

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

by Steve McGiffen

No systematic theoretical study of the development of European economic integration has as yet been conducted. In the collection of essays *A Ruined Fortress: Neoliberal Hegemony and Transformation in Europe (2003)*, numerous thinkers informed by Neo-Gramscian theory, including editors Alan Cafruny and Magus Ryner, point the way to what has since become an urgently needed research agenda which would potentially constitute such a study. Yet the novel and unique nature of the European Union calls for a sustained 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 nostalgia.

Those 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 hard-pushed to maintain a day-to-day challenge to its ideology and practice. This EU-critical 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 sporadic decline or, at best, consolidation of already hugely depleted forces.

The very difficulties of establishing and carrying out an effective programme of research whose findings might be of use to the EU-critical 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 practised 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-nationalist, 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 destructive xenophobia and populist 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 then emerges that 'cooperation' automatically implies 'integration'. Yet without embracing an atavistic conservatism unlikely to attract the educated and talented 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, 'Europeanism'. The only way to do so is to demonstrate that the European Union is not, in reality, an internationalist project at all. In common with other transnational instruments of bourgeois hegemony, including the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), it is a *universalist* construct which seeks the eventual abolition of the nation state and its replacement with a matrix of centralised technocratic 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 elitism. The Lisbon Treaty, which on October 2nd 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 Irish, of all of the twenty-seven member states, have been given the privilege of voting in a referendum on the Treaty.

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

By supplanting freely-engaged cooperation between democracies with a centralised elitism, the managers of European capitalism are seeking to remove the system's economic base from any popular influence. This is to be achieved by *institutionalising* the prevailing neoliberal orthodoxy. As Robert Cox defines it,

Institutionalization is a means of stabilizing and perpetuating a particular order. Institutions reflect the power relations prevailing at their point of origin and tend ... to encourage collective images consistent with these 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 noted 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 their 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 privatisation of every aspect of our lives through mechanisms which insulate core decisions from democratic influence, it must, in order to achieve this, undermine two centuries of social and political democratisation. On the global level, the principal instruments for achieving this insulation are, as mentioned above, the IFIs and the WTO, together with less formalised groupings such as the G8 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 its own reconstitution as a federal state with economic power concentrated at the centre, and in which the economic realm is insulated from politics. The furtherance of this separation is what the Lisbon Treaty is 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 this separation become the basic ontology of the new European order; and that a European-level political system be constructed that would limit popular pressures for political and social control of economic processes. These 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 'core' states, especially Germany.

The European Union as nascent state

Consider the traditional functions of the state. Firstly, it must be able to defend its borders, a matter which has been given broad interpretation by a succession of imperialist powers, so that Imperial Britain could use arguments of national security (or the security of nationals) to defend invasions of distant territories, as have the United States and its allies for more recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iran. Many more examples could be found, as could instances of states using the same argument to defend 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 militarisation 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 Czechoslovakia, over forty years ago. Moreover, almost all of the EU's member states are also members of NATO and therefore already bound by treaty to go to each others' aid should such an enemy emerge. Were the United Nations, the only body which can legally do so, to authorise military action against a sovereign state, every EU member state would be able, should it see fit, to contribute soldiers and matériel to support defensive 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 can conceivably lead to a challenge to US military dominance, given that in 2008 the United States was responsible for almost half of global expenditure 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 drawing on civilian and military assets," and that these may be used "on 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 clear that the second point of the CSDP is what is important. This states that the policy "shall include the progressive framing 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 unified military force, in other words an EU armed force. Their smaller partners, should any 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 purposes 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 lent 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:

stability 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 pressure and market forces within the Union;
the ability to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic & 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, even one elected according to the generally accepted rules of parliamentary democracy, but primarily the rule of laws ensuring the security of *property*. In conjunction with the outlawing of rules limiting property ownership to nationals, a key aim of the WTO, the rules and practice of which the EU is a key determinant, the 'rule of law' is transformed from something resembling the benign phenomenon which its name suggests into a key instrument of economic imperialism. It is unclear, moreover, whether the license to operate "outside the Union" is meant to be exclusive, in other words whether the force is forbidden from operating within the member states. Could British soldiers be sent to quell violent disturbances of the kind seen recently in Greece, Hungary and the Baltic States, for instance? Could it, indeed, be used against a member state government which fails to enforce the 'rule of law'? There seems nothing in the proposed Treaty to prevent either of these eventualities, and if the latter seems, under current conditions, fanciful, the former appears all too plausible.

The second traditional function of the state is indeed to preserve internal order. The European Union, through the 'third pillar' of Justice and Home Affairs (JHA), has already taken steps in this direction, enhancing police cooperation as part of its contribution to the 'War on Terror' which has, as elsewhere, been used as a pretext for the erosion of civil liberties. The creation of an "operational capacity" could be seen as enhancing a state's ability to perform this function but may also, where necessary, be available to supplant or usurp it. The incorporation of the 'Third Pillar', currently a fully inter-governmental system standing outside the supranational 'European Community', into the Union proper by means of the Lisbon Treaty will facilitate this.

These two functions of the state – defence of the realm and the preservation of internal order – are the least controversial, in the sense that anyone, even the most extreme libertarian, would accept them as *itsine qua non*. Beyond this, the most consensual aspect of a definition of state legitimacy is probably (in practice) its role combining different forms of 'guidance', as both an arbiter of conflicting interests and a long-term planner. The tasks of 'arbiter' and 'planner' are closely related, if not identical, in that the state functions as a sovereign power which stands above the play of social forces resulting from the conflicts 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 view was consensual throughout much of the twentieth century, embraced by conservatives 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 arbiter and guide. The bourgeois state, in this view, exists in part to mediate conflicts between rival capitalists, and to look beyond the short-term interests of individual corporations to ensure the long-term health of the system. Marx and Engels, in *The Communist Manifesto*, called the state "but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie". As developed by Antonio Gramsci, this arbiter/guide function can be seen to broaden beyond the hegemonic class itself, constructing the consent of a broad section of society by incorporating the needs, desires and impulses of these classes into a programmatic expression and accompanying ideology. All of this can be seen quite starkly in the Lisbon Treaty, and in the proposed European Constitution – rejected by the electorates of the Netherlands and France – of which it is merely a reworking. The Treaty, and the ideology of Europeanism which lies behind it, purport 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, are mysteriously outmoded. These values turn out to include such things as social solidarity and gender equality, but not secure employment contracts of long duration, which are defined as a privilege won at the expense of the 'excluded'.

The incorporation of market capitalism into a Treaty which can be changed only by the unanimous consent of the (currently 27) member states, thus performs the third function of the state, a function which the states themselves have proved unable to perform individually in the face of the rapid economic changes which have been called 'globalisation'. By locking in a neoliberal economic system some distance 'to the right' of the post-World War Two socio-economic accord on which the welfare states of western Europe were based, the Lisbon Treaty seeks to eliminate the state as a terrain of struggle. In so doing it promises (though this is hardly its intention), to settle a question within the broad movement of Marxism, the dilemma between reformism and revolution, or between the classical Leninist definition of the state as an instrument of class power, and a more nuanced view evident in the actual practice of post-World War Two Marxist political parties. For social democrats, and (in practice) all European parties to the left of them of any size or significance, have long behaved as if they believed that the state could be won for the cause of social progress without a Leninist revolution being necessary. If revolutionary change is taken to mean root-and-branch transformation of the constitution of a state, whether by violent or non-violent means, then revolution has been the only route to a post-capitalist society in Europe since the adoption of the Treaty on European Union. However, Lisbon closes any remaining loopholes, any avenues for compromise, any legal route whatsoever to socialism. The only question remaining to us is what form a revolution can possibly take in a world where power is so diffuse.

If this seems melodramatic, a study of the actual choices offered to electorates by mainstream parties will make it appear less so. Until the 1980s elections in European parliamentary democracies concerned, principally, the 'mix' of the 'mixed economy': the degree, in other words, of social versus private ownership of the means of production; of social versus private ownership of essential services such as health care, education, public transport and retirement pension funds; and of social versus private ownership of services to facilitate the smooth functioning of the economy, such as banks and providers of various forms of insurance. The existing Treaty on European Union, together with the broader international commitments of the member states and of the Union itself, go some way towards settling this question by determining a 'mix' heavily tilted in favour of private ownership of every sector. The Lisbon Treaty would complete this process, finalising the conditions under which the 'market economy' – a euphemism for neoliberal capitalism – is firmly entrenched in a constitutionally immutable matrix of law and obligation.

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 population 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 (EP) election held in early June, 2009. Across the Union, turnout was as low as 43%, and in only eight member states did it exceed half of the eligible electorate. From a respectable near-62% at the first direct EP election (in 1979, when there were 9 member states), turnout has declined at 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 in these elections, we are left to speculate. Various explanations have been suggested by mainstream politicians. The leader of the EP's third largest group, Graham Watson of the centrist Liberals, 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 Commission president be appointed from the ranks of elected MEPs, or that a proportion of MEPs should be elected from pan-European lists, seem unlikely to address this problem. Leader of the centre-left 'Party of European Socialists' (the second biggest group), Martin Schulz, blamed the low turnout on the way in which genuinely 'European' issues were rarely highlighted in EP elections. This is again true, with those voters who do turn out seemingly preferring to take the opportunity to express support for, or (more usually) dissatisfaction 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 reform, or for the Commission to come forward with reform proposals. Seemingly, the European political elite prefers to swallow the five-yearly humiliation of extremely low interest in the elections (which the media reflect, and arguably bear some of the responsibility for) in exchange for being left alone to do as it will the rest of the time. For indifference, though embarrassing on election day, is a positive benefit the rest of the time. After all, if the elite really cared to solicit and abide by the views of the peoples of the 27, the electorates of twenty-six member states would not have been denied the right to vote on the Lisbon Treaty, the most wide-ranging constitutional change to occur in Europe since the collapse of state socialism. Nor would they have responded to the overwhelming 'no' votes in the referenda on the European Constitution held in France and the Netherlands by presenting the European peoples with a virtually identical proposal.

The minority which is enthusiastic about the European Union has also not been studied in any depth. I can therefore cite only wide personal experience to suggest, tentatively, that it comes from groups which are relatively privileged, relatively well-educated, possessing the IT, linguistic and personal skills which bring rewards in the upper echelons of the modern labour market, and relatively young. The general reaction to any criticism of the EU reflects this: the use of the term 'anti-European', accompanied by a contemptuous disregard for opponents' arguments; the identification of the EU with modernity, progress, and a broad-minded internationalism; the identification of critical views with nationalism and xenophobia; and the portrayal of socialism and social ownership as 'old-fashioned'. Together, these fuel a tendency to dismiss critics as stuck in the past, an attitude which negates the necessity to explain and defend the integrationist position with anything more than clichéd nods to '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 extricate 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 global problem, but since the rise 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 invasive approach to security is part of the response to this. As is becoming evident as workers in Britain and France begin to react to 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 Bedirrhanoğlu, we need to build on Cox's "conceptualizing the political sphere in capitalist development as one within which national, international 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 concerns, how and where the Lisbon Treaty and the structures it creates fit into this.

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