The European Union as 'universalist' project: Developing a critical left response

By Steve McGlinch

No systematic theoretical study of the development of European economic integration has so far been conducted. In the collection of essays A Rebalanced Fortress: Neoliberal Hegemony and Transformation in Europe (2003), mainstream thinkers informed by Neo- 

Grassmann theory, including editors Alan Caliendo and Magnus Fryntor, point to the way in which this has since become an arguably unmarked research agenda which would potentially constitute such a study. Yet the level and unique nature of the European Union calls for a nuanced application of theoretical tools capable of providing a sound analysis of the EU and its neoliberal trajectory, an analysis capable of offering guidance to movements of resistance in their search for effective counter hegemonic strategies, a search which is in danger of descending into quixotism and utopianism.

These elements of the European left which continue to offer a response to the European Union as an instrument for deepening the exploitative potential of capitalism have been so weakened that they are hand-pushed to maintain a day today challenge to its ideology and practice. This EU vertical left enjoys isolated successes, such as the rise of the Socialist Party of the Netherlands to become its country’s biggest opposition party, but the broader picture is one of episodic decline or, at best, consolidation of already hugely depleted forces.

The very difficulty of establishing and carrying out an effective programme of research whose findings might be of use to the EU vertical left point to the urgency of doing so. The development of the European Union into a hegemonic force in European intellectual life has meant that critical voices have been marginalised. The assumption of ‘European Studies’ as practiced in European universities is that the proper role of intellectual activity in this field is to find ways to smooth the path of political and economic integration, the desirability of which is a given. The existence of a non-national, progressive critique of integration in its current form is scarcely acknowledged.

An ill-defined ‘internationalism’ has become a very deep orthodoxy, representing a reaction to alternative xenophobia and popular nationalism, to the need to respond to a globalisation which makes it impossible for individual countries to address economic or environmental problems without ‘cooperating’ with each other. It thus emerges that ‘cooperation’ automatically means ‘integration’. Yet without embracing an anti-imperialist perspective unlikely to entrench the educated and informed young, it seems impossible for many to resist this ideology which on a world scale might be called ‘globalism’ and on the scale of Europe, ‘Europeanisation’.

The only way to do so is to demonstrate that the European Union is not, in fact, an internationalist project at all. In common with other international institutions of bourgeois hegemony, including the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), it is an insidious construct which seeks to mask the essential abolition of the nation state and its replacement with a matrix of controlled, techno-economic structures impervious to popular influence.

Established by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, the European Union (EU) represents a development away from the internationalism which motivated the founding of the European Economic Community in 1957 and towards a universalism whose purpose is to undermine popular democracy and replace it with technocratic elites. The Lisbon Treaty, which on October 2 will be put to the electorate of Ireland for the second time, is the latest step in this process, the reality of which is aptly demonstrated by the fact that only the last, all of the twenty-seven member states, have been given the privileges of a state in a邦 going on the Treaty.

The purpose of internationalism is to facilitate cooperation between nations. The EU’s goal is, on the contrary, to reduce those nations to elements in a universalist system, one in which policy goals, values and methodology are determined by centralised structures and the elites which control them.

By supplanting freely-engaged cooperation between democratically controlled elites, the managers of European capital are seeking to remove the system’s economic base from any popular influence. This is to be achieved by co-opting/decolonising the prevailing neoliberal orthodoxy. As Robert Cox defines it,

Institutionalisation is a means of subduing and perpetuating a particular order. Institutionalisation involves the power relations pertaining at its point of origin and lead… to encoing collective images consistent with those power relations.

The purpose is to ensure that key aspects of economic management are... shielded from politics... from popular pressures. This is achieved by confirmed practices, by treaty, by legislation, and by formal constitutional provisions.

This is not an exclusively European process. It is one which can be seen occurring on the global level in a series of developments which Stephen Gill has called ‘new constitutionalism’. Within the European Union, however, the process has reached into the social, economic and political life of developed countries more deeply than has occurred in any other region of the world. As Gill pointed out shortly after the Treaty on European Union was signed, “...new constitutionalist thinking lies at the heart of the Maastricht Agreements for European unification and a single currency...” (which) tie the hands of future governments with regard to fiscal and central control over much of their economic policy.”

New Constitutionalism is not an end in itself, but an instrument with distinct, if shifting, policy goals. Designed to enable the prioritisation of every aspect of our lives through mechanisms which insulate core decisions from democratic influence, it must, in order to achieve this, undermine key constituents of social and political democratisation. On the global level, the principal instruments for achieving this insulation are, as mentioned above, the WTO and the G8, together with less formalised groupings such as the G7 and the World Economic Forum, and quasi-secret bodies like the Bilderberg group and the Trilateral Commission. On the regional level it operates through, for example, NAFTA.

No other regional body, however, has anything like the power and ambition of the European Union, which is moving incrementally towards an even more centralised body with economic power concentrated at the centre, and in which the economic system is insulated from politics. The fattening of this separation is the Lisbon Treaty, designed to achieve, in common with each successive treaty since the Single European Act of 1987. As Robert Cox noted in the run up to Maastricht,

Strong forces urge that the separation become the basic ontology of the new European order; that a European-level political system be constructed that would limit popular pressures for political and social control of economic processes. Those processes would then be left to a combination of the market and a Brussels-based technocracy which would, in turn, reflect the dominance of big capital and the ‘lone’ states, especially Germany.

The European Union as unneutral state

Consider the traditional functions of the state. Firstly, it must be able to define its borders, a matter which has been given much consideration by the succession of imperial powers, so that Imperial Britain could use arguments of national security (of the security of national) to define invasions of distant territories, as have the United States and its allies for more recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Many more examples could be found, as could instances of states using the same argument to define aggression against sovereign neighbours: Nazi Germany’s invasion of the Sudetenland, or the US in the 1980s invasions of Grenada and Panama. Israel routinely employs the argument in an ongoing way to justify its occupation of Palestinian territory and its violence against Palestinians.

The construction of the European Union, which will be accelerated should the Lisbon Treaty be adopted, must be read in this context. The EU has no enemies as such. The last country now forming part of the Union to suffer an armed invasion was Czeckoslovakia, over forty years ago. Moreover, almost all of the EU’s member states also member states of NATO and therefore already bound by treaty to go to each other’s aid should such an enemy emerge. Were the United Nations, the only body which can legally do so, to undertake military action against a sovereign state, every EU member state would be able, should it so wish, to contribute soldiers and material to support definitive or retaliatory action. It is therefore unclear why the European Union should need a joint military force at all. Neither a joint military force nor any feasible increase in military spending are conclusively lead to a challenge to US military dominance, given that in 2001 the United States was responsible for almost half of global expenditures and Europe, including non-member states, for only a fifth.

The Treaty itself is not helpful in answering the question of why an EU military force is necessary, stating only that “The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) ... shall provide the Union with an operational capacity to draw on civilian and military assets,” and that there may be so-called “missions outside the Union for peace-keeping, conflict prevention and strengthening international security in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter.” The value-added here is not obvious, and it seems therefore unclear at this point of the CSDP what is its importance. The status that this policy shall include the progressive functioning of a common Union defence policy. This will lead to a common defence, when the European Council, acting unanimously, so decides.”

In practice this means that the big, rich member states will establish a ‘common defence’ – which is hard to interpret as anything other than a militarised military force, in other words an EU armed force. Their smaller partners, should they not be enthusiastic, will be bullied or bribed into acquiescing in this. Where this will leave neutral Ireland, Austria, Finland and Sweden is uncertain.

Broad interpretation of the purpose of an EU armed force would suggest that “peace-keeping, conflict prevention and strengthening international security" might be seen to include the furtherance of ‘European values’. This vague term is left more substance by the existence of the Accession Criteria, better known as the Copenhagen Criteria, a list of conditions which applicant states must meet before being allowed to join. These are summarised by the European Commission as follows:

"ability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;

the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the Union;

the ability to take the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.
While it is the case that the Copenhagen Criteria are meant to apply to countries seeking membership, it is also clear that, for the European Commission, democracy and the 'market economy' form two sides of the same coin. The 'rule of law' is therefore not simply the enforcement of laws made by a duly constituted government, but also the constitutional rules governing the operation of that government. The creation of an 'operational capacity' could be seen as enhancing the state's ability to perform this function, but may well, where necessary, be available to supplement or usurp it. The incorporation of the 'Third Pillar', currently a fully intergovernmental system standing outside the supranational 'European Community', into the Union proper by means of the Lisbon Treaty will facilitate this.

Two of these functions of the state – defense of the realm and the preservation of social stability – are the least controversial, in the sense that anyone, even the most extreme libertarian, would accept them in any form they see. Beyond this, the most consensual aspect of a definition of state legitimacy is probably (in practice) its role combining different forms of 'governance', as both an arbiter of conflicting interests and a long-term planner. The tasks of 'leadership' and 'planning' are closely linked, if not identical, for the state functions as a sovereign power which stands above the play of social forces resulting from the conflict which arise in a society made up of individuals with a variety of social and economic interests. Though increasingly challenged by a post-Thatcher, post-Reagan libertarian right, this concern was common throughout much of the twentieth century, endorsed by conservatists and social democrats alike.

In its theoretical approach to the state, classical Marxism viewed the state as the embodiment of the interests of a dominant class, yet maintained the idea of a people's and a state. The bourgeoisie, in this view, exists in part to moderate conflicts between rival capitalists, and in the absence of short-term interests of individual capitalists to ensure the long-term health of the system. Marx and Engels, in The Communist Manifesto, called the state a 'tools of the bourgeoisie'. As developed by Antonio Gramsci, an elite group's function can be seen to extend beyond the hegemonic class itself, constructing the consent of a broad sector of society by incorporating the codes, desires and impulses of those classes into a programme of expression and accompanying ideology. All of this can be seen quite clearly in the Lisbon Treaty, and in the proposed European Constitution – rejected by the governments of the Netherlands and France – of which it is merely a rewriting. The Treaty, and the ideology of Europeanism which it embodies, is intended to be an attempt to preserve European values in a world in which traditional social democracy, the ideology and practice of the post-war settlement, is mysteriously outmoded. These values relate to such things as social solidarity and gender equality, but non-employment laws of long duration, which are defined as a privilege won at the expense of the 'excluded'.

The minority which is enthusiastic about the European Union has also not been studied in any depth. I can therefore cite my experience to suggest, tentatively, that it comes from groups which are relatively privileged, relatively well-educated, with some social mobility and political education, and which have low rates of unemployment, but are not necessarily left alone to do as they will the rest of the time. For indifference, though embarrassing on election day, is a positive gain for the Union which can be shown to exist in a variety of forms. Thus it is clear that the Lisbon Treaty will be implemented by the small elite which defines direct and unquestionable benefit from it. This is why it has created, with varying degrees of success, the universalist ideology which I have called Europeanism.

The hollowing out of parliamentary democracy

Developments within the European Union from the Treaty of Maastricht onwards form part of a global process which is emptying parliamentary democracy of meaning. As parliamentary institutions have spread following the collapse of authoritarian systems of government in large areas of the world, they have simultaneously been deprived of a range of powers once considered proper to them. In order to be successful, however, this project needs support beyond the tiny elite which derives direct and unquestionable benefit from it. This is why it has created, with varying degrees of success, the universalist ideology which I have called Europeanism.

Aside from the elite which are its real and immediate beneficiaries, Europeanism wins the support of a number of social layers and, perhaps more importantly, the acquiescence of the mass of the populations of every member state. Actual enthusiasm for the EU is confined to a small minority. The best recent measure of this is the European Parliamentary election held in early June, 2009. Across the Union, turnout was as low as 45%, and in only eight member states did it exceed half of the eligible electorate. From a respectable comparison of the elections held in 1979, when there were 9 member states, turnout has declined in every election since.

Despite this display of indifference, however, parties critical of the way in which European integration is being carried out, whether from a right- or left-wing perspective, did not in general fare well. As no reliable, systematic study has been carried out into why people abstain from the elections, we are left to speculate. Various explanations have been suggested by mainstream politicians. The leader of the British Liberal Democrats, Graham Watson of the Liberal Democrats, stated his belief that more people would vote if they felt their vote had more influence. This seems a truism, but his proposals that the European Parliament should appoint the leader of the largest political party to a position analogous to that of a prime minister, is likely to be unlikely to address this problem. Leader of the centre-left Party of European Socialists (the second biggest group), Martin Schulz, flourished the low voter turnout in the way in which generally European values were rarely highlighted in EU elections. This is again true, with those voters who did turn out seeming to prefer to take the opportunity to express support for, or (more usually) disaffiliation with, their own country's governing party or parties.

The striking thing is that mainstream politicians have not reacted to the declining turnout by calling for a wide debate on reforms, or for the Commission to come forward with reforms proposals. Surprisingly, the European political elite prefers to overlook the five-yearly humiliation of extremely low interest in the elections (which media reflect, and arguably bear some of the responsibility for) in exchange for being left alone to do as it will of the time of the elections. For indifference, though embarrassing on election day, is a positive gain for the Union which can be shown to exist in a variety of forms. Thus it is clear that the Lisbon Treaty will be implemented by the small elite which defines direct and unquestionable benefit from it. This is why it has created, with varying degrees of success, the universalist ideology which I have called Europeanism.

The minority which is enthusiastic about the European Union has also not been studied in any depth. I can therefore cite my experience to suggest, tentatively, that it comes from groups which are relatively privileged, relatively well-educated, possessing the tools of linguistic and personal skills which bring success in the upper echelons of the modern labour market, and culturally young. The general reaction to any criticism of the EU reflects this – for the sake of the Union, Europeanism is endorsed by a conservative demolition for opposition arguments; the identification of the EU with modernity, progress, and a broad-based internationalism; the identification of critical views with nationalism and xenophobia; and the portrayal of socialism and social democracy as 'old-fashioned'. Together, these fail to translate to decisive crises as much as the past, an attitude which requires the necessity to explain and defend the integrationist project with anything more than clichés about 'globalisation'.

'New Constitutionalism', as applied to the development of the European Union, goes beyond the locking in of neoliberal economics to affect policy across the board. In order to institute itself from a deep crisis which has been visibly approaching since the oil shock of the early 1970s, capitalism needs to increase the rate at which it extracts surplus value from labour. This is a process of the NICs and in particular China, Europe and the west in general have been faced with the related problem of global competition. An increasingly authoritarian and intransigent approach to security is part of the response to this. As is most evident in Britain and France begins to react to the the scaling down of payrolls as the crisis hits, the structures created as part of the
War on Terror are eminently suited for fighting the class war, too, in that the weakening of civil liberties facilitates policing actions against an increasingly rebellious, troublesome population and workforce.

All of this suggests areas for further research. We need to discover who supports this integrationist project and why, and how well they understand it. If there is no active ‘street-level’ support for neoliberal integration, there is also little or no active, generalised resistance, and we need to find out why that is, too. Beyond these empirical surveys, a whole area of European economic and political integration awaits analysis. Following the suggestion of Pinar Bedirhanoglu, we need to build on Cox’s “conceptualizing the political sphere in capitalist development as one within which national, institutional and transnational processes of policy formation are intertwined in a hierarchical structure of crisis management”, particularly from the point of view of this essay’s concern, how and where the Lisbon Treaty and the structure it creates fits into this.

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