

Whose Union is the European Union: The Capital's or the Peoples'?

The processes that the European Union (EU) has gone through in recent decades have led to the discussion about the future of the Union – and interestingly mostly within the Union itself – more than ever before. For the first time in the history of the EU, a member state – a country big enough to shake the balances within the Union, i.e. the United Kingdom – has left the Union as a result of a contested referendum, while for the last ten years or more, even in a founding country such as Italy, besides the newer member states, the Union's fundamental values and principles have been brought into somewhat fierce discussion under the rule of governments in power, which want to pursue policies independent of the Union displaying that the discussions on the future of the EU are not without any reason. Does the EU that followed a rapid enlargement policy after the Cold War, but increasingly alienated itself from the peoples that make up Europe and from their expectations, stand on the brink of a historical crisis? If there is any truth in these and similar questions, then the most important issues challenging the EU today, I argue, relate to the following critical question, and the answer(s) which we will give to: *whose Union is the European Union: the Capital's or the peoples'?*

During the Cold War period, under the security umbrella of NATO and the USA, Western European countries, primarily by creating an economic cooperation area, tried to recover from the devastation caused by World War II, and indeed succeeded, albeit partially, in building an environment of relative prosperity within a few decades. Undoubtedly, as the subject of another story, the raw materials and resources accumulated from the (former) colonies and the employment of a younger and dynamic population, some of which came from the same colonies, as labor force with the status of 'immigrant/guest worker' played a large part in this success. Although this picture of prosperity began to erode gradually by the 1980s, after a short time at the end of the decade, yet unexpectedly for the many, capitalism declared its 'final' victory all over the world. The emergence of 'new' independent states in the Eastern Europe that had recently been 'liberated' from the yoke of the Soviet Union was considered as a great opportunity by the political elites and architects of the EU in the 1990s.

The evolution of the European Community (EC), which consisted of fifteen member states at that time, into a political Union in the '90s, in line with a strategic decision and through a series of rapid and important transformations, raised the question and comments in many circles, 'Is a United States of Europe emerging?'. In fact what actually happened was the revival of an old 'dream' dating back to almost ancient times. The ideal of a united Europe has remained the supreme goal of many Europeans including prominent rulers, statesmen, politicians and thinkers throughout the history.

After a short period of uncertainty with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was understood that the international system would become much more plural and unpredictable compared to the one during the Cold War. Yet what is newest in the 'new world order' as expressed by the architects of the world-system with a sort of triumphal euphoria, is that large capital groups called multinational or transnational corporations would have an effective and decisive influence on the global scale at an unprecedented level. For sure, throughout the history, the capital has always provided a certain status to its owner. So what was new here was that the entire economic-political system had to be maintained globally through the interests of these capital groups and with manipulative capital movements. The complicated and sometimes illegal networks of interest of multinational corporations often gave them an overwhelming advantage over other international actors.

As in the whole world, the 1980s and '90s were marked by the 'neoliberal transformation' led by the US President Reagan and British Prime Minister Thatcher across the European Union region too. The welfare state model, which is also considered as a 'third way' experience between communism and capitalism, has thus been irreversibly eroded. Since then, some minor points of resistance has been tried to be completely destroyed. While the process was largely completed with the 'reforms' carried out by Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had been in power for many years in Germany, this is exactly the mission of the banker-turned President Emmanuel Macron and his team in France. In the UK one can easily consider the task completed. The British Labour Party, led by Tony Blair, who came to power in 1997, carried out the 'necessary reforms' rapidly from where the conservatives left off. Italy, on the other hand, went through a similar experience in the 2000s under the administration of PM Silvio Berlusconi, one of the country's leading corporate media bosses and prominent businessmen.

In addition to these similar processes experienced by the member states separately, as the European Union was transforming from an economic community to a political union after the Cold War, it was strongly underlined that the Union was committed to free market principles from the very beginning, and declared that the new members to be admitted to the Union must have their own individual economic structures based firmly on these principles. Through the economic criteria, which have been set out, emphasized, and closely followed at various summits since Maastricht, the communist economies of the former Eastern Bloc were 'successfully' transformed into free markets within a short time.

It is clear that the transformation of the economic structure cannot be considered separately from the socio-political structure. As Hungarian economist Karl Polanyi, one of the leading economic historians of the last century, argues in his masterpiece *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, the market economy presupposes the market society. For this reason, the 'global neoliberal transformation' of the last thirty or forty years has led to a large-scale socio-political and cultural *transmutation*. For the market society is based on an extremely individualized and atomized structure, publicity and social responsibility, and even a sort of ethics in such a fragmented society have been replaced by an unlimited pursuit of self-interest, as this is what is understood from the capitalist activity of 'business'. Thus, the individual interrupted and alienated from the society he lives in ultimately gets lonely. Contemporary continental European societies have become increasingly 'Anglo-Saxon' in this process, while EU institutions, on the other hand, have become insensitive more and more to the needs and expectations of their own societies, getting to seem only as the representatives of capital and business circles, interest groups, and lobbies. The fact that the Union did not pay much attention to strengthening the democratic mechanisms that would make the European peoples have a voice has played a critical role on this result.

The increasing social and economic inequality in Europe and as a result, the deepening of serious and chronic problems are seen as one of the leading reasons for the extreme right, neo-fascist and populist movements and parties to rise unprecedentedly since the end of the Second World War. What is more important and maybe shocking is the fact that these movements have a wide and ever-expanding social and political support, and some of them today are even in power, or very close to it. So many questions might come to one's mind consecutively: is democracy once again under a serious threat, as it was in the 1930s? Or one can put it differently and might ask, 'Are all these 'illiberal' but 'democratic' reactions against the inequality symbolized by official institutions in a (neo)liberal but non-democratic Europe and the EU? Since the problem is not one-dimensional, the number of questions and answers can be increased too, albeit paradoxically; and they all may have some 'truth'. Yet one simple but difficult question that is at the beginning will make some persons in Europe, who are feeling responsible for the future of their peoples, contemplate for a long time and finally make a choice and a decision: *whose* Union is the European Union: the Capital's or the peoples of Europe? Both the future of Europe and the EU depends on this.