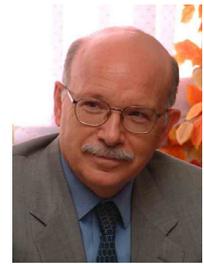


Questions

CIDOB

D.L.: B-8441-2012



16

SEPTEMBER
2012

EUROPE: is Democracy at Stake?

Roberto Toscano, Senior Research Fellow Associate, CIDOB, interviewed by Oleguer Sarsanedas

The very fact that the question is being raised tells a great deal about the present-day situation of Europe as a Union. Right at the epicenter of the economic and financial crisis, the EU is run by partly-elected officials striving to keep an unwavering austerity course through the storm, as member state after member state plunges deeper into recession and faces mounting social unrest.

While a number of countries are de facto intervened by the so-called Troika (the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund: all unelected) and the Men in Black have set up a permanent camp in Athens, Lisbon, Dublin, Rome and Madrid, decisions are increasingly taken by officials perceived by citizens as aloof and far removed from day-to-day street-level concerns. Pro-Europeanism is at an all-time low throughout the Union and voter disaffection with European institutions is growing fast, as reflected by the fact that fringe parties (to the right and to the left) are moving to center stage in several countries (bailed-out and not bailed-out alike).

Roberto Toscano is not outright pessimistic about the prospects of democracy in Europe, and finds strength in the fact that democracy as a concept is now embedded in the European DNA. But he warns to make no mistake: a democratic reaction is badly needed to rescue the Union from the dire straits in which it finds itself at present. To him, the problem is political rather than economic.

Amartya Sen wrote a piece for the Guardian (one year ago last June) under the following title: "It isn't just the euro. Europe's democracy itself is at stake". Do you agree? Do you think it is plausible to fear a threat to democracy in Europe today?

If the question implies that democracy in Europe could be replaced by dictatorships, then of course the answer would be a comfortable "no". But this is really not the point. Democracy is today, especially in Europe, an unbeatable brand, and it would be impossible to propose and introduce a dismantling of democratic institutions (parliaments, elections, political parties). What we have to fear, instead, is not the triumph of declared enemies of democracy, but rather the political success and prevalence of

what Tzvetan Todorov has called, in a recent book, “democracy’s intimate enemies” --that is: trends appearing within, and not as an open alternative to, democracy.

What we see in Europe today is a very dangerous alternative between two political options that do not abolish democracy, but tend to empty it of its real content. On one side, facing the combination of the economic crisis with the vertical drop in prestige of political parties (accused, not without reason, of being both incompetent and corrupt) there is populism, which always existed in more or less nuanced forms, now openly attacking “the establishment”, and putting forward simple answers to complex questions. To be noted, incidentally, that whereas populism has always had two brands, left and right-wing, today it is right-wing populism that is growing, feeding upon --and stoking-- fears related to the loss of cultural homogeneity brought about by immigration, as well as what is perceived as the “Islamic threat”.

On the opposite side of the political (and socio-economic) spectrum, democracy can be and is being subverted in substance by technocracy. Since political parties have been thoroughly disqualified, the temptation to seek salvation in “experts” often turns out to be irresistible.

Since I am Italian, I cannot avoid pointing out that in my country democracy is being challenged by populism on one side (Berlusconi and the Northern League have been by and large a populist phenomenon, and today the movement headed by Beppe Grillo, a foul-mouthed comedian, may have become, according to public opinion polls, Italy’s third largest party), and technocracy on the other side. The Monti government is quintessentially technocratic. In itself it would not be incompatible with democracy, not only because it is constitutionally supported by a parliamentary majority, but also because Monti’s role is similar to that of the Roman “dictator” (totally different from the 20th-century concept, insofar as the Roman Republic, facing a major threat, used to give full-powers but a time-limited mandate to an eminent citizen, who would exit from the scene once he had performed the job). The problem is that very few Italian citizens --including those who do not necessarily agree with the conservative, “bourgeois” approach of Mario Monti-- consider Italian political parties (internally divided and universally hit by corruption scandals) sufficiently fit to allow the country to go back to normal political life. There is no doubt that Monti has saved Italy from a catastrophic financial collapse, but what next?

Europe has been a democratic model for the world. How did we come to this mess?

There are several reasons for this dismal state of democracy in Europe (in substance, and not just institutions).

One can start with the evident deterioration of political leadership: De Gaulle, Adenauer, De Gasperi have had political successors who have certainly not been on the same level, have not shown the same credibility and capacity to inspire. If we move to times closer to us, we can say the same about leadership on the Left: shall we mention Francois Mitterrand, Felipe González, and Enrico Berlinguer? (I refrain from mentioning Tony Blair, since I think it is extremely difficult to place him within the Left, even very widely defined).

But there are also structural reasons. The combination of globalization with neo-liberal dogma has sharply decreased the role of the state and revealed (not only in Europe, but everywhere) that economic power is dominant, and often capable of using politics for its own narrow benefit --and not for a “public good” that today seems more a pious wish than a real possibility. Capitalism has always been like this --by definition. But now, the Big Challenge (Soviet Communism) being over, it has become more unabashedly greedy, more capable of carrying out a unilateral class warfare (as US

billionaire Warren Buffett has been honest enough to admit). It has gone back to its “basic instincts”, which had been restrained for decades, and partly compensated by social-democratic welfare-oriented measures.

On a cultural level (and here I would advise you to read what great sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has to say), consumerism has proved devastating for democracy, in the sense that citizens have been replaced by consumers –idolatrous, one-dimensional, politically obtuse, and structurally-indebted consumers.

What are we lacking: a bigger political vision or a clearer economic thinking –or both?

Turning around an orthodox Marxist view (as well as the famous Clinton-era phrase: “It’s the economy, stupid”), I would say that the problem is political rather than economic. Who decides, and to the benefit of whom? Who is taking the lion’s share of GNP? Who calls the shots in politics? Why are the citizens not participating, thereby allowing crooks and exploiters to run wild? Why has it become impossible to defend a public dimension which does not replace the private, but is necessary to make sure that private interest does not become inimical to the public good? Why is it almost impossible to defend legality, when illegality is committed by the powerful?

Political and moral issues, actually.

The lack of a popular base is bad news for democracy. Increasingly, Europeans don’t feel European, and euro-skepticism keeps growing even in countries traditionally very much pro-Europe, like Spain. Why hasn’t this problem been tackled?

Let’s take one step back and ask: how is it possible to envisage democracy beyond the nation-state? European citizens, as a consequence of the “professionalization of politics” and the evident complicity of politics with greedy, socially insensitive capitalism, have become quite skeptical about representative democracy: they feel they are incapable of influencing politics, and concrete policies, within individual nations. Is it surprising that they feel even less empowered at the EU level?

Re-building a healthy, functioning relationship between the represented and the representatives is a task that should be addressed at three different levels (increasingly difficult): the local, the national, and the European level. On the latter, obviously, the role of the European Parliament should be enhanced –but this is only one aspect of the wider EU “democratic problem”. One should add that active citizens organize and express themselves not only through official institutions, but also within civil society. Here I would be more optimistic, insofar as NGOs and non-profit organizations have built a very significant network (which is a complement, not a substitute, to institutional politics).

Is the European fiscal treaty and the policy of budget cuts that comes with it an enemy to democracy, in the sense that no elected government would stand a chance of revoking this diktat? Is this never-ending crisis giving birth to a political monster, as Ulrich Beck puts it?

The idea of writing into the constitutions the obligation of a balanced budget is the quintessential triumph of neo-liberalism at a time when facts prove how disastrous this ideology has been not only for Europe and the US, but for the whole world. If we try to understand the deeper meaning of this “self-restraint”, we can see that it

is the consecration of the old Thatcherian “there is no alternative”: the preposterous concept that the economy should be run according to allegedly “objective” formulae. So, governments tie their own hands and then turn to the discontented masses and say that they can no longer do anything. Of course indebtedness, both private and public, has reached insane levels in Europe, but it should not be forgotten that easy credit was the only way to keep the system going once the distribution of national income had shifted (after the Reagan-Thatcher revolution) sharply in favor of the upper ranges of the socio-economic scale. Somebody, somehow had to keep buying. There is however a whole set of alternatives to insane indebtedness and a balanced budget –a formula that makes it impossible for the state to promote growth at a moment when the main problems it faces are stagnation and unemployment. When the crisis exploded in 2008, many thought that wisdom and the survival instinct would make capitalism abandon ideological neo-liberalism and go back to some healthy dose of Keynesianism. Vested interests prevented it from happening. The situation is now dismal, and still potentially heading for catastrophe.

We live in accelerating times, and decision-making in the EU is perceived as being extremely slow. Hence, the technocratic lobby (promoted by EU institutions) is gathering strength. Why does the EU allow unelected bodies (such as the international financial institutions and the rating agencies) the power to command democratically elected governments?

Let us be frank: the EU is certainly not the only one institution letting financial entities run the show. The problem is more widespread, and more radical. In the new century, Europe has been abandoning its own brand of capitalism, and has by and large espoused its American variant. Welfare is being subjected to cuts (with the crisis as a pretext), and the market is the inevitable reference for political platforms --including former social-democratic parties.

Most analysts agree that the real challenge now is the erosion of the middle-classes (which goes hand in hand with voter disaffection)...

Figures show exactly this: the erosion of the middle class. Actually, what is happening is that the upper middle-class tends to resemble socially and behave politically like the upper class, while the lower middle-class tends to be “proletarianized” and join in with the lower class. The reason being: the concentration of economic gains towards the upper segment of the socio-economic scale, and --more significantly-- the gradual reduction, if not the dismantling, of the welfare state. Indeed, without the welfare state (free quality education, universal health care, affordable public transport), the middle class cannot but shrink and deteriorate. More important: statistics show that social mobility --the very root of the middle-class growth-- has dropped dramatically both in Europe and in the US.

What is your opinion on the surge of (previously) fringe parties? How are we to read the recent election results in the Netherlands? And what do you think may happen in Italy, with Berlusconi’s announced comeback?

It is hard to tell whether Berlusconi will really try a comeback, the Italian political situation is far from being clear. Monti is by definition an emergency, a temporary solution to Italy’s problems, but the fact is that there is no clear forecast on what or who can come after him. Protest is spreading. So is populism.

Elections in the Netherlands are one of the few positive symptoms of a possible dem-

ocratic reaction, and of resistance to populism and demagoguery. But it will take a lot of very serious work on the part of European democrats if we want to start on a road to political stability and avoidance of extremism, while not abdicating democracy in favor of technocracy.

Hölderlin said that “Where there is danger, salvation grows too”. Do you think Europe’s crisis could be turned, in fact, into an opportunity for democracy?

It might, but it is hard right now to identify the forces that could bring about such a strengthening of democracy. There are several questions here: some radical changes in the defense of the public good and in the relationship between market and state are needed, but is it possible to be radical without being extremist? How can the Left come up with political platforms that avoid a self-defeating remake of previous failed attempts to do away with the market and, at the same time, that do not abdicate the right/duty to set rules and limits to the market, while exerting an active role in promoting growth and fighting unemployment? How can welfare be made financially sustainable? How can progressives --and here I especially refer to the real moral and political tragedy that besets my own country, Italy-- convince the electorate that without legality there will be no salvation, and that illegality does not give common citizens a space “to do their own thing” without state interference, but favours only the rich and the criminal? *Un vaste programme*, as General de Gaulle would have said.