The end of hypocrisy and the questioning of democracy

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Abstract

The financial crisis of 2007 has clearly demonstrated the declining economic and political hegemony of the European social model. Austerity measures, rationalization, and cuts in all areas of society and the state were encouraged by the EU directorates. These measures have weakened social cohesion in many EU societies and jeopardized the significant progress made in terms of discrimination over the last decade. The rise in unemployment and social problems has fueled nationalism and stigmatization of certain groups. Sometimes, even democracy itself, as the main structural feature of the Western world, is permeated by various dangers under the tragic pressures and effects of the crisis. In this sense, all the pretexts that the European elite has at times put forward around the issue of institutionalized protection of the democratic order are beginning to crumble. The vital question therefore arises: with citizenship crippled, what kind of democracy can we talk about? So, if we are interested in facing reality soberly and without distraction, should we prepare ourselves for the possibility of a definitive attack on democracy?

1. The entrenchment of social achievements

The financial crisis of 2007 has clearly demonstrated the declining economic and political hegemony of the European social model, together with its specific cultural characteristics. As Vaughan-Whitehead (2015, 1-65) notes, the European Social Model's main pillars have been entrenched. Long-standing social policies have been altered, weakened, and, in some cases, hastened. At the same time, fiscal considerations have pushed new reform areas (such as wages and collective bargaining) forward. A new policy agenda introduces policies affecting the labor market. The labor market reforms promoted long before the crisis, have proliferated rapidly since the implementation of fiscal consolidation policies, touching on a wide range of issues. Work contracts have been loosened in a number of countries (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2015). The attempt at consolidation affected areas such as wages and collective bargaining. Work contracts in a number of countries have been made more flexible, and many countries have simplified procedures for collective and individual dismissals, as well as reduced notification periods. In general, the state is rolling back on the labor market. Employee rights and working conditions were also questioned. A number of reforms aimed at improving competitiveness and economic recovery have had a direct impact on wages and working conditions. Steps taken to slow wage growth, for example, have resulted in real wage decreases and even wage freezes (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2015). In the field of social protection, the majority of European countries were pursuing, prior to the crisis, long-term reforms to address demographic changes, long-term sustainability concerns, and structural unemployment. Fiscal consolidation policies, on the other hand, have moved countries away from these policies. First, a number of countries restricted access to unemployment benefits, imposing new and stricter eligibility requirements. Second, the length of unemployment benefits has been reduced. Third, the value of unemployment benefits has been reduced in several countries. Family benefits and support programs have also been targeted, complicating the lives of parents and children, particularly working mothers. (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2015).

In some manner the field of social dialogue was restricted by legislative reforms implemented as part of structural reform packages since 2010 that have resulted in a significant change in collective bargaining coverage and scope,

particularly in so-called "deficit countries.". Three major trends were identified. First, the right to strike was restricted in certain circumstances; second, the scope of collective bargaining was limited by restricting mechanisms for extending collective agreements to more workers and companies; and third, forced decentralization occurred, with restrictions on social partners' rights to negotiate at sectoral or national levels. (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2015).

Also, the public sector of many European countries has been subjected to unprecedented pressures. Employment security is no longer the norm as a result of "adjustments." Almost every country has announced plans to cut public-sector wages, either through wage freezes or salary cuts (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2015).All these developments, launched through austerity measures, rationalization, and cuts in all areas of society and the state, were elaborated by important international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund with the encouragement of the EU directorates. These measures have weakened social cohesion in many EU societies and jeopardized the significant progress made in terms of discrimination over the last decade without significantly increasing the competitiveness of EU countries. The rise in unemployment and social problems has fueled nationalism and stigmatization of certain groups. Sometimes, even democracy itself, as the main structural feature of the Western world, is permeated by various dangers under the tragic pressures and effects of the crisis. In this sense, all the pretexts that the European elite has at times put forward around the issue of institutionalized protection of the democratic order are beginning to crumble.

2. The replacement of democratic commitments

As Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen notes, values that Europe has fought for over decades, such as the preservation of a democratic Europe concerned with social welfare, are now being called into question. The most worrying aspect of the current stagnation that pervades Europe is, according to Sen (2012), the replacement of democratic commitments with economic dictates by EU and ECB leaders, and indirectly by rating agencies whose judgments have been notoriously flawed.

"If democracy has been one of the strong commitments with which Europe emerged in the 1940s, an understanding of the necessity of social security and the

*avoidance of intense social deprivation was surely another." There is a central issue of social justice involved here—that of reducing rather than enhancing injustice. The public services are valued for what they actually provide to people, especially vulnerable people, and this is something for which Europe has fought. "Savage cuts in these services undermine what had emerged as a social commitment in Europe at the end of World War II, which led to the birth of the welfare state and the national health services in a period of rapid social change on the continent, setting a great example of public responsibil*ity from which the rest of the world—from East Asia to Latin America-would learn." (Sen,2012).

As the specific characteristics of the European crisis show, we have entered a transitional period that, under certain conditions, could trigger a deeper recession of democracy, a development with significant external and internal consequences for the Constitution and the political economy, as well as for the stability of the social body. In any case, there are *"growing signs of democratic "deconsolidation" in Europe and the United States, including rising disaffection with democratic institutions, growing support for authoritarian alternatives, and a weakening commitment to democratic rules of the game. Western Europe's democratic troubles have been fed by the declining programmatic distinctiveness, creativity, and responsiveness of mainstream parties. "Gripped by many of the same underlying stresses—economic dislocation, rising inequality, immigration pressures, identity divisions, and explosive inflammation of these by social media... (Diamond, 2022).*

According to Antonis Liakos, (2012), 'the world is now suffering the consequences of a market revolution that has succeeded in all fields in overturning the post-war arrangements, and in particular the compromise between capitalism and democracy, the concept of the social contract between labor, capital, and the state. The now enormous expansion of the unequal distribution of wealth disintegrates not only the concept of the demos, but also its imaginary projection in democracy. If we see economic growth without democracy in the East, the West must compete with countries where the minimum wage and the absence of a welfare state force it to successively but steadily demolish its standard of living and the welfare state, cutting social rights from citizenship.

3. The hegemony of neoliberalism

The prevalence of deregulation and privatization principles, combined with a ruthless pro-cyclical austerity policy – a strategy aimed solely at ensuring that the powerful Western states, particularly in relation to emerging economies – has fallen out of favor in terms of values, morals, and experience (Lehndorff, 2011).This disrepute, however, is only superficial, since the deeper logic of political, economic, and social leveling has been rooted in consciences since the end of the 20th century through the hegemony of neoliberalism. In short, while the banal realization has now matured in the public sphere and academic circles that the neoliberal system's rules do not reverse the fundamental causes of the crisis that is destroying the Western world, no real conditions for a turnaround are being created.Indeed, neoliberalism as a management tool cannot overcome the crisis. On the contrary, neoliberal logic is seen by many analysts as the trigger and part of this crisis. But what alternatives are on offer?

Criticism of neoliberalism may be as fashionable as never before, and no longer exclusive to the left, but the saturation of the public and everyday mind with neoliberal ideologies has limited the intellectual capacity to grasp deeper reality, which acts as an obstacle to finding strategies for problem-solving. This phenomenon can be seen in the fact that even criticism of neoliberalism is sometimes supported by neoliberal arguments.It is as if we are moving between two neoliberal 'operating systems'. While the orthodox neoliberal school of conservative-liberal origin clearly advocates a bottom-up redistribution, even the mild neoliberal variant of the 'Third Way' of social-democratic origin has proved to be unreliable. No one believes any longer in the combination of neoliberal reforms and smoothing out "social consequences."The neoliberal ideology *"that, quietly, has come to regulate all we practice and believe: that competition is the only legitimate organizing principle for human activity"* (Metcalf,2017) is entirely in crisis and has lost its credibility, without this meaning that the loss of acceptance is directly equivalent to a loss of hegemony—quite the opposite (Matutinovic, 2020). Importantly, extensive scientific and public perception change does not result in institutional and political-economic change.The question of the 'strange survival of neoliberalism' is therefore urgently raised, as Colin

Crouch (2011) pointed out in his famous book on post-democracy. In particular, Crouch notes the paradox that, despite the empirical failure of neoliberalism during the crisis period as a policy tool, its hegemonic and fundamental position in the whole structure has been further strengthened. Neoliberalism appears resilient in the face of macroeconomic pressures and civil society demands.

Nevertheless, the reasons for this systemic dogmatism are far more worrying than the doctrine itself. Here we are dealing with the coincidence of the economic and political spheres, or the assimilation of politics into the economy and hence the 'dethronement of politics' as Hayek (1979, 128–149) predicted. `

It is precisely this development, however, that contains abundant risks for the long-term survival of democracy. The assimilation between economy and politics is manifested, among other things, through the open unfolding of the private interests of political personnel, as shown by the management of the tax evaders' list in Greece or the open collection policy of political personalities all over Europe under the pretext of specialized services or speeches. Among the previous examples, the most tragic are, among others, the appointment of Head Bankers like Mario Monti as Italian Prime Minister and Loukas Papademos as Greek Prime Minister. Referendums like that proposed by Papandreou as a way out of the protracted Greek crisis were dismissed as untimely and dangerous by the international centers of power, while the establishment of politically illegitimate governments was seen as a 'golden formula." (Mavrozacharakis& & Tzagarakis, 2015) .

Beyond any democratic legitimacy, governments of "technocrats" or "experts" were established on the grounds of the "survival" of countries. In reality, it was disguised as the government of bankers. Indeed, in the case of Italy, 'most of the new ministers came from the boards of directors of the big Italian companies'. Some analysts speak of quasi-institutionalized coups, which meet with little resistance under the sword of default. (Keucheyan & Durand, 2015, 25).

4. The uprising of populism and the degeneration of democratic procedures

But up to what point can fear provide space for unsecured and unlegitimized forms of power? It is obvious that the very question touches the real substance of democracy. And since the rules of democracy are violated by those who are supposed to guard them, it is inevitable that those forces that seek to abolish the democratic acquis and the constitutional order will be discouraged. The uprising of right-wing populism, the mainstreaming of an extreme-right discourse, and the evolution of extreme-type political behavior are the results. Extreme rightwing political formations have established their divisive and racist discourses through a type of populism that exclusionary articulates 'the people." (Cammaerts, 2018:8). The identification of ideological adversaries is critical to this, as is fear mongering. The mainstreaming of an extreme rightwing populist discourse was facilitated in part by the implementation of a politics of provocation, which tends to elicit virulent moral outrage from the so-called "liberal elite." (Cammaerts, 2018:8). This is then framed as a politically correct witch-hunt, resulting in perpetrator-victim reversal.

Combined with the above, it is not surprising that the demand is gradually spreading that national parliaments should be weakened and have less scope for policy co-creation and fewer veto rights. By analogy with the hegemonic strengthening of neoliberalism, a structural tendency in Europe has intensified in a certain direction towards the deconstruction of the democratic acquis. Parliaments are degenerating into obedient instruments with the right to vote, as the votes on the ESM and the fiscal pact have shown. Key decisions are taken behind closed doors, in committees of experts and ministries, within which the influence of the private sector is considerable. In fact, many studies have shown that there is an open channel of personnel exchange between the economy and politics. Business representatives are given key positions in ministries and vice versa (della-Porta , Keating et al., ,2018:. 373–410). The list of people who have taken lucrative positions in the economy after their political careers is endless. Some even maintain their "privileged relationships with the private sector" during their political careers. For example, many former party leaders such as Peer Steinbrück, Gerhard Schröder, and Tony Blair have served on the boards of powerful corporations and do not hesitate to work for authoritarian politicians such as Putin (Casey & Schmitt, 2022).Because the institutionalization of neoliberal prescriptions on the one hand, and the intensifying interaction of economics

and politics on the other have already gone so far, we have to speculate that a serious political and economic paradigm shift will take a long time to appear on the horizon. Instead, we should very probably expect a further escalation of the crisis.

The more the prosperity of the western world is reduced, the less chance there is of democracy succeeding in the sense that rights and citizenship are reduced under the influence of the crisis. Modern European citizenship is undoubtedly linked to the diverse civil, political, and social rights that have been historically acquired and institutionalized (Lehning, 1999). But the crisis is affecting and nullifying social rights and limiting political rights. In this way, it is damaging the very status of citizenship. (Ivanković Tamamović,2015).

> *"Democracy is at risk. Its survival is endangered by a perfect storm of threats, both from within and from a rising tide of authoritarianism. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these threats through the imposition of states of emergency, the spread of disinformation, and crackdowns on independent media and freedom of expression….The number of countries undergoing "democratic backsliding"... has never been as high as in the last decade. (Diamond,2022)*.

Furthermore, under the guise of fiscal austerity to repay public debt, governments and major multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, have everywhere imposed policies that have deteriorated public health systems: job cuts in the health sector, precarious employment contracts, reduction of hospital beds, closure of local health centers, increases in health care costs and medicine prices, under-immunization, and so on. (Toussaint, Vivas, Samary, et.al. ,2020).

The vital question therefore arises: with citizenship crippled, what kind of democracy can we talk about? So, if we are interested in facing reality soberly and without distraction, should, we prepare ourselves for the possibility of a definitive attack on democracy? This question on its own represents the existence of a serious "antidemocratic quandary." On the one hand, the dispossession of the people is troubling for both normative and prudential reasons. It betrays one of liberal democracy's core promises and instills a deep distrust in the political system that grows more corrosive with each passing year. The system's stability may thus depend

on finding ways to restore ordinary citizens' sense of control . On the other hand, the technocratic institutions that have played a significant role in the rise of undemocratic liberalism are performing critical work that is required for democratic governments to deliver on key issues such as public safety and economic growth: The abolition of these institutions would almost certainly make many citizens' lives worse and undermine the performance legitimacy on which democracies have always relied to some extent. The decomposition of liberal democracy into its constituent parts will be one of the defining challenges of the coming decades, precisely because it cannot be overcome simply by returning power to the people (Mounk, 2018). Neoliberalism as an economic and social system does not, in its most consistent and extreme application, presuppose a democratic regime. However, it is a system that represents the economic elite, and therefore simply guarantees profit and the growth and institutionalization of the power of these elites. It is precisely this mundane diagnosis that explains the above paradox. The problem that arises is whether, at a time when consumption, due to the rapid decline in purchasing power, is diminishing as a tool to embody and neutralize reactions, there are other safeguards on the part of the system that will exorcise systemic risks.

5. The conflict between left and right and the return to redistributive values

It is natural that the economic crisis has brought the opposition between fiscal authoritarianism and the preservation of social acquis to the forefront of public debate as the dominant line of conflict between the right and the left. A conflict without clear dividing lines but filled with vague and unclear narratives as well as diverse aphorisms Never before has the question of the essential contents of the conflict between left and right arisen so vitally. The left interprets freedom as liberation from poverty and calls on the state to provide social protection and solidarity with the weak. The right, on the other hand, approaches freedom primarily as liberation from state interventionism and coercion, valuing any economic risk-taking as insurmountable. The crisis era, however, reversed the value-signals since the state was used by the dominant neoconservative forces as the main lever for the compression of societies and essentially for carrying out a new bottom-up redistribution. A modern left-wing policy is not only opposed to right-wing policy in

the defense of social acquis and the issue of redistribution, but also must focus on the issue of liquidity and increased investment, especially in sectors that offer stable and quality employment. This is possible through tax and other incentives for companies active in innovation and new productive sectors. At the same time, a policy is needed to stimulate consumption and, through this, to stimulate employment. A test in this direction is the reduction of indirect taxes, in particular the VAT. Also, taxes for low and moderate income families could be reduced (these families use their disposable income almost entirely on consumption). All these measures increase domestic consumption, reducing the national savings rate and the current account surplus. None of these policies has any effect on the competitiveness of the economies' export sectors.

In other words, the left should return to the central redistributive narrative articulated by John Rawls in 1971 (302). This narrative is based on two principles. The first principle is based on a contract between free and equal citizens, which provides that each individual has an equal right to the most extended form of freedom without impeding the equal freedom of others. In the particularized societies of today, everyone has the same political rights, and incomes and opportunities are equally distributed. This ideal is based on the French Enlightenment, liberte , egalite, and fraternite movements. In a sense, this principle conveys the socialist expectation of a direct democracy of equal citizens. Hence the introduction of a second, more realistic principle without abolishing the pursuit of utopia.

The second ideal is a transitional stage towards utopia, requiring that economic and social inequalities be addressed by specific policies to ensure that underprivileged citizens benefit to the greatest extent possible, and that these policies be linked to positions, offices, services, and benefits that are open to all under conditions that ensure fair equality of opportunity.

The modern social democracy should not accept the conditions presented by the ruling political class, but set about redefining them as a matter of urgency by recognizing and making fruitful the immense, ever-growing fund of social disgust with the existing order (Fraser, 2017).

Instead of fighting social security systems with the alliance of financialization and emancipation, the Left should forge a new alliance of advocates of emancipation and social security against financialization. In this project, , emancipation does not

mean diversifying the capitalist hierarchy, but abolishing it. And prosperity does not mean growing shareholder or corporate profits, but the material condition of a good life for all. This combination provides the only principled and promising answer to the political challenge we face (Fraser, 2017).

Politics for the left and social democracy is a process that has to do with a *" uneasiness over the spectacle of enormous, disproportionate , unjustified inequalities between rich and poor, between those at the top and those at the bottom of the social ladder , and between those with power - that is to say , the ability to determine the behaviour of others in the economic , political and ideological spheres - and those without power"* (Bobbio,1996: 83).

This view opposes clearly the existing trend of establishment parties (from the "moderate" right to certain sectors of the social democrats) to accept and even implement aspects of the discourse of the far right, especially in immigration matters. In a certain sense sharing some of the far right's discourse and solutions is incongruous because it legitimizes policies and values that contradict the best of the European Enlightenment tradition and, moreover, serves only to benefit the far right at the polls **(**Rodríguez-Aguilera, 2014). It causes confusion and, in some cases, complete withdrawal from the electoral process (in favor of abstention) among voters of truly moderate parties who are fed up with the overall backwards slide, which is hardly good news for European democracy (Rodríguez-Aguilera, 2014).

In contrast to some opportunist tendencies of the times and in line with its enlightening traditions, the centre-left today, must renew her support for the welfare state's egalitarian redistributive value. Last but not least, the center left must strengthen all aspects and potential of pluralist democracy in order to make it more transparent, oriented toward the protection of fundamental rights, and participatory(Rodríguez-Aguilera, 2014). Such a program would undoubtedly be difficult to implement; however, it could significantly contribute to halting the seemingly overwhelming tide of reactionary populisms now sweeping across Europe, which are aided not only by the crisis's particularly adverse objective conditions, but also by the inability of the EU to act.

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