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NO AUTHENTIC DEMOCRACY WITHOUT SOCIAL PROGRESS

Democracy is all at the same time a requirement for itself and a means for popular classes to assert and enforce their claims.

Democracy – taken in its general meaning of recognition of the legitimacy of the different visions between the individual and society, the diversity of interests, as well as the one of the necessary institutions to promote their implementation – is the unavoidable condition for human emancipation. That emancipation cannot be thought of without the one of the mind. Democracy gives to creativity in all areas its full potential.

But democracy – then taken in its more precise meaning of the set of institutions which define its practises and governs it – is equally an instrument: the one of facilitating the promotion of the “people’s” (the popular classes) interests or, on the contrary, of curbing their development.

In that last meaning, we should make careful difference between the means of popular democracy from the one of democracy reserved to privileged people. Qualifying democracy as “popular” may seem a pleonasm as demos means the people in Greek. But the pleonasm is made necessary because the democracy which the dominant ideology proposes us was designed and constructed to serve the privileged and not to promote the power of popular classes.

An authentic democracy is indissociable with social progress. This means it must associate the requirements of liberty and the nonetheless important ones of equality. Now those two values are not spontaneously necessarily complementary but often conflicting. Liberty, associated with ownership on the same footing, sanctified by the economic system, reduces the space of materialisation of the claims to equality, as ownership is necessarily the one of a minority, as well as being always unequally distributed. In our present times, the one of the dominant big financial oligopolies, that extreme inequality and the combine liberty/ownership association enforce the true power of a plutocracy, and reduce democracy to the practise of rites without impact. In counterpoint, equality (to the least a certain degree of lesser inequality) can be – and has often been in contemporary history – guaranteed by the power, without much tolerance for the exercise of citizenship liberties.

Combining liberty and equality is the essence of the challenge facing contemporary peoples.

The institutional democracy the dominant ideology proposes us constitutes an obstacle to authentic democratic progress. Democracy as we know it has not been – and is still not – designed to favour the expression of popular claims but to oppose them obstacles difficult to overcome. Three sets of reflections on the institutions and the practises of that truncated democracy will illustrate our thesis.

Dominant recent trends in the institutionalised practises of electoral and institutionalised democracy of European countries openly pursuit the objective of reducing what their promoters call “the excess of democracy”! Adoption of the principle of the single-member constituency run-off system (with one, sometimes double ballot) taking continuation of

“proportional representation” (when it existed) has as an objective annihilating the impact of “minority” voters and give primacy to “centrist” candidates who accept to submit to the “rules of the system” (to the “market”) and to the conventional discourse which aims at legitimising it. We will note that Great Britain, “the country of origin of democracy”, so we are said, has always practised the single-member constituency run-off system, like the United States of America.

The adoption of the presidential system and the principle of the President elected from universal suffrage pursue the same objective. That option seeks to force the public opinion to crystallise around two candidates said to be of the right and of the left, in fact forced under these conditions of polarisation of choices to compete at the centre. The United States, and after them, Latin America, have always based their constitutional system on that principle, in full knowledge of its consequences as the texts of the Founding Fathers testify to that. The principle has been, in contemporary times, largely adopted in Africa and Asia for reasons stemming from an identical logic. It is in progress in Europe and was adopted by the Vth Republic in France, despite the tradition which associated it the Bonapartism. It remains also true the principle of parliamentarism based on the single-member constituency run-off which favours two major political parties gives comparable results and results in quasi-Presidential Prime Ministers.

The project of a European constitution fed the ambition of enshrining the principles of a representative democracy barring the route to effective expression of popular claims. It is true that project was formally rejected by the French and Dutch peoples. It is not nonetheless true Brussels institutions are conducting themselves as if those rejections were invalid and of non effect; and the new project said to be of a “mini treaty” revives its essential contents. We must then continue referring to that project in the present tense! Not only does the project revive enshrining of ownership which the Declarations (of 1789, of the United States and others) had formulated, but it gives it absolute value challenged, at least partly, in the aftermath of World War II, when popular classes, victorious in their fight against fascism, had acquired a legitimacy they had never benefited until then in capitalist countries (and which they are underway of losing today). In the trail of that evolution, the project annihilates the very concept of public service, which restricted the area of expansion of the freedom of owners by imposing respect of realms of social activities governed by the principle of equality. That principle of (relative) equality of access to education, health, security of employment, a few of the basic needs (water, electricity, transports) is now sacrificed to the expansion requirement of the marketplace offered to the exploitation of the capital. I will keep under silence the detailed developments reinforcing the “rights” of the financial oligarchy in a number of areas which do not derive from a constitution in principle solely reserved to the principles and not to the final interpretation of their enforcement.

On another respect, the project considerably reduced the legislative powers of Nations by submitting them to the supremacy of the “European” law, whereas we know, the least so, that if legislative powers in the European States are indeed formed from parliamentary elections, such is not the case within the European Union. The shift of those powers, of the national parliaments to Brussels side-room of the European Union favours another shift, openly sought after, towards the government of judges – a government still conservative – in charge of dictating compliance or not of national laws (voted) as regards the regards the instructions of Brussels (which are not). The draft constitution, through its formal reference to NATO, annihilates the possible impact of a democratic choice as regards foreign policy. NATO is an alliance (then in principle likely to be withdrawn from by elected powers), what is more

military and entrusted to the custody of the United States (to the least a foreign State from the European Union!). Abolition of the States' sovereignty in that context is synonymous to the abolition of a fundamental democratic right, the one of enforcing the foreign policy sought after by the people. Branding of the full set of the texts in a booster wording of the pretended roots of the European civilisation (Christianity, or nearly escaped Judeo-Christianity) does not reinforce the democratic impact of the project but, on the contrary, limits its significance.

We then understand Giscard d'Estaing the (utterly reactionary) genitor of that text exclaiming it was "almost as good as the text of the United States' Constitution"! Because indeed the text of the Constitution of the United States, which is presented to us as having been the guarantee of a sustained development of "democracy in America" (by contrast with its advances and regressions in Europe) has indeed been thought of by its authors to marginalise the risk of offensives of popular claims. The Founding Fathers had in that respect striking lucidity which they expressed with a striking straight forwardness. They first retained only two fundamental values (freedom and ownership), eliminating aspirations to equality. The dominant ideology of the United States has remained to date characterised by its disregard for equality, which is sacrificed on the shrine of competition (said to be conducive to creative initiative) and being itself the spontaneous outcome of the freedom/ownership combination which becomes the freedom of owners (the supremacy of the "market"). That extreme expression of the perfectly functional ideology and political culture for capitalism abolishes the concept of solidarity, which not only defines socialist aspirations, but has also been, through history, more important than competition in the construction of the progress of humanity. Then, by deliberately constructing institutional forms specific to a representative and procedural democracy: there is democracy if the procedures it provides for are respected without the necessity of taking into account who the decision will benefit and who it will be detrimental to. The uninominal voting system and the concentration of presidential powers reduce almost to nothingness the chances of development of the authentic popular representation. The French Revolution, being on the contrary aware of those dangers had, for that reason and by opposition, chosen not to elect a "President" (an "elected King"). Representative and procedural democracy, operating in a society under domination of the primacy of the competition among owners favoured the power of money the expression of which took still more extreme forms than in Europe. We know it is impossible to participate in an electoral campaign without having at one's avail enormous amounts of money; we know the law authorises without restrictions financing of campaigns by the wealthiest capitalists, the same rules apply to the press, etc. Procedural democracy reinforces in turn the power of judges, symbolised by the Supreme Court; and we can fear, rightfully so, that power is the most often exercised in a conservative spirit. Those conservative precautions explain the longevity of the Constitution of the United States. Giscard d'Estaing made no mistakes about that, wishing for Europe a constitution which bars thinking about something other than capitalism, giving any aspiration to go beyond it, towards socialism, a characteristic of unconstitutionality, and thus illegitimacy.

In addition, as we know it the democracy under consideration as in Athens – was reserved to White people of European origin. The Founding Fathers were not only in favour of slavery, but they were most often directly slave owners. They have also never thought the Indians deserved better than being exterminated. The successive waves of immigration did the rest: substituting the crystallisation of "communitarianist" consciousness to class political consciousness (I will refer readers here to my book *The Liberal Virus*). The massive depoliticisation of the opinion (materialised among others by the abstention of half the poor citizens) seen of course with envy by the European friends of the United States is the product

of that systematic construction which deserves little the democratic qualifier.

The advances of democracy have always been produced by popular struggles, and those advances were more marked in revolutionary periods.

The dominant ideology associates “democracy” and “market freedom” (i.e., capitalism in fact) and pretends they are indissociable: no democracy without market; so no conceivable democratic socialism. This is here but a tautological ideological formulation – in the vulgar and negative meaning of the term – which supposes reduction of the concept of democracy to the truncated one of the United States. As a fact, the history of actually existing capitalism shows that even that truncated democracy has never been completely endorsed by the peoples.

In the centres of capitalism as such, i.e., in Western and Central Europe and in the United States, the advances of representative democracy have always been the outcome of popular struggles, contained as long as was possible by the tenants of power (the owners). This is an undeniable fact whether as regards the opening of voting rights (universal suffrage is recent), reinforcement of legislative powers in front of the privileges of the Kings, associated aristocrats and the military High Command, resort to “proportional voting”, inclusion within the rights of limits to the liberty of owners (rights to employment, social security, etc.).

At the scale of the system of global capitalism – the true unit in which the development of capitalism moves – the (truncated) democracy/capitalism association is still more visibly without real foundations. In the peripheries integrated in real global capitalism, democracy has never – or almost – been in the agenda of the possible or even thought after for the functioning of capitalist accumulation.

Under these conditions, I will even go as far as saying that democratic advances in the centres, if they have indeed been the outcome of the struggles of the concerned popular classes, have nonetheless been largely facilitated by the advantages of the societies under consideration within the global system. Marx expected important positive effects from universal suffrage: the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism. History has not proved his expectations true because universal suffrage operated in these instances in societies plagued by nationalist/imperialist ideology and the true advantages attached to it (cf. Luciano Canfora, *La démocratie, histoire d'une idéologie*, Seuil 2006).

Popular movements and peoples in struggle for socialism and liberation from imperialist domination have been at the origin of authentic democratic advances, inventing a theory and a practise which associate democracy and social progress. That evolution – superior to capitalism, its ideology and its narrow practise of representative and procedural democracy – was initiated very early, as early as the French Revolution. It expressed itself in a more mature and more radical manner in subsequent revolutions, during the Commune of Paris, the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution and some others (the one of Mexico, Cuba, and Vietnam).

The Mountain Convention not only imposed profound democratic reforms (universal suffrage, abolition of slavery), proclaims their founding principles (equality, solidarity, right to life, to education, etc.), but provides in addition for institutional systems designed to serve them (rejection of the presidential system, etc.). Whichever the limitations of those advanced – which the objective conditions of the economy of that time explain easily – they have nonetheless inspired new hopes, the ones expressed by Babouvian communists. The

Commune of Paris claims heritage of that heritage and takes it further.

The Russian Revolution initiates the great reforms which determine a possible socialist and democratic evolution: land reform, expropriation of capitalists. State control drift will occur later. But it is undoubtedly the Chinese which had enacted the principles of a “popular democracy” (nothing to do with the practice of Eastern Europe “popular democracies”) holder of true social and democratic advances, defining a phase of the long transition to democratic socialism. Abolition of private ownership of land and guarantee of equal access to it by all were its major axis. Setting in place of Communes as collective managers of agricultural production, of small industrial units associated with public services (schools, clinics, etc.) could serve as an efficient institutional framework to progressive democratisation in the management of all aspects of social life. The limitations, inconsistencies and regressions of the Chinese popular democracy have multiple causes, well analysed by Lin Chun (*The transformation of Chinese socialism*, Duke U. Press 2006): the objective contradiction which oppose the three necessary poles of a long-term transition project (national independence, development of the productive forces, progress of the values of equality and socialism), but also – and not less important- absence of the formulation of formal legal guarantees of the rights of the individual and imprecise institutionalisation of the powers. The “mass line” which invites the popular classes formulating their claims, gives them the means to do so, and does not institutionalise the party as a self-proclaimed vanguard which “teaches” the people a truth of which it has the monopoly of the knowledge without having to “learn” from the people, stems indeed from a democratic project. That principle is at the Jericho sides of the thesis according to which theory is brought from outside the movement. The “mass line” does not constitute however a substitute to the institutionalisation of the rights and the organisations.

I am not among people who abstain from severely criticising the authoritarian drifts, if not bloody, which accompanied the revolutionary periods of history. Explaining the reasons underlying them does not justify them and does not reduce their destructive dimension as regards the socialist future they conveyed. Still is it necessary to remind that the bloodiest violence has always been the one exercised by counter revolutions. The white terror of the Versaillais counts its victims by tens of thousands; the number of innocent victims of the Commune does not exceed a hundred. The bloody drifts of Stalinism are not the product of the logic of socialism but the will to stop its progression and substitute it a state control which I qualify as a “capitalism without capitalists”. Still, is there need to remind of the permanent crimes of actually existing capitalism/imperialism, the colonial massacres, the ones associated with “preventive wars” waged in present day by the United States and their allies? Under such conditions, “democracy” when it is not simply barred from the agenda is no more than a masquerade as we see it in Iraq.

Democracy, today in regression around the world can only make progress provided it takes the forms of an institutionalised social democracy.

Capitalism of the oligopolies is the enemy of democracy, were it bourgeois, as I have already said it (chapter 4). Democracy (even in its truncated forms) is not generally, in the present context of globalised capitalism, in progress – real or even potential – but on the contrary in regression, threatened by a lack of legitimacy and credibility. “The market makes all the decisions; the Parliament (when it does exist) makes none”. In addition the war led “against terror” serves, as we know it, as a pretext for curtailing democratic rights for the biggest benefit of plutocracy, new form of the one of the financial bourgeoisie of senile capitalism.

The peoples run then the risk of being attracted by the illusion of “identity” (para ethnic and/or para religious) entrenchment, by essence antidemocratic, which confines them in a deadlock.

Everywhere, even in very different conditions according to whether we are in the centres or the peripheries of contemporary globalised capitalism, the challenge is the same: going beyond both capitalism and representative democracy, in other words, adopting radical positions in those two indissociable directions constitutes the condition of democratic progress.

I will then enumerate some possible general propositions which will enable progress in that direction:

(i) Adoption of charters of rights (national and international charters, specific charters relating to defined areas such as the rights of women, peasants, workers’ organisations, the management of public services, of state-owned and private enterprise, etc.) which dare challenge the sacrosanct dimension of ownership, assert primacy of the values which associate liberty and equality, development and social progress; and of course the formulation of necessary means for those charters not to remain in a state of lip service.

(ii) Reinforcement of the powers of elected parliaments, adoption of the principle of the proportional voting system, abolition of presidential systems should be given high priority in the programmes of a political left-wing dedicated to giving back democracy its lost meaning.

(iii) Opening up of spaces of popular and democratic management in all areas of social services, production units, municipal management and the conduct of struggles to make their legitimacy acknowledged by the authorities.

(iv) Rehabilitate full respect of the nations’ sovereignty, knowing there can be no “supranational democracy” if democratic aspirations are violated at the level of States (which is the case in the European Union). Sacrificing possible progress of the more advanced peoples in their struggles in the name of a “long-term” advantage, which ever one, within big regional blocks is not acceptable because achievement of actual advances in one or many countries can have bandwagon effect on the others, whereas alignment on the “requirements” of the regional union is almost always alignment on the least advanced. Operating that choice is in fact making prevail the dominant interest for which “the global opening up” of markets is of a decisive importance over the ones of the popular classes.

The challenges facing a radical programme of the proposed model are certainly considerable. Beyond the variety of concrete situations, we can identify three sets of major difficulties:

- In the countries of the periphery the challenge can only be won if for a long period of transition (of secular type) the political systems of popular democracy succeed in combining three objectives: safeguard and reinforcement of national independence in an international multi-polar system based on a negotiated globalisation, unavoidable acceleration of the development of productive forces without which it is vain to speak about poverty eradication and the construction of a balanced multi-polar world, assertion of the growing place of socialism and equality in particular. That challenge concerns three quarters of humanity. But if meeting it determines parallel progression of the democratisation of society, in reverse and complementary sense, it seems to me difficult in present times to reach a development worthy

of that name (i.e., accelerated, social, if not socialist, reinforcing national independence) by means of “enlightened despotism”. No doubt an enlightened autocracy of that kind would be better than obscurantist despotisms, little annoying for imperialism, no doubt there may still exist situations for which we cannot hope much better in the short-term. It seems to me evident however that, what can be obtained in that non democratic political context will rapidly bump into impassable limits.

- Democracy is not a recipe one just needs to adopt. Its construction is an endless process, which makes me prefer the term of democratisation. In fact, that recipe – the multi party system and elections – not only confines into the option of a truncated representative and procedural democracy, reserved to the sole area of the management of political life, and owing to that, perfectly anti-popular in our time of senile capitalism, but also, being associated to economic liberalism, turns into a farcical joke. The recipe deprives of its legitimacy the struggle for democracy. Accepting that solution as “less bad”, confines into a demoralising deadlock, and discourses on “good governance” and “poverty reduction” bring no responses to the destructive effects of liberalism.

It finally seems to me useful to signal the important options to discuss with regards to the methods of struggle capable of successfully advancing in the directions indicated here. That debate is of direct concern for the “movements” of the social Forums.

The present time is characterised by extreme diversity of all natures of social movements of protest and struggle against the devastating effects of the deployment of the dominant strategies in place. But it is as much characterised by great mistrust towards the forms of organisation and struggle of the historic left-wing of the XIXth and XXth centuries, towards their spontaneous propensity of proclaiming themselves as “vanguards” (a term largely rejected today owing to that), and, in response of affirming their identity through methods which often indeed respect the principles of democracy. Those criticisms are largely based on a pertinent critical analysis of what the struggles of the two last centuries were. They must then be seriously taken and inspire creative invention of new forms of organisation and action.

In response to that challenge, many “movements” and militants accept propositions I believe extremely dangerous. Among these I will at least mention:

(i) The discourse on “civil society”: beyond the conceptual blur, what is meant by that term is largely inspired from a model that praises a-politism (and in particular rejection of the parties politics) to the benefit of pretended proximity, grassroots, immediately “useful” action (in reality then without actual capacity of challenging systems of powers seen to be too powerful to be defeated). The method encourages negative evolutions, perpetuating the fragmentation of the movement, if not their transformation into defence “lobbies” for particular interests to the detriment of the general interest. The United States tradition of which Negri revives the appraisal largely inspires the discourse on the “multitude”. It finds its ideological foundation on the over promotion of the “individual”, who is perceived as having become the historic actor of transformation, a role classes and nations would no longer fulfil. That ideology suits the “bobo” (Bohemian-bourgeois) minorities of the opulent West – over represented in the social Forums - , it does not respond to the expectations of the immense masses of the popular classes.

(ii) The communitarianist discourse: a product almost inevitably born from the diversifying of the “origins” of the components of the popular classes (itself produced by the migrations of

the past half century). Largely associated with the weakness of the expressions of the class and citizenship consciousness, the communitarianist ideology, far from promoting maturation of the mentioned forms of consciousness, perpetuates their under development. Here again the tradition which comes from the United States, where it has precisely fulfilled that function of obstacle for the maturation of political class consciousness, is today in great vogue in Europe.

The “movements”’ stagnation, trapped by methods and discourses criticised here, the very limited (often insignificant) successes of the struggles in which they engage, encourages in turn alignment to the thesis of the “less bad choice” to avoid the “worse”. But that choice, knowing the less bad is often little different from the worse, has only one impact: demoralising the popular classes.

In counterpoint, I will make the following propositions:

(i) Organising the convergence within diversity: this implies of course respect of divergence (including independence of the organisations) but also research for platforms for actions in common, capable of promoting convergence. This implies accepting that definition of strategies of action, short-term objectives and longer-term perspectives must be at the centre of the debates; a task to which the World Forum of Alternatives wishes to contribute.

(ii) Rejection of a-politism: reminding that all movements, all struggles are by nature political actions, and that consequently, associating political parties (or, from lack of that, segments of those parties and actors openly present on the grounds of “politics”) must not be rejected but sought for.

(iii) The challenge for all movements, small or large size, as for all revolutionary or reformist political parties are of a same nature: it consists in giving priority to the logic of struggle over the ones of organisation. The last mentioned logic favours timidity, alignment on the “less bad”. The mentioned promote radicalisation of struggles, their will to get to triumph.