonize the majority and does not allow itself to be defeated by the complex of being a minority, or by the autonomist or anarchist vision of a presumed social world beyond electoral confrontation, where one exiles oneself. Louçã has repeated on multiple occasions that the Bloco came to win and change.

Very interesting considerations, not only in the Portuguese case, but in other latitudes, as in the case of the Spanish state in which there are important mass movements with a great political prominence, but without expression in the area of representation. And learning from this is essential, especially when we encounter the need to coordinate and raise socio-political initiatives at a European level. As became clear with the Greek experience in 2015, questioning neoliberal policies in Europe puts us in a difficult balance of forces that can only be counteracted by building a convergence of initiatives at European level. A task that seems ever more urgent, on which not only the Bloco, but all the anti-capitalist forces, are hugely lagging behind.

A road with risks and challenges

The party model that the Bloco represents has a firm electoral base despite swings, but its municipal implantation and its presence in the institutions is less than its national presence; likewise, its ties with the organized working class less than what is necessary, which could reduce its possibilities of progress, although it has a significant presence in the mobilizations against climate change and in the Ecosocialist Meetings, the last of which was held in Lisbon.

But electoral/institutional work remains a central question. The conditions in which it develops imply that a large part of activist energy and political capacity must be devoted to institutionality and that a party with institutional responsibilities must respond with great speed to everyday political changes. To avoid the pressures of adaptation to the institutions – and, ultimately, the system – as well as the dilution of the project in the meanderings of political tactics, parties which enjoy electoral success have to develop their strength in several aspects: collectively maintaining the political roadmap, promoting culture and measures for the renewal and control of its leaders and positions, and planning a growing presence in social organizations.

As a way to avoid bureaucratization and lethargy in the leadership of a party, one of the most important instruments is the rotation of its leaders. We believe the renewal of cadres in the BE has played a very important role in the resilience of the Bloco. We can see, along with the veteran founders of the BE, Luis Fazenda, Francisco Louça and Fernando Rosas, young leaders such as Jorge Costa, Pedro Filipe Soares, Joao Camargo and José Soeiro and, especially, the role played by the triad of women with important responsibilities: Mariana Mortagua, Marisa Matias and Catarina Martins. Generational change and the entry of women into leading positions. Years ago, Francisco Louça's decision to leave his positions to promote this renewal process was a practical political example. At the same time, he assured that he would continue to work as from the first day, which he has done, which continues to confer on him an important authority within the organization.

But beyond rotation in the leadership there must be more elements to ensure the role of a revolutionary organization. Catarina Martins, spokesperson of the Coordinating Commission, places it in the internal texture of the party and its relationship with its social base. Martins said at the last BE Convention that “a party of combat... depends on that energy that is its men and women.” And she is right. These are essential elements to avoid assimilation and capture by the system or surrender to the conveniences of power. But the key is located in the links between the party and the people: in parliament and the institutions because the Bloco represents the people, outside of them because the movement and the struggle supply the Bloco with strength. As Martins puts it, “we exist because we are necessary, because we are the people that fights”.

PS:

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[1] Miguel Romero and Francico Louçã, September 2010, “[Somehow, we filled a space that did not exist, a political space that had not yet been recognized](#)”.

[2] Pierre Rousset, May 2017, “[Reflections on the “party question” \(expanded version\) – an overview](#)”.

[3] Jorge Costa, April 2014 “[40 years after the Carnation Revolution](#)”. (We are now of course 45 years later, 25 April 1974-2019.)