

# Can democracy solve all problems?\*

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From the beginning, Takis Fotopoulos' book aims very high, intending "to propose a new liberatory project, not just as a new utopia but as perhaps the only way out of the crisis" (p. 11). This inclusive democracy project is "an effort to integrate society with polity, the economy, and Nature" (p. 9). In order to make wholly clear the originality of the author's work, it may be useful to reverse the exposing order by showing first the consistency of the project as laid out in the second part, before surveying its justifications given in the first part.

It means no less than the building of a new institutional framework securing an equal distribution of power. The author rightly starts from the fact that today "any talk about democracy which does not also refer to the question of economic power" is "hollow": "To talk about the equal sharing of political power, without conditioning it on the equal sharing of economic power, is at best meaningless and at worse deceptive" (p. 206). Therefore, "the objective of a new liberatory project should not merely be the abolition of capitalist property relations but of the market economy itself" (p. 23). Largely relying on Karl Polanyi, Takis Fotopoulos concludes that the reintegration of society with the economy is a necessity if an autonomous society is to be built. "The choice of autonomy implies that the institution of society is not based on any kind of irrationalism (faith in God, mystical beliefs, etc.), as well as on 'objective truths' about social evolution grounded on social or natural 'laws'" (p. 183).

"The main characteristic of the proposed model, which also differentiates it from socialist planning models, is that it explicitly presupposes a stateless, moneyless and marketless economy that precludes private accumulation of wealth and the institutionalisation of privileges for some sections of society, without having to rely on a mythical post-scarcity state of abundance, or having to sacrifice freedom of choice" (p. 209). Direct democracy could be seen as the solution to both economic and political contradictions. "The *demos* becomes the authentic unit of economic life" (p. 205). This inclusive democracy project was first expressed dramatically by May 1968 and is active, according to the author, in the antiglobalisation movement.

Finally, concurring with our own analysis, Takis Fotopoulos, more or less, comes to the idea that organizing the new society implies moving away from a 'growth economy' (i.e. a society whose main aim is economic growth) to 'ungrowth' (i.e. a society that has not growth as an aim), to localism.

Growth ideology constitutes indeed, in his opinion, the dominant social paradigm, and in both the East and the West. "Although the growth economy is the offspring of the dynamic of the market economy, the two concepts should not be confused since it is possible to have

a growth economy which is not also a market economy —notably the case of ‘actually existing socialism’” (p. 39). Growth economy may be defined as the system of economic organisation that is geared, either “objectively” or deliberately, toward maximising economic growth. It is founded on the social imaginary signification, identified by Castoriadis, that “the unlimited growth of production and of the productive forces is *in fact* the central objective of human existence” (*Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p.184), or the boundless spreading of “rational domination”. “The growth economy has already created a growth society, the main characteristics of which are consumerism, privacy, alienation and the subsequent disintegration of social ties. The growth society, in turn, inexorably leads toward a ‘non-society’” (p. 149). The critique of the growth economy and society is without any doubt the starting point of the author’s project. “The central contradiction of the market economy today is the one arising from the fact that any effective control of the ecological implications of growth is incompatible with the requirements of competitiveness, which neoliberal globalisation process imposes” (p. 161). In order to side-track this contradiction, we have to get out of the economy. “The main issue today cannot be reduced to just a matter of changing our values, as some radical greens naively argue, or even condemning economic growth per se. The crucial issue today is how we may create a new society where institutionalised domination of human being over human being and the consequent idea of dominating nature is ruled out. The search for such a system will lead us to the conclusion that it is not just growth ideology, which has to be abandoned, but the market economy itself” (p. 85). “But the economy itself”, I would say.

Ecological democracy will be established through “localism”. Localism is first and foremost considered by the author under its political dimension, while it is also viewed as the solution to the economic contradictions. Inclusive democracy implies a “confederation of *demoi*”, i.e. little homogeneous units of 30,000 inhabitants or so. This figure would allow, according to the author, the local satisfaction of most basic needs. “Given the huge size of many modern cities, this implies that many of them will have to be broken up” in several *demoi* (p. 215). Notwithstanding conventional wisdom, “economic viability is not determined exclusively or even decisively by size” (p. 215). “The new political organisation could, for instance, take the form of a confederation of autonomous groups (at regional, national, continental and world levels) aiming at the democratic transformation of their respective communities” (p. 243). “Politics in this sense is not anymore a technique for holding and exercising power but becomes again the self-management of society by its members” (p. 15). Local initiative even constitutes a way out of global deadlocks. “Contesting local elections gives the chance to start changing society from below, which is the only democratic strategy, as against the statist approaches, which aim to change society from above through the conquest of state power, and the ‘civil society’ approaches, which do not aim to a systemic change at all. It is because the *demos* is the fundamental social and economic unit of a future democratic society that we have to start from the local level to change society” (p. 241). Under these circumstances, “the problem for emancipatory politics today is how all the social groups which potentially form the basis of a new liberatory subject would be united by a common worldview, a common paradigm, which sees the ultimate cause of the present multidimensional crisis in the existing structures that secure the concentration of power at all levels, as well as the corresponding value systems”. So, “the various social groups which form the new liberatory subject could function as the catalyst for a new society that would reintegrate society with polity, the economy and Nature” (p. 244). The growing realization of global contradictions raises up local initiative setting out the process of change. If we rightly understand the author,

inclusive democracy would result, then, from a dialectic between institutional and human change. “In the last instance, it is *paedeia* that may effectively condition democratic practice” (p. 196). A new education will intend to shape a new man...

Clearly, the realization of such an ambitious project cannot be the result of a reformist patching up. In fact, “within the present internationalised market economy, no controls to protect society and nature effectively from the workings of the market, not even the type of controls introduced by socialdemocratic governments in the past, are feasible anymore” (p. 8). The building of the new society implies, therefore, a radical break –hence the very long list of criticisms, score settlements, ostracisms making up the first part of the book, and justifying the project. To begin with a re-reading of history. As, for instance, with respect to the decline of national economies and social-democratic states. “The crisis of the early 1970s [...] was not mainly due to the oil crisis but to the fact that the degree of internationalisation of the market economy achieved by then was not compatible anymore with statism” (p. 41). Social-democratic state protected society for the workings of the market. Domestic demand accounted for 90 percent of economic growth. “Organised labour could press successfully for wage rises that exceeded significantly the increase in productivity” (p. 47). So, free trade was the best means to “destroy the self-reliance of local economies and effect their integration into the internationalised market economy”. “The fundamental reason for the historic failure of socialist statism in both its versions lies in its attempt to merge two incompatible elements: the ‘growth’ element, which expressed the logic of the market economy, with the social justice element, which expressed socialist ethics” (p. 98). Growth implies a concentration of economic power. So, the dilemma for the Left is “either to adopt the present globalisation with some qualifications (as social-liberals do) or reject it altogether and challenge the fundamental institution that led to it in the first place: the system of the market economy itself” (p. 78).

Basically, the failure of the Left can be explained in terms of the absence of *real* democracy. Takis Fotopoulos pursues here a type of Castoradian critique of representative democracy : “The introduction of representative ‘democracy’ had nothing to do with the size of the population”: it “was intended to act as a filter, i.e. as the very antithesis of *isegoria*, which means *equality of speech* – a necessary requirement of classical democracy” (p. 32). “The idea of the modern state, according to John Dunn, quoted p. 174, was invented precisely to repudiate the possible coherence of democratic claims to rule, or even take genuinely political action (...) Representative democracy is democracy made safe for the modern state”. Eventually, representative “democracy” is oligarchy, i.e., as in the Aristotelian tradition, domination by the rich.

One of the preferred targets of the author are “postmodernists” (in the context of the ideological debate in the English-speaking world) and their illusory project of “radical democracy”, which is “both a-historical and utopian in the negative sense of the word” (p. 14). Takis Fotopoulos sternly criticizes Habermas and Chantal Mouffe. Her radical democracy, notably, implies no break with “a negative conception of freedom and an individualistic conception of autonomy, which is assumed separate from collective autonomy” (p. 189). “Although one may accept the post-modernist view that history cannot be seen as a linear (Kant et al.) or dialectical (Hegel, Marx) process of Progress that embodies reason, this does not imply that we should assign equal value to all historical forms of social organisation: from classical Athens, the Swiss cantons and the Parisian Sections, to the present ‘democratic’ regimes. This type of general relativism, which is

adopted by post-modernism, simply expresses the latter's abandonment of any critique of the institutionalised social reality and a general retreat to conformism, as Castoriadis rightly points out. Furthermore, adopting the post-modern rejection of universalism implies the abandonment of any idea of a liberatory project, as the project of autonomy/democracy is of course very much a 'universal' one" (p. 183).

Greens, antiglobalizers, new keynesians, even, by the way, Castoriadis himself, do not escape criticism... "Despite the anti-growth rhetoric of mainstream green economists, as long as they take for granted the system of the market economy and its 'grow-or-die' dynamic, they indirectly adopt the growth economy itself" (p. 203). They indulge the fantasy of a "green techno-science", if not of a "green capitalism" (p.117). The antiglobalisation movement isn't an antisystemic movement, it may "resist", but its political platform remains reformist, it is unable to advance a systemic change. "The reformist Left on globalisation includes post-Marxists, social democrats and others in the broad Left (Pierre Bourdieu, Immanuel Wallerstein, Noam Chomsky, Samir Amin, John Gray, Leo Panitch among them)" (p. 67). They are willing to resist, but, unlike the "much more realistic" social-liberals, they are doomed to powerlessness. "A new Europe-wide Keynesianism is not feasible either, unless it is combined with a self-reliant growth led by a highly protected internal market economy. But, such a solution is in direct contradiction to the system's logic and dynamics" (p. 111).

Finally, "the public realm, contrary to the practice of many supporters of the republican or democratic project (Arendt, Castoriadis, Bookchin et al.) includes not just the political realm, but any area of human activity where decisions can be taken collectively and democratically" (p. 190).

After reading this complex and sometimes difficult work, what is to be thought of its author's great design? Although I am viewing myself, more or less, as a heir of Castoriadis, and developing ideas fairly close to those of Takis Fotopoulos, I confess this provocative book, in the positive sense of the word, puzzled me on several respects. In spite of my great sympathy for direct democracy, I am not convinced the desire for it is so widely shared (and surely not universally), nor it is in my view a panacea. Aristotle noted that "as for the poor, they are ready to keep quiet, even when excluded from office, provided they are not subjected to violence or to confiscation of their property" (*Politics*, IV, 13, 1297 b 5). "For, while the masses take no great offence of being excluded from office, (on the contrary, they may even be glad of this opportunity to look after their private affairs)" (*Politics*, V, 8, 1308 b 30). In Athens, 9 citizens out of 10 were more often than not absent from the debates, and, in spite of the fees paid for being there, public officers had a lot of trouble dragging the crowd from agora to ecclesia. So, did the Athenian people favour an antidemocratic system? Surely not. We probably have to agree with Tocqueville when he sees "the principle of popular sovereignty at the bottom of all governments and hidden under the less freedom-prone institutions" (*Souvenirs*, 1942 edition, p. 220).

In this context, radical rejection of representative "democracy" is somewhat excessive. It is now part of our tradition, whether we like it or not. And it isn't necessarily the embodiment of evil. There is indeed some refreshing ingenuousness in the author's assertions : "Once citizens have tasted a real democracy, no amount of physical or economic violence will be enough to persuade them to return to pseudo-democratic forms of organisation" (p. 242). Athens' experiment, with decisions finally taken by less than 400 out of 200,000

inhabitants of classical Attica, doesn't confirm this. All in all, is representation by elected officers less democratic than lazily or carelessly giving up the city's affairs to notabilities and demagogues? In this respect, it must be admitted that Paul Veyne's analysis (*Le Pain et le Cirque*, Seuil, 1976), although disillusioned, is fairly convincing. Improved representation, with recallable officers and direct participation in some cases (e.g. the participative budget in Porto Alegre), may constitute a satisfactory compromise. The key issue of the equal distribution of economic power will indeed remain unsolved, but it is somewhat illusory to envision solving it at a stroke with the magic wand of direct democracy. Lastly, I distrust any universalist project, even a radical or subversive one: I am prone to detect in it some residual smell of Western ethnocentrism. I already disagreed with Castoriadis about this. Reading Takis Fotopoulos strengthens my doubts. As Louis Dumont perfectly showed, the holistic imaginary of most human societies, if not unacquainted with some requirement of due consideration for dignity of individuals and attention to their will, is largely irrelevant to our egalitarian imaginary.

On the whole, we have here an invigorating essay, which constitutes a considerable contribution to the debate about democracy as a solution to the deep multidimensional crisis (political, economic, social, cultural) of globalized mankind.

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