

The Europeans peoples' fight against neoliberal capitalism and the Reformist Left*

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1. Representative 'democracy' does not express the will of the people

The outcome of the plebiscites in two key countries of the European Union, France and Holland, is the second incident within the last two years which makes obvious the huge gap between the European peoples and the elites which take crucial decisions about them without bothering to take into account their will. First, these elites contemptuously ignored the millions of people in the streets of major European cities who condemned the invasion and consequent brutal occupation of Iraq launched by the Anglo-American part of the transnational elite –later on to be legitimised by all its members. Second, the same elites have similarly been ignoring growing indignation over the past fifteen years or so against the Treaties institutionalising neoliberal globalisation which, as a rule, were approved by the political elites alone without the expressed will of the peoples being involved. At present, the elites are engaged in a huge campaign to give constitutional power to the same Treaties and neoliberal values, through the EU Constitution which codifies them.

However, when these elites were forced by circumstances to request the expression of the peoples' will on the EU Constitution through plebiscites, the outcome not only made clear their political nakedness but also the fact that representative 'democracy' does not express the will of the people.^[1] Plebiscites constitute, of course, an inadequate means of expressing the popular will, particularly today when the mass media, being controlled by the same political and economic elites, are in no position to inform the people about the real issues they face and about possible ways of sorting them out. Although, therefore, only direct democracy could really integrate polity with society, plebiscites may be –under certain circumstances– more representative of people's will than parliamentary democracy, since they involve citizens themselves in the process of decision-taking with respect to significant specific issues. This is in contrast to representative 'democracy' in which all decision-taking is delegated to an elite of professional politicians who decide on the citizens' behalf on the basis of very broad mandates renewed every four years or so, which effectively do not commit the elites to anything but a set of meaningless generalities.

Thus, it is interesting to note that wherever the elites were relatively split, and as a result a kind of dialogue on the matter was possible, the popular verdict on the neoliberal EU

constitution was a resounding 'no'. Apart from Spain, where the elites managed to achieve the approval of the Constitution by less than 33% of a completely uninformed electorate (taking into account the abstention rates), in France, as well as in Holland, almost 39% of the electorate rejected it. This, despite the fact that for months, the elites –backed by the Reformist Left of the Cohn Bendits and Toni Negris of this world, as well as 'the usual suspects', *le Nouvel Observateur*, *Libération* and the rest– used every means at their disposal to avert this result. Thus, in thousands of well-attended meetings, where the constitutional treaty was put under scrutiny,^[2] the more people were realising the disorienting role of the media on the crucial links between the problems they faced (unemployment, rapid decline in purchasing power, insecurity about pensions, growing inequality etc) and the EU itself, the more they moved en masse to the 'non' camp. It is not, therefore, surprising that in the affluent suburbs of Paris, over 80% voted 'yes', while the opposite happened in the mining cities of northern France and the poorest districts of Marseille where the 'no' vote reached similar, or even higher, levels.^[3]

The resounding 'no' of the plebiscites in France and Holland were not, of course, unexpected by those of us in the antisystemic Left who have always assumed that neoliberal globalisation –the main agent of which, in the European area, is the EU– would sooner or later lead to the present explosion of popular anger which shocked the European elites and created huge tremor waves for the European Union itself. It was, in other words, only a matter of time before the poorest social strata of low-wagers, unemployed, and underemployed (who are the main victims of this globalisation), could eventually link the EU, and indirectly neoliberal globalisation, to the crucial problems they were facing: unemployment or low-wage employment/underemployment, the continuous intensification of work, the rapid erosion of their incomes by the introduction of the Euro, pension insecurity and the constant deterioration of Health, Education and other social services.

2. The role of the Reformist Left in the fight against neoliberal capitalism

What is however equally, if not more, important is the role played by the reformist Left with respect to the outcome of these plebiscites, i.e. the Left which does not challenge the EU –let alone the system based on the capitalist market economy and representative democracy itself– but simply demands some reforms of this system, so that the slogan of 'another world is possible' could become a fact. To my mind, the transcendence of this branch of the Left by the development of a mass antisystemic movement would play a decisive role in the continuation and further empowerment of the mainly spontaneous anti-elite movement which is presently flourishing in Europe.

As is well known, the reformist Left in France was divided on the issue of its stand with regard to the EU Constitution. Part of it, consisting of the main body of the socialist party, together with the major papers of the reformist Left (*le Nouvel Observateur*, *Libération* etc) sided with the 'yes' camp. This was also the stand taken by part of the Green party following Cohn Bendit (the ex-revolutionary and currently enthusiastic member of the political elite, as well as supporter of every criminal war of the transnational elite), but also –surprisingly for some but not for us^[4]– by Toni Negri (the well-known author of the best seller *Empire*). Another part, consisting of a section of the socialist party under Laurent

Fabius (later ejected from the leadership for his stand in the referendum), ATTAC, Social Forum, and the main paper of this part of the reformist Left, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, sided with the 'no' vote, although it never challenged the EU itself but only its present neoliberal character. It was this heterogeneous front of reformist, as well as antisystemic, currents within the Left which, together with the nationalistic Right who also exploited the same popular anger against the EU, has won the battle for the 'no' vote.

It is, therefore, clear that this victory was mainly due to the stand taken by the part of the reformist Left which opposed the present form of the constitution, despite the fact that in essence it adopts the same position on globalisation as the part of the reformist Left which sided with the 'yes' camp. All of them adopt a conspiracy theory of neoliberal globalisation according to which it is just a political phenomenon expressing the reaction of capital to the conquests of organised labour during the social democratic consensus. The political conclusion implied by this sort of analysis is that neoliberal globalisation is reversible, provided that —as supporters of the 'yes' vote argue— the 'progressive' pole within the EU headed by France and Germany is supported, or —as 'no' supporters argue— sufficient pressure from below is exerted, so that the same elites are pushed towards the development of a 'progressive' pole within the internationalised market economy based on a European 'social model', which will oppose the Anglo-Saxon model based on neoliberalism.

3. Neoliberal globalisation is not reversible within the market economy system

As I have attempted to show elsewhere,^[5] neoliberal globalisation is not reversible, as the reformist Left assumes, but rather it constitutes a systemic phenomenon which expresses a fundamental change in objective conditions, i.e., mainly, the opening of capital markets "from below", through the Euro-dollar and similar markets that were created to meet the needs of the expanding multinationals and which directly undermined statism in general and the social democratic consensus in particular. These developments, together with the parallel change in subjective conditions brought about by the decimation of the labour movement in the West (due to the information revolution and consequent de-industrialisation), as well as the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' in the East, have led to the flourishing of the neoliberal movement and the institutionalisation 'from above' of neoliberal globalisation. The above fundamental changes imply that:

- neoliberal globalisation is neither a kind of capitalist conspiracy, nor is it reversible within a system of open and liberalised markets. The economies which are integrated within the internationalised market economy, even if they belong to economic blocks (EU, NAFTA etc), are completely interdependent. This means that the marketization of the economy for the sake of greater competitiveness implies the corresponding marketization of society, inevitably leading to a levelling at the lowest common denominator as far as working class social conquests are concerned. It is not accidental, anyway, that the Euro, in the aftermath of the plebiscites, suffered a serious setback in world exchange markets on the mere suspicion that the massive 'no' verdicts would force certain European elites to slow down the pace of neoliberal 'reforms' (privatisations, flexible labour markets, erosion of pension and social security rights etc)
- the political and social elites, in the framework of the internationalised market economy, do not have any choice but to walk along the neoliberal one-way street.

Their strategic aim, therefore, is bound to be the isolation of the antisystemic currents which question the EU itself as the main expression of neoliberal globalisation in Europe, perhaps with some 'concessions' towards the reformist Left in order to meet its objective of 'capitalism with a human face' in Europe.

In other words, in an internationalised system of open and liberalised markets, growth and 'development' necessarily pass through the conditions of pseudo 'full employment' and constant intensification of work presently prevailing in the capitalist centres (USA, UK etc), or through the return to the nineteenth century conditions of work in the periphery (India, China etc), and, finally, through the huge widening of inequality between the privileged few and the rest, everywhere, with the corresponding implications for the conditions of Health care, education and social services!

Clearly then, the political and economic elites would use any means at their disposal to persuade the social strata which mainly suffer the consequences of neoliberal globalisation that a 'social market' economy within the EU is possible —as the reformist Left also argues. This is because, as stated above, the European political parties which rotate in power do not have any other choice but to take the one-way neoliberal street, under the ideological cover of a 'social market-based' Europe. This need becomes particularly pressing as they increasingly realise that the main cause of the EU's failure to match the US and Asia in growth, productivity, innovation and competitiveness —as a very recent high-level report drawn up by industrialists, trade unionists and business academics under Wim Kok^[6] stressed — is its inability 'to modernise its ailing economy'. In other words, its inability to implement speedily the kind of neoliberal reforms overwhelmingly rejected by the recent plebiscites! This fact confirms the prediction I made almost ten years ago that a European social market model, like the presently collapsed Rhine model in Germany 'is not a model for future capitalism but a remnant of the statist phase of marketization, which obviously cannot survive the present internationalisation of the market economy'.^[7]

4. The duty of the antisystemic Left

Today, the imperative and urgent duty of the antisystemic Left is, therefore, to elucidate the systemic character of neoliberal globalisation —a position which implies that the transcendence of it is not possible within the EU and generally within the capitalist market economy. If this realisation does not become dominant within the presently flourishing movement against European elites, then this movement will inevitably suffer the same fate as the anti-war movement: it will simply fizzle out when it becomes clear that, just as the 'no to the war' demand was not enough to stop the predatory invasion in Iraq, the 'no to the EU constitution' demand will not stop the predatory invasion of the same elites into our conditions of life and work respectively, in accordance with the requirements of neoliberal globalisation.

As long, therefore, as the European peoples do not realise that only the development of mass antisystemic movements, which would challenge the system of the market economy and representative 'democracy' itself, would allow the creation of the conditions for the transcendence of neoliberal globalisation, they will inevitably be led by the reformist Left from one frustration to another: from the fizzling out of the mass antiwar and antiglobalisation movements of yesterday, to the foreshadowed corresponding fizzling out of the movement against the neoliberal EU constitution of tomorrow.

* This is based on two articles which were first published in the fortnightly column of Takis Fotopoulos in the mass circulation Athens daily *Eleftherotypia* on 11/6/2005 and the Left weekly paper *PRIN* on 19/6/2005.

[1] No wonder that the social-liberal ideologues of globalisation now talk about the 'the anti-democratic' consequences of the plebiscites. Obviously, for them, plebiscites have democratic consequences only when their outcomes are consistent with the elites' decisions! See Will Hutton, 'My problem with Europe', *The Observer* (5/6/2005).

[2] Serge Halimi, 'Thwarted by a surge of democracy', *The Guardian* (2/6/2005).

[3] Ibid.

[4] See T. Fotopoulos & A. Gezerlis, '[Hardt and Negri's Empire: a new Communist Manifesto or a reformist welcome to neoliberal globalisation?](#)' *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (July 2002).

[5] See e.g. T. Fotopoulos, '[Globalisation, the reformist Left and the Anti-Globalisation 'Movement'](#)', *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (July 2001).

[6] David Gow, 'Europe losing growth race, says report', *The Guardian* (4/11/2004).

[7] See T. Fotopoulos, *Towards An Inclusive Democracy* (London/New York: Cassell/Continuum, 1997), p. 97.