

## EUROPE IN SEARCH OF A FUTURE\*

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Must western Europe follow in the footsteps of the United States? Is our future inevitably American? The question was raised, spectacularly, at the end of 1993 during discussions over 'culture' as part of the Gatt negotiations. Must our images, our heroes, our models, even our dreams be shaped by the American media? asked the passionate advocates of the so-called cultural exception. Actually they won the day. Culture, you may recall, was at the last moment removed from the Gatt deal; the European Community was thus able to preserve some quotas on the import of American films. The victory, as could be guessed, was very provisional. Indeed, this *kulturkampf* revealed, as we shall see below, that what is crucial for the independence of western Europe is not so much its capacity to shelter behind protective walls as its ability and will to build a different society.

In a western Europe having rediscovered mass unemployment, the question is now put back on the historical agenda in dramatic fashion. The United States is given as an example to follow by the international establishment. With its 'working poor', its 'labour flexibility', its absence of a national health service and its growing gap between the haves and the have nots, the model may be unattractive, but in the new deregulated world, in which capital can move freely in search of cheap labour, Europe is told that it has no choice. It must now start dismantling its welfare state in earnest.

Such a prospect poses a problem for the Left in western Europe. It may have swallowed a great deal and carried an ideological retreat tantamount to surrender. Yet even this is not enough. To follow the American pattern, to imitate the Democratic Party, the European Left must break its organic links with labour unions, accept the total deregulation of the labour market and the rapid removal of all the social conquests won by the working people in the period of postwar prosperity. The Left would now be allowed into office not as the reformist manager of capitalism but as a tough champion of austerity. The leaders may be eager but, judging by the

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popular protests in Italy provoked by a frontal attack on pensions, they may not be able to deliver.

On the other hand, any attempt to defend the achievements, on which the success and popularity of social-democracy rested, would require a highly radical line and mass mobilisation, breaking altogether with the moderate policy pursued hitherto by the respectful Left. Just to ensure full employment today would demand a total revision of economic and social policies. The left-wing parties, when in office, have contributed to their present predicament, accepting among other things the complete lifting of restrictions on the international movement of capital. The last few years have seen a drastic reduction of the powers of the individual nation states to manage their own economy. A leftish government coming into **office** in Rome or London today would have incomparably less room for manoeuvre than the French Left had – though it did not use it – in **1981**.

Yet, if the medium-sized European nation state can no longer go it on its own, the European Union as such could protect itself and stand up to the United States. I will argue that it will only have the drive to do so if it consciously tries to forge a society fundamentally different from the American. But this issue of the field on which the battle should be waged raises for us another series of problems: does the medium-size nation state still offer the initial terrain for the radical transformation of society and, if it does, how fast must it attract support from other countries, and thus spread, to survive?

Finally, I shall have to admit the rather rhetorical use of the term American to describe our future. The United States is taken in this context as the most advanced (and hopefully the last) stage of capitalism now spreading all over the globe. There is no curse condemning Americans to live for ever in a socially unjust society. All that I will argue is that, as the attack on welfare state capitalism intensifies, it is in western Europe, because of its historical background, that the battle crucial for our historical future will be fought first, at the turn of this millenium.

### *Shaping our dreams*

The struggle for the survival of a European film industry was instructive because it was at once vital and phoney. It was vital because what was at stake was the imposed uniformity of our images and, beyond, of our cultural representation. It was phoney because, while directors, actors, critics and their associates fought for their very existence, the real conflict was between merchants who, when they hear the word culture, reach for their pocket calculators. Behind ~~the~~ high-sounding slogans – resist the American invasion and Joan of Arc to the rescue, on one side, down with protectionism, people have the right to choose, on the other – you could detect the calculations of the accountants. To make matters still more

ridiculous, the Americans talked as if western Europe were some kind of Zhdanovian fortress protected by high walls against the wicked products of Hollywood. In fact, at the time, three-quarters of the film revenue earned within the European Community went to American companies. Audiovisual exports from the US to the EEC amounted to \$4 billion compared with shipments of \$250 million in the opposite direction. What was being questioned was not the dominant position that the American industry had already acquired in the European market. It was Hollywood's inexorable drive towards a quasi monopoly.

Two major obstacles were involved. One was the subsidy granted to the domestic film industry, notably in France. The American objection was that all films were taxed to provide the subsidy, but only French films got it. The television quota system was potentially a more serious hurdle. It was based on a directive known as 'television without frontiers', and provided that a majority of programmes on each television station must originate within the Community (now the European Union). It is this provision which survived as 'cultural goods' were threatened. Actually it was never strictly applied in all the countries. With the expansion of cable, the spread of satellites and Europe's continued deregulation, the powerful vested interests are once again on the offensive.

During the 1993 polemics, Regis **Debray** quoted the words of a Time Warner executive speaking on a French television channel: 'You French are best at making cheese and wine, or in fashion. Filming is our speciality. So let us get on with film-making and you keep on with the cheeses'. **Debray** summed it up, tongue in cheek: 'let us shape the minds and you stick to **stomachs**'.<sup>2</sup> Not so fast. Our collective stomachs are financially too precious to be left to the French, as was shown in the bitter Gatt battles over agriculture. But the control of the mind, the monopoly of the image, is even more important.

The trouble here is that we are not dealing with films as a **form** of art, but with films as merchandise, as a commodity. The United States is better at manufacturing, packaging, advertising and **selling** cultural goods. It has advantages in size and scope, in language and experience. This applies not only to films but to mass-produced TV programmes that, having covered their costs at home, can be dumped abroad at prices the local competition cannot match. Yet what is at stake is more than profits alone. When Rambo is splashed all over China, when the recent **American** soap operas and sitcoms dominate the screens of western Europe and the older versions the poorer half of the Continent, one wonders whether mastery of the image has not become both the instrument and the symbol of leadership in the new world order.

Should Europe copy the Americans in order to resist them? Judging by some of the **European co-productions** aimed at the lowest common **denom-**

inator and dubbed in English so as to broaden the market, the remedy is worse than the disease. Yet, even if the European producers were commercially successful, this would in no way solve our problem, since what matters is the nature of the product and not the language or the nominal nationality of the producer. Universal is owned by Matsushita, Columbia by Sony, Fox by ex-Australian Rupert Murdoch and MGM by Credit Lyonnais, and all this in no way diminishes the extent of American cultural domination. Similarly, the real masters of European TV (like Silvio Berlusconi, the tycoon turned politician, or Martin Bouygues, whose father, with money made on public works, bought France's biggest channel, **TF1**), whatever they may say for immediate commercial gain, have nothing against the American system, on which their fortune rests. By contrast, the real opponents of cultural imperialism have nothing against American art. They are fighting against the commercialisation of creativity, the imposed uniformity, the manufacturing of culture, which American big business has raised to a fine art but of which it is not the only practitioner.

Genuine artists manage to create against the odds. It is easier for writers or painters than for film makers, because less initial outlay is needed. Such genuine creators exist on both sides of the ocean. Whatever their success, they go against the trend of the machine of commercial mass culture, which codifies our desires, stifles our dreams, shrinks instead of widening our consciousness. The 'anti-imperialist' battle is thus our common struggle against commercial conveyor belts and culture treated as a commodity. This dictates the way for European resistance. Since culture will not cease to be a commodity in a world of merchandise, the road to independence leads through a radical transformation of society, a difficult search for a world in which artistic creation will no longer be dominated by the tyranny of the market but will not be subjected to the dictatorship of the state either (a categorical imperative since the Soviet experience).

A tall order, especially with the wind clearly blowing in the opposite direction. In the meantime all we can do is to multiply islands of free creation and pockets of resistance, slow down the advance of the juggernaut of conformity, relying on the gut resistance to GATT culture, to the resistible reign of merchandise. Ultimately, Europe's independence is linked to the nature of its society and this lesson is valid not only for culture.

### *A historic compromise*

One cannot grasp the gravity of the current crisis and the dilemma it sets for social-democracy, taken here **in the** now accepted meaning of reformist management of capitalist society, without looking back, however briefly, at the half century of postwar development in western Europe, with its thirty years of exceptionally fast growth, followed by the two decades of the still

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unfinished restructuring.

The first thirty years will go down in history books as a period of unprecedented expansion and deep change of the social landscape, particularly rapid in countries where the industrial revolution in the 19th century had not gone as far as in Britain or Germany. Those were the years of the vanishing peasantry, with fast rising agricultural productivity and mass migration to town. But this was not enough to satisfy demand: immigrant workers and women joined the labour force en masse. Except in Britain, the national product was rising at an average 5% a year. **Living** standards, measured in material terms, nearly trebled within a generation, as western Europe was catching up with America, copying its pattern of consumption.

The image of Europe during this period of exceptional prosperity is, obviously, too bright. It does not take into account the inequalities of development, the urban overcrowding, the strains and stresses of this social upheaval. The French students' and workers rising of 1968 or the Italian 'Hot Autumn' the year after cannot be understood without the awareness of the deep discontent below the glittering surface of the so-called consumer society. Nevertheless, in terms of material goods and even of social welfare the progress was undeniable. This is why the period can be described, retrospectively, as the golden age of social democracy, taken here in its narrow current meaning. And the scope for reforms within the system was great.

Real wages were rising. Unemployment was kept around 3% of the labour force. A minimum wage was introduced, coupled in many countries with a sliding scale linked to inflation. Some controls were introduced into the labour market. The network of social security spread and a public health system was extended to the whole population. Reformism was the fashion even where the governments were neither Labour nor social-democratic. The **Gaullists** described planning as 'an ardent obligation', while German Christian Democrats talked of a social market economy. Governments were trying to run the economy by Keynesian methods and their propagandists proclaimed that capitalism had found the secret of eternal growth.

The mood was contagious. Towards the end of the period – after Khrushchev's indictment of Stalin and the invasion of Hungary in 1956 and, twelve years later, the entry of Soviet tanks into Prague – when it became plain to everybody that the Soviet Union presented no alternative, even the Communists, led by the Italians, accepted the idea that what was at stake from now on was a further improvement of the system and not its abolition. History, however, has its **ironies**. By the time they had accepted this 'historical compromise'<sup>7</sup>, this *compromesso storico*, the foundations on which it rested had begun to collapse. The mid-seventies actually mark the beginning of a new historical period in which the achievements of social-

democracy come under mounting attack.

**As** if guided by conditioned reflexes, the Left stuck to the centre of the stage. Its protagonist, however, moved sharply to the Right. The years that followed, particularly the 'eighties, saw serious defeats of the labour movement which, so far, has not adjusted itself to the continuing restructuring of the labour force (the shrinking of its strongholds in the mines, in steel, in shipbuilding; the rise of the white collar workers, coupled with the mass inflow of women etc). These were also the years of rapid deregulation, with particular emphasis on the opening of frontiers and the full liberation of capital movements. In western Europe the resulting reduction of the powers of the nation state – hitherto the instrument of Keynesian intervention – was not compensated by any corresponding strengthening of a European state, of a federation with its capital in Brussels.

Finally, this was a period of privatisation, of mounting criticism against the welfare state and, altogether, of a fantastic ideological swing to the Right. Private became beautiful and public nasty, both by definition. Free enterprise and profits acquired a new virtue. So did inequality. Huge salaries and even bigger incomes from investment were first presented as a 'necessary evil', then as the rightful reward. Last but not least those have been the years of a relentless rise in unemployment.

But it is only in the current decade, in the 'nineties, with the long depression that has only now ended, that the crisis of social-democracy has come to a head. For a long time we were told that the restructuring was temporary, that it only affected old industries and that the expanding services would absorb the surplus labour. Now, reality can no longer be concealed: unemployment has come to stay. It may decrease slightly during the boom, but it is much higher at the end of each cycle than it was at the end of its predecessor. At about 12% of the labour force – and the figures for the jobless are everywhere underestimated unemployment is the major preoccupation of the people in western Europe. Yet every suggestion that one should drastically reduce working hours or reorganise society so as to eliminate this calamity are met with the same response from the OECD or the IMF, from the international establishment or from the domestic ones: follow the American example.

### ***A nightmarish model***

What we are now being offered as a model is not some new version of the American dream. Quite the contrary. The United States is given as an example, because the rate of unemployment there is about half the West European average, but the advocates of the American solution do not hide the price that has to be paid. In the USA the gap between the privileged few at the top and the deprived many at the bottom of society is not only big; it has been growing fast in the last twenty years. So has the number of people

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living below the level of subsistence and, having a job is no protection: the 'working poor' are the latest American invention. Throughout the postwar period the country had little social protection by European standards, and even that limited welfare is now being drastically reduced. It is a nightmare rather than a dream that Europe is offered as a model.

Russia and its 'empire of evil' used to be described by the Reaganites as a hell from which there is no exit. Since the collapse of the Berlin wall, it is capitalism, invading the whole planet, that is being painted as omnipresent and eternal. Capital and commodities (though not labour) flowing virtually freely within this global system, Europe allegedly has no choice. It can no longer afford the 'luxury' of a significant minimum wage, of permanent jobs, of a health service for all, of a welfare state instead of charitable institutions. It must conform or collapse, follow in American footsteps because there is no other way out. The fiction of a capitalism with a human face must now be abandoned. Its basic principle is the survival of the 'fittest'. It's back to the asphalt jungle, with charity as an outlet for the bleeding hearts.

The snag for Europe's social-democracy is that this line implies an open offensive against both its myths and its actual achievements, against the very reason for its existence. Admittedly, the social-democratic leaders have in recent years performed a spectacular ideological retreat. On property, profits, equality the Left now accepts ideas that the Right did not dare to proclaim a quarter of a century ago. In countries of open political consensus, like Britain, Maggie Thatcher preached the new gospel and successive Labour leaders learnt to recite a **bowdlerised** version of the same prayer. In the countries of southern Europe, where the Left was supposed to stand for a radical transformation of society, these were the years of "normalisation", of the conversion to consensus politics. **True**, in France, General de **Gaulle** had prepared the ground with the institutions of the Fifth Republic. Yet it took **François** Mitterrand and the Left in office to persuade the French people (provisionally?) that there is no alternative, that society, and therefore life, cannot be radically altered by collective political action. In Spain, Felipe Gonzales performed the same function. But the problem today is no longer the acceptance of the existing system. The difficulty for the respectful Left is that it must combine consensus politics with a frontal attack against the vital interests of the working people. The Italian case, with the sudden rise of TV tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, leaning heavily on Gianfranco Fini, the neo-fascist from whom you would buy a second-hand car, is thus worth examining, because Italy seems to link past and present, the **normalisation** with the attempt of the bourgeoisie to prepare itself for the new phase in European history.

This is not the place to study the specifications of the Italian situation: the yawning development gap between North and South, which explains

the emergence of the League; the weakness of the relatively young state which helps to understand the pervasive nature of corruption; the possession by one tycoon of half the country's television or the presence of a 'fascist with a human face'. Whatever the peculiarities, a big puzzle remains. The capitalist establishment does not particularly like fascism. It calls it to the rescue only if it faces a terrible danger, if society is in total disarray and a radical Left is ready to take over. Nothing of the kind was happening in Italy. The Left was no threat. Its strongest section, the **ex**-Communist PDS (Democratic Party of the Left) would not frighten a fly: during the electoral campaign in March, 1994, it claimed to have the backing of the City, the blessing of Nato, and hailed Aurelio Ciampi, the former governor of the Bank of Italy, as its model statesman.

There are, thus, two possible explanations. One can be called accidental. After the fall of the Berlin wall, the establishment thought it could afford a smooth transition. When it allowed the judges of Milan to act, however, it unleashed a Frankenstein. Hell broke loose and the establishment was compelled to improvise to put the pieces together. Still mistrusting the Left, it put its money on Berlusconi and Fini. But it is already trying to restore a more traditional order. The other explanation postulates that Italy is, possibly, a forerunner, setting the pattern for other countries of western Europe. It assumes that all the changes are advance preparations for potential threats. The establishment knew what austerity measures would have to be introduced, what sacrifices demanded from the poorer sections of the population in order to keep Italy in the top European league, fulfilling the obligations of the Maastricht Treaty. It therefore, decided to introduce in advance an authoritarian regime, including a party ready for anything, if needed. Even if the second interpretation is right, big business may now be shifting positions. Berlusconi's frontal attack on the welfare state, taking pensions as its first target, provoked a massive popular response, strikes and the biggest demo Rome has seen since the war, enough to provoke second thoughts about general strategy.

Italy's rulers must now decide whether they want to take the risk of confrontation or whether they can rely on the Left, essentially the PDS, to get the same medicine absorbed more slowly but without shocks. In more general terms, the west European establishment must choose between class conflict and class collaboration for this new phase of intensified offensive against the conquests won by the labour movement in the postwar period. The leaders of the official Left have hitherto shown an eagerness to work within the system and to prop it up. What they are now being asked to do, however, is qualitatively different. To perform the function the Democratic Party plays in the States, they would have to break and organic ties that still link them with labour unions and disown the heritage on which their postwar success depended. The welfare state now has roots within society,

and the Italian popular response to the open attack against pensions gives an idea of what the resistance might be. True, after his presidential victory Bill Clinton was hailed as hero to be imitated by the Labour Party in Britain, the Socialists in France and the PDS in Italy. The decomposition of the Democratic Party has tempered the zeal of political climbers, particularly in countries, like Germany, where the party links with the labour movement are strongest. Whatever the temptation of office, the leaders of the respectful Left must now be aware of the risks of political suicide.

Yet, to move in the opposite direction and try to defend old conquests against the new offensive would carry the movement well beyond the conceptions of its current leadership. There is no scope now for a moderate defence of the welfare state. Just to stick to the central front, the search for full employment implies a radical revision of the organisation of labour both at the level of the factory, the shop or the office, as that of society at large. To impose it, a mass movement from below would be needed, and it would be rapidly driven to tackle the vital issues that were at least put on the historical agenda in the sixties and then, though unsolved, were simply pushed aside: what kind of growth? for what purpose? in whose interest? within which social, international and ecological context? Inventing what **forms** of democracy at all levels so that people should really take part in shaping their work and their fate?

Even if we assume, in a moment of optimism, that the movement is boldly trying to tackle such questions, can it find answers within the now bursting frontiers of the nation state?

### *Europe and the Nation State*

To argue that a nation state the size of Britain, France or Italy can no longer provide the ground on which the radical transformation of society is at least initiated is to abdicate; it is to rule out such a transition for a forthcoming historical period. The European Union, after all, is not, or rather not **yet**, a state with power to be seized in Brussels, while it is idle to expect the mood of the people to mature simultaneously in all the member countries. I nevertheless disagree with the left-wingers who pleaded in favour of the Maastricht Treaty, arguing that Europe will be the field for the crucial class struggles of tomorrow. If you don't fight against the established order on your home pitch, you will not be magically radicalised by the transfer of the confrontation to a bigger ground.

But you will not become radical either simply by sticking to narrow frontiers. There was a time when in the British Labour Party it was enough to be 'anti-European' to have a leftish reputation. The attitude was the more absurd since it was obvious that the policies of a prospective Labour government would be too mild to clash **with** the liberal framework of the then Common Market. The conversion to 'Europe' of a Labour Party

drifting further and further to the Right is thus natural. The debate over the capitalist integration of western Europe is losing at least some of its ambiguity.

The Left-wing critics of the Maastricht Treaty (or of Nafta) must be extremely careful to distinguish their opposition from that of the jingoist challengers of the Treaty. They have to stress that their opposition is essentially tactical, that sovereignty is not one of their shibboleths, that they will be ready tomorrow to reach agreements with the unions or workers' councils of Alcatel, Siemens or Fiat, whereas they reject the deal reached by their bosses to-day. They must emphasise their internationalism not only to preserve the Left's principles and identity, but also for strategic reasons. If the nation state still provides scope for initial action, it does not do it for long. The breathing space must be counted in weeks and months rather than years. A left-wing government coming into office and trying to introduce policies running against the trend would be under immediate attack in this deregulated environment, where almost all money is potentially hot money. Therefore, it must have an internationally minded platform (involving, for instance, a reduction of working hours, the transformation of the Social Chapter in the Treaty into an instrument of genuine defence of workers' rights, a programme for the reshaping and strengthening of the welfare state, and so on), one that can mobilise the working people in the other member countries, allowing it to extend the confrontation from the national to the European terrain.

Historians who examine our age may be puzzled by the one-sided nature of the struggle so far. The Left dropped any reference to the class nature of the conflict at the very moment when the Right, headed by Reagan and Thatcher, embarked on an episode of naked class war. Similarly, while employers have been busy building a Europe of big business, designed to stimulate their profits, the labour unions have been paradoxically parochial. Nobody would now envisage a trade union limited, say, to **Lombardy** or Yorkshire or Michigan. A purely national union in Europe is fast becoming equally absurd. The differences in wages and social benefits between countries within the European Union are such that the employers don't even have to move overseas to start their strategy of the lowest common denominator. The Left, if it wants to survive, has internationalism thrust upon it. Necessity, alas, is not always the guarantee of a progressive solution.

Since a Europe *from below* is unlikely to be built in the immediate future, is it impossible to envisage an independent European Union built *from above* by the capitalist **state**? I shall have to give the reasons for my negative answer in shorthand. For unification you need a unifier, a country which could perform the role Prussia had played within the German **Zollverein**. There were three such candidates. First, the United States,

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which pushed Europe towards integration, then decided it would be a dangerous rival and gave up. Next came General de Gaulle, whose dominant figure concealed for a time the fact that he had the trappings of power, not its substance. Finally, there was and there is Germany itself. As long as it was divided and considered that it needed an American nuclear umbrella to protect it, Germany could not be the leader of a coalition standing up to the United States. This handicap should have vanished together with the Berlin wall. But, though the united Germany is undoubtedly the crucial power in Europe, the Europe is not moving beyond the American orbit. The desire to see the United States assuring the capitalist world order seems stronger than the inner contradiction. This is why the old slogan stressing the alternative – United Socialist States of Europe or Europe of the United States – remains valid for the foreseeable future.

Americanisation is a bit of a misnomer. In a sense, ever since the war, Europe, emerging from ruins, has been 'catching up with America', imitating its pattern of consumption and, hence, its way of life. **americanisation** here means the form of exploitation destined by the United States for the privileged parts of the world as capitalism spreads across the globe. In other words, to reject our American future is to question the inevitability of capitalism.

Actually, it is nowhere written that the United States is bound to be capitalist for ever. True, there was a time when one assumed that the break with the old system would first occur in countries like France and Italy, with their big Communist parties and a radical tradition. Nobody would now venture such orders of priority. The odd lands out have been 'normalised'; and it is in countries where its link with the labour movement is strongest, like Germany, that the Left may find it most difficult to accept the new strategy. Besides, with the economy becoming really global, to think of 'socialism in a single country' becomes totally absurd.

In the current conjuncture, however, because of its social democratic developments and left-wing heritage now coming under attack, western Europe is more likely in the next few years to provide the state for a crucial confrontation. It is there that the regime is getting close to the end of its tether. It is there that rising unemployment shows the basic contradiction between our technological genius and the absurdity of our social **organisation**. It is there, as mentioned earlier, that the questions – raised but unanswered in the 'sixties about the nature of our production, the purposes of our consumption, the pattern of our social organisation – that these questions will have to be tackled.

**Rimbaud** wrote about the need to reinvent love. Socialism, too, will have to be reinvented or, rather, brought up to date to meet the needs of our

epoch. Nobody now thinks in terms of seizure of the Winter Palace. The best one can hope for is the beginning of a movement from below destined for a distant seizure of power. Even if people are no longer fooled by the idea that history has come to a stop, they must still be convinced once again that life can be altered by collective action. To begin with, the protection of past conquests will require wide coalitions and defensive tactics. Yet, if the defence is not to lead to surrender, it will have to turn into an offensive, offering alternative solutions. Thus, it will be difficult to rally the people for long around the welfare state as it is. It will be necessary to suggest a different version, run by the people and in their interests, and therefore the vision of a different, self-managed society. All this will take time. Yet simultaneously, we are racing against the clock, because Nature abhors the void and, if the Left does not provide rational solutions, the Extreme Right may well usher in the reign of Unreason. From **Antwerp** with its Vlaams Blok to Rome with its neo-fascists, the ghosts from the past remind us of the dangerous future.