

France: The revolt of the victims of neoliberal globalisation*

TAKIS FOTOPOULOS

A strong wind blows against neoliberal globalisation all over the world today: from Europe and Latin America to Asia and Africa. In Europe, in particular, the revolt of the victims of globalisation in France has been spreading for more than a year, as indicated by the campaign against the neoliberal Constitution of the European Union^[1], the November riots^[2] and, today, the mass strikes and demonstrations against the French elite's attempt to introduce the Anglo-American kind of legislation of 'hire and fire at will' for young people (or, 'flexible' labour relations, as neoliberals euphemistically call it). Even in Britain, the bastion of neoliberalism, the biggest show of industrial muscle since the 1926 general strike took place a week ago, when more than a million public sector workers joined a mass strike against further cuts in their pension rights. No wonder that some analysts already talk of a new 'May 68', when a similar movement was spreading all over the advanced capitalist countries (France, Germany, Britain, the USA and elsewhere) —a movement that marked the beginning of a new era.

However, despite some similarities between the movement of the late '60s and the present movement against neoliberal globalisation, one should not forget the fundamental differences between them. The demands of the movement of the '60s were clearly 'antisystemic', in the sense that they put into question not only the system's consequences but also the causes themselves, i.e. the very structures of the capitalist market economy and its offspring, the 'growth economy', in the West, and the bureaucratic growth economy in the East. Thus,

- the materialistic and consumerist, as well as highly unequal, capitalist society in the West was rejected because power was concentrated at the hands of political and economic elites —although the degree of concentration was much smaller than it is today— while the hierarchical structures in the family, the place of education and the workplace were highly oppressive. Similarly,
- the bureaucratic growth economy in the East was severely criticised because, although it was better at meeting the basic needs of all citizens —and not principally those with a full wallet, as was the case in the West, even at the time of the dominance of the welfare state which reduced inequalities— it was also authoritarian, with state power and the other hierarchical structures being even more oppressive than in the West.

Therefore, the fundamental demand raised by young students and workers at the end of the '60s was that of a self-determination, which would transcend both state oppression and the capitalist market economy, as well as the patriarchal structures at home and the hierarchical structures at the factory, the office or the University. However, the collapse of this movement, for reasons beyond this paper, left behind not only a positive legacy, as

expressed both by the development of new social movements (feminist, ecological etc) and by forms of self-organisation and democratic decision-taking through face-to-face assemblies, but also a potentially negative legacy which was later exploited by the neoliberal movement: the critique of statism —for different reasons to those maintained by the neoliberals, of course. In other words, the movement of the '60s always rejected any kind of hetero-determination, due either to the capitalist market economy or to the state, which epitomised the hierarchical structure of society, while neoliberals, on the other hand, were opposed to statism because it did not leave enough freedom to the market economy — namely, the economic elites which controlled it! So, the neoliberal critique of statism was absolutely compatible with the needs of globalisation which emerged in the '70s, with the massive expansion of multinational corporations —a fact which is a clear indication of the systemic character of globalisation. Given that statism was fundamentally incompatible with the essence of globalisation, i.e. the open and liberated markets, there was an imperative need to reverse the constant spreading out of statism needed to accommodate the inexorably expanding welfare state.

This need triggered off the development of neoliberal ideology for the supposed enhancement of the individual against the state, through meeting all of the individual's needs via the market and private enterprise. This implied massive privatisations of public enterprises and 'flexible' labour relations, as well as health and education services — even social security — being assigned to private initiative. However, this does not mean that neoliberal globalisation is simply an ideology, or just the consequence of 'bad' policies which could be reversed through 'pressure from below', as is alleged by the reformist Left. Neoliberal ideology is just used by the elites to justify the structural changes necessitated by neoliberal globalisation, but globalisation itself is a 'systemic' phenomenon and, as such, is reversible only from without, rather than from within, the system of the market economy.

It is clear, on the basis of this problematic, that the demands of today's movement against neoliberal globalisation are not antisystemic, since they question only the consequences of the present system and not the causes as well — namely, the very structures which give rise to these consequences. It is not, therefore, surprising that, in contrast to May '68, the entire reformist Left —even the social-liberals of the French 'socialist' party— support several of the demands of the present movement for ameliorating the 'extremities' of neoliberalism which, in fact, constitute the sole difference between social liberalism and neoliberalism.

In reality, however, even these 'extremities' cannot be significantly reduced —not even at the level of economic blocs, like the EU, let alone at the level of a single country. This is because, in the framework of the internationalised market economy, the more open and liberated the markets and the more 'flexible' labour relations are, the more attractive the country or bloc concerned is to local or foreign capital.^[3] It is only, therefore, through a global treaty that, theoretically, some effective control over markets and the multinationals could be imposed, with the aim of protecting labour and the environment. However, the precondition for such a treaty would be that intensive growth, which today is a task that the market system 'assigns' to the multinational corporations, would necessarily cease to be the main economic goal, as well as the inevitable outcome of the dynamics of the market economy. Another precondition would be that countries as diverse as the social-liberal Sweden, the neoliberal USA and those in between like the UK, as well as countries like China and India (whose spectacular growth and 'development' is based on the blatant

exploitation of the miserable working conditions and abysmally low wages prevailing in them for the attraction of foreign capital –the very reasons for the need for such a treaty!) would also need to sign this treaty. However, when even the ridiculous half measures of the Kyoto treaty have not been adopted by the ‘international community’^[4], despite the fact that the catastrophic climatic changes become ever more irreversible by the day, one can see how realistic the slogan of the reformist Left is that ‘another world is possible’, even within the EU and the internationalised market economy!

The crucial issue today, therefore, is whether today’s spontaneous struggles against neoliberal globalisation, which –given the complete lack of a mass antisystemic movement– are by necessity defensive, could constitute the basis for the development of an antisystemic consciousness and a corresponding movement or whether, instead, they will be exhausted in defensive demands and easily suppressed insurrections, as has frequently occurred in the past...

* The above text is based on a translation of an article which was first published in the fortnightly column of Takis Fotopoulos in the mass circulation Athens daily *Eleftherotypia* on 01/4/06

[1] See T. Fotopoulos, ‘The European Constitution and the Left’, *Newsletter* #13 (25 April 2005); ‘And now France: Neoliberal globalisation again under attack’, *Newsletter* #15 (28 May 2005) and ‘The Europeans peoples’ fight against neoliberal capitalism and the Reformist Left’, *Newsletter* #16 (13 June 2005).

[2] See T. Fotopoulos, ‘The European Left and the myth of the European social model’, *Newsletter* #23 (14 November 2005).

[3] see T. Fotopoulos, [*The Multidimensional Crisis and Inclusive Democracy*](#), (English translation of the book with the same title published in Athens in 2005), ch. 3.

[4] see T. Fotopoulos, "[Kyoto and other tales](#)", *Newsletter* #10 (19 February 2005).