

Market and society

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Takis Fotopoulos' book "Inclusive Democracy", first published in English, is identified by features missing from most other similar books and articles dealing with the issue of the –mainly economic– global crisis: that is a global proposal for overcoming this crisis, a feasible-according to the writer-liberating proposal towards the creation of a real democracy which will overcome the present political, economic, social and ecological crisis.

In fact, whilst most writers and analysts of the current multidimensional crisis focus upon the diagnosis and the causes of it, Fotopoulos, apart from studying this crisis and its causes through its historical evolution, as this has been expressed in the various market forms, he also ventures to propose an alternative scheme (which is by no means a magical recipe as he recognises himself) based on the one hand upon the model of classical Athenian democracy, which he expands and enriches, and on the other, upon the synthesis and transcendence of the main social movements of the last century (democratic, socialist, radical, ecological, feminist and libertarian).

This "inclusive" democracy, a term used by Aristotle in a different context to denote the political organization of the city-market, will be based, technically and practically, upon confederal communalism, whilst morally and philosophically upon "democratic rationalism".

It is worth noting that Fotopoulos has, for over twelve years, presented his views mainly in the journal "Democracy and Nature" (formerly "Society and Nature") which he has been editing since 1992.

According to Fotopoulos, the main cause of this crisis is the liberal market economy that became a system only two centuries ago, when the process of marketisation began, which today has reached its current neo-liberal "internationalized" form --at least as far as the movement of capital and commodities is concerned. As a result, the socially controlled markets of the past have become the autonomous markets of the present. It should be noted that the writer is using the term "internationalization" instead of the widely used term "globalization", which for him is an erroneous term given that production has not as yet been internationalized but only partially.

The market economy, which is based on individualism and competition, led to an unprecedented huge concentration of economic and political power.

This model, and the type of personal attitude it creates, has penetrated even countries like

Greece, whose economy and society were to a great extent based upon communal values, such as cooperation and solidarity.

According to the writer, however, these values, which in many Western European countries have been associated with attempts to establish a so-called social economy, have very few chances to survive by themselves and even fewer chances to provide an integrated proposal for a way out of this crisis, as they ultimately get absorbed and integrated by the dominant economy.

Despite that, Fotopoulos believes that any attempt to transcend market economy, as well as central planning, should start “from below”; the same applies as regards the transition to what he calls, following Bookchin, a ‘confederal’ inclusive democracy, which is a new form of political organization based upon a geographically determined community. An inclusive democracy will include political, economic, social and ecological democracy and will mould a new kind of citizenship involving citizens as members of a genuinely open society, i.e. of a society of people with a high level of consciousness.

In this problematique, as the author argued in a recent conference in Greece on ‘Globalisation and social economy’, neither the social economy nor the so-called civil society could constitute a successful resistance to globalization. The writer, very carefully rejects the civil society as a vehicle towards a ‘radical democracy’, on the basis that this approach is a-historical and utopian in the negative sense of the word:

- Ahistorical, since the state “castrated” citizens’ associations in the context of the structural changes that led to the creation of an internationalized market economy and
- utopian, since, in the same context of the market economy which –like the state--has been taken for granted by the supporters of civil society, the encouragement and empowerment of such autonomous institutions and associations could only be feasible provided that they do not come in conflict with the logic and dynamics of market economy.

However, should there not be a starting point? Is it not the civil society, i.e. citizens themselves who will form the basis of local communities first, and confederal communities eventually? Are not these special citizens’ movements, which will form the organic “systemic” parts of a wider movement for a radical change, aiming at the inclusive and genuine democracy? This being so, would they not have to fight against the existing market? In this respect, the writer proposes the creation of artificial markets which, even in the transitional stage, could satisfy the real needs of the community.

It may be that some may have reservations on the inclusive democracy project, as they have become tired in believing in a radical social change and have been identified with present “reality”, accepting the end of history. They cannot, however, remain aloof vis-a vis this excellent and exemplary analysis of the current system and the causes of its multi-dimensional crisis offered by the author –an analysis that has to be read widely, particularly so by students of economics.

Fotopoulos’ book includes elements of utopia, in the positive sense of the word. The writer does not refer to an idealist kind ideal society, as he takes into serious consideration reality.

His model is rather based on realistic utopia. After all, “utopias may have died but utopia (as a vision) is still alive”.

* This review of *Periektiki Dimokratia* (Kastaniotis:Athens, 1999) was first published (in Greek) in the Athens daily *To Vima* (16 January 2000).