

National Question in Europe Today-II

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Two sets of movements that have risen in Europe, recently most visibly and strongly in France, are indicative of the social tensions and ethnic conflicts produced within an advanced industrial economy in the context of globalisation.

Outsourcing, that is, the export of mainly unskilled and semi-skilled labour but also skilled labour and R&D activities to the low wage 'developing' economies of the Third World is creating unemployment in the First World. But within the centres of world capitalism is now also the periphery—the second or third generation migrants from Third World countries, who are harder hit than the 'native' whites by the ensuing unemployment. If average officially declared unemployment is around 10% in France, and it is much higher than this among its youth, it is more than 40% among the migrant youth, the Africans from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa and the Arabs, who are often school drop-outs.³⁰ It was this migrant youth corralled in suburban ghettos of cities and towns of France who rioted in 2005. It is not just unemployment, it is the living in degraded conditions without adequate amenities and facilities and the daily racist discrimination and humiliation meted out to them that were the trigger. Such treatment is also the lot of a large section of German Turks, particularly after the reunification, and the very miniscule number of Afro-Germans in Germany. The reason why they are specially subjected to abuse and humiliation is the colour of their skin and their religion. Other east or southern European migrants face discrimination but not on the same level and in the same way due to their more acceptable skin colour, religion (Christianity) and country of origin. Those coming from North or sub-Saharan Africa are looked down upon more and treated like scum because their countries of origin were earlier French/German colonies.

A second wave of unrest is coming largely from the European youth and workers. In Germany, students have agitated against the introduction of tuition fees in hitherto free higher education institutions and in the early part of 2005 there have been strikes in a number of industries demanding higher wages. In France, the youth took to the streets in March 2006 to protest a new labour law, against which a nationwide general strike was organised. This law with its hire and fire clauses was claimed to resolve the problem of rising unemployment in France, but this was not considered an acceptable solution. So far, there has been no overt unity between the migrants and the French students and workers - both of whom are hard hit by neo-liberal policies of the French government. The trade unions have not overtly championed the migrant workers and youth and in fact throughout Europe have either connived in or failed to adequately counter discriminatory racist practises. This is by and large particularly true of socialist

and left trade unions, though an objective basis for unity against the state and its policies certainly exists.

While joining the European Union helped some countries like Portugal and Spain in increasing their economic growth rates and employment levels (while incidentally simultaneously increasing regional disparities), the same has not been the case in East Germany or in a country like Greece. There the gap between the rich and the poor has been a growing one. While the banking and shipping sectors have witnessed booming profits the number of people below the poverty line has increased. The privatisation, austerity programmes and new labour laws introduced by the government after being inducted into the EU in 2004 have led it to become a target of attack by workers. In December 2005, a militant group calling itself 'Revolutionary Struggle' bombed the Finance Ministry in Athens to protest its "economic terrorism."³¹

In the Polish elections of 2005 a party (Law and Justice Party) was voted to power that espouses nationalism rather than European identity. It has been voted to power because of the people's aversion to any further neo-liberal reforms as these have obviously worsened the poverty levels. In 1988, only 4% of Poland's people were poor - defined as having an income of less than £ 1.25 a day. Now around 17% are said to be below the poverty line.³²

In general, the majority of the population of the former Soviet bloc countries has not benefited from the liberalisation and privatisation process - a mandatory condition for EU entry. For most of the people in these countries the transition to market economies has meant a big fall in living standards and conditions and unemployment is widespread. This enables super exploitation of the labour force in these countries, which either migrates to work in the advanced industrial West European countries or is employed by corporations setting up shop in their own countries. In both cases wage rates are lower than the standard West European levels. Spending on healthcare, education and social welfare generally continues to be slashed, while after joining NATO the defence expenses of these governments have gone up in order to modernise and adapt the respective armed forces to the demands of NATO and EU membership.³³ All this has led to the charge of the Latin Americanisation of Eastern Europe, that is, the making of Eastern Europe into Western Europe's backyard.

Neoliberal policies are leading to strike and other militant working class actions both among the 'white' as well as 'coloured' migrant workers and other affected sections. Regional inequalities within nations are also growing and are giving rise to the revival of older struggles for national liberation on the one hand and to new sub-national regional movements for greater autonomy or even separation within the nations of the European Union. Spain, for instance, has seen the revival of the long-standing Basque struggle for national liberation. The armed separatist group ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* meaning 'Basque Homeland and Freedom') is demanding the creation of a separate state within

the European Union taking in the Basque region of Navarre in Spain and parts of South-West France.

Catalonia province in Spain has also lobbied for and been granted greater autonomy by the Spanish government. This demand for greater autonomy was made on the basis of Catalan leaders claiming a national status for Catalonia albeit within Spain. The autonomy law passed in 2005 gives the Catalanian government headquartered in Barcelona the power to change laws passed by the Spanish Parliament and a status of peer in its dealings with the Central government. Both the Basque region and Catalonia are the wealthier, more industrialised parts of Spain and are very much linked to the wider European economy. In the case of both regions an important question within the struggles is that of retaining greater wealth for development within the region through local control over natural resources and over tax revenue in the place of centralised control over these through the government in Madrid.³⁴

The banned hardline pro-independence 'Batasuna,' the political wing of ETA, opposed the European Constitution which it sees as defending a "Europe of states", which ignores the reality of peoples and their languages and denies the right of self-determination to the Continent's peoples. The more moderate Catalan nationalists supported the EU Constitution under the condition that Catalan be recognised as an official language.

Other regional movements that have revived recently in Europe are those in Flanders, Scotland, Brittany, Corsica and Wales. Ethno-regionalism/nationalism has been a by-product of globalisation. Old-style centralised monolingual and monocultural homogeneous national unity is being questioned as integration into the globalised economy takes place on a regional, sub-national basis. As a result not only are some earlier sub-national regionalist movements revived, new cross-border economic regions are formed in Europe as across the globe, which may demand independent, autonomous political status later on leading to redefinition and redrawing of borders. Creating such 'euro regions' in border areas between Germany and its neighbouring countries of Poland and the Czech Republic, for instance, is helping in integrating these territories on a colonial/neocolonial basis for the benefit of German capital. Often these cross-border areas are territories that have historically already been colonised by German settlers. All these sub-nationalist and regionalist tendencies are part of the fissiparous, centrifugal tendencies predominating worldwide as a result of globalisation and the extremely uneven development that it is fostering.³⁵

In Italy, as in other advanced industrialised countries, strong regional sentiments for greater decentralisation have largely been seized by the rightist forces and parties. Regionalisation in this sense and from their perspective, not from the perspective of facilitating greater grassroots democracy, gives greater powers to states and regions and becomes instrumental in increasing inequalities between regions. It is also used as an instrument by corporates to break up nationally organised trade unions and integrated them into the regions, which makes them more amenable to corporate controls and demands.

In Germany, during a strike of hospital workers in March 2006 for higher wages and against an increase in the number of working hours the main public service trade union, *Verdi*, accepted negotiations within the framework of the municipalities and Laender (the federal states) breaking the unity of the national collective contract and opening up the path to the undermining of the union and its link to the confederation of German trade unions (DGB). The intention of the ruling elites, and the trade union bureaucrats and bourgeoisie are very much part of it, is to break up the traditional system of institutionalised collaboration of the trade unions as social partner of industry and management. Collective agreements valid on a national level are no longer welcome by employers and governments in a situation of intensified competition between states for industry. If negotiations happen on regional levels it is easier for the employers to enhance the process of flexibilisation of the labour force that has already begun.

Breaking with the tradition of national level collective bargaining must also be seen in the background to new moves, not just in Germany but in some other West European countries like Italy and Spain, to give greater powers to the constituent states in a number of specific areas-such as education, taxation, health and immigration-through a reform of the federal system. It is the 'wealthier' states that have been pushing for such reforms because they want to decouple themselves from poorer neighbours and abolish the existing compensatory arrangements. In Germany, where such a reform has been passed by parliament, it is the eastern European states and the western states with high rates of unemployment and lower standards of living that will suffer and where the rate of impoverishment will increase. In Italy, where such projected reforms were rejected through a general referendum, it would have been the southern Italian states which would have suffered the most.

As a whole the European Union still lacks clear positions on the question of regionalisation within its component nation-states. This is because such national or sub-national struggles touch upon the very sensitive issue of political borders of nations and they embody the threat of secession endangering the national integrity of states. The European Union promulgated the Convention for the Protection of Minorities and the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, which cover some aspects of the national question in Europe, but even these have not been signed by all European Union states although the concessions on this question are very minor. For instance, the languages of recent immigrants from other states are excluded from such protection. France is an important European Union country that has not signed either the Convention or the Charter.

PROSPECTS

The European Union as it is presently constituted is a concert of capitalist states where West German capitalism is striving to play a leading role. The question of a full-time professional army that can be deployed independently and within the framework of NATO and/or UN is being raised in its parliament in order to better

enable it to fulfil such a role. The Union is a regional bloc, currently mainly in economic terms, and is in both rivalry and collusion with the other major capitalist-imperialist states, the US and Japan for markets and resources. France has so far chosen to go along with and has supported Germany because it believes that in this way it can also play a dominating political role within this bloc having the advantages of being a nuclear power (which Germany is not), and already having a seat on the UNSC (which Germany does not have but aspires towards).³⁶

Germany's objective, sought to be realised by Hitler at the time of the Second World War, is "European unity" under German domination. All the crimes that were committed by Hitler in Europe were committed in the name of "European unity". [Remember the occupations of France and of Belgium (as a base for operations against England), the conversion of Poland and Bohemia-Moravia (non-German territories in the then Czechoslovakia) into colonies, the annexation of Austria and so on and so forth.]³⁷ Now again Germany is seeking expansion—this time mainly eastwards and in alliance with the West European powers and in collusion with the US. It has as its target zones Turkey and even Russia. The final goal is a European federation or confederation with its own armed forces (independent of NATO, which is under American high command) as an alternative to the ruling neoliberal Washington Consensus* in the world's economic institutions.³⁸

In a manifesto³⁹ calling for a 'Renaissance of Europe,' Habermas, a leading West German intellectual, who has been campaigning for a European Germany from the social-democratic perspective, emphasized the need for Europe to bring its full weight to bear at the international level and within the UN in order to balance the hegemonic unilateralism of the US.

Western Europe, according to him, has the moral basis to take on such a role. It has presented a Third Way, an alternative set of concepts for consolidating Atlantic/OECD hegemony over the populations and states of the world. This includes the use of the rule of law rather than brute military force for upholding the hegemony of metropolitan capitals. International law and treaty obligations are to be used to refashion and subjugate domestic law so as to provide predictable environments for EU capitals. This has been the approach within the framework of the EU, and within that of the WTO. The EU has used the concepts of Human Rights, Democracy and Good Governance (HRDGG) diplomacy to push forward its economic imperialism agenda. When target states resist EU economic policy goals they can be hit by HRDGG diplomacy, and if they are compliant on the economic-political front they are let off lightly even if they do not satisfactorily comply with HRDGG norms.⁴⁰ This is so even as key EU member states themselves hardly conform to their proclaimed ideals of democracy and human rights within their own borders, and historically also have often transgressed these norms at home and abroad in their colonies.⁴¹

The constitution of the EU itself, has been very undemocratically and bureaucratically done. It is business lobbies [and related corruption (bribe scandals) to some extent] that play a decisive role in the functioning of the European Union. Multi-party elections are projected as the signature of democracy and are made into a pre-condition for entry and participation in the EU, but elections are by and large a farce and a ritual because all the parties concerned support only one basic neoliberal agenda and hence are not able to present any fundamental choices or alternatives to the voters resulting in a deep divide between rulers and ruled and voter apathy. In a neoliberal economy the state is increasingly indifferent or repressive towards the human needs of its citizens. By creating a division between the centres and the peripheries within the European Union through destroying the national economies of the East European countries the dominating countries within it have achieved more or less the same results as fascism had attempted in an earlier era: huge transfers of workers and farmers, forced low wage labour, privileges for members of the dominating nations, the razing of entire villages. Only this time it is being done legally, in the name of democracy and good governance while demonising the Stalinist Communist era in these countries.

According to Habermas, among other things, Europeans still prefer the ethics of “more social justice” as against the (North American) individualistic ethics of competition that accepts extreme social inequality. An EU with such an alternative vision of global and domestic politics regulated by law and powerful international institutions (global governance) would embody a project that counters US hegemony and unilateralism. To accomplish these goals in any realistic manner, however, the EU has to acquire greater qualities of state, particularly greater military power. Only a common and independent foreign, security and defence policy would make Europe into a ‘superpower’, a global player of first rank.

A major point of criticism against such a vision of EU role on the world stage is that to effectively balance US hegemony, considerable financial investment in the coordination and modernisation of European military forces is required. That would have the paradoxical effect of draining resources away from the welfare state, which is held out in the Manifesto as a distinctive characteristic of Europe vis-a-vis North America. Neo-liberal policies have also in any case been destroying the welfare state and deregulating labour markets as the only way to remain competitive on the global markets.⁴¹

In reality Euro imperialism, turning on a Franco-German axis, offers only another version of the dominance of the richest capitalist countries over the rest of the globe in the 21st century. The only difference is that such a project of hegemony by the G-7 would have to be based upon global collegial bodies within which the leading capitalist states would haggle over the precise content of the various legal regimes to be imposed upon other countries. The West European states would want the (American) use of aggressive military force to be under the discipline of the UNSC.

Thus the West European concept of a new world order would also be a patently coercive one and designed to transform domestic jurisdictions, politics and economies throughout the world in greater alignment with imperialist interests. But there would be an attempt to be different from the North American model by trying to legitimate as far as possible all the coercive instruments within the realm of jurisprudence.⁴²

However, any such plan at counter-hegemony meets with overt hostility and resistance on the part of the US. It has many strategies in place to counter Franco-German initiatives towards greater political autonomy from the US. Pressure is applied via the many interlinkages of US capital with the capitals of these countries. Then there are its financial and political linkages with those East European countries that would wish to resist German hegemony in Europe as a result of previous bitter experiences. Finally, there are the possibilities of currency manipulations that weaken the Euro and the Euro monetary zone through devaluation of the dollar making the European Union less competitive on the world market. The US is also trying to beat back Russian, Chinese and European influences in Central Asia by trying to control the energy belt from the Middle East through to the Caspian Sea. This is an exclusivist project: it entails the exclusion of strong West European, Russian or East Asian influence in the region. US control over the energy belt would give it an enormously powerful lever for re-subordinating both Europe and East Asia.⁴³

It is not clear whether the inter-imperialist rivalries are as major a force today as in the pre-Second World War period considering the increase in the degree of transnational merging of the major corporations within Western Europe and between Europe and the US. Although currently there is a greater defence of national interests against cross-border mergers and takeovers and new trade barriers are coming up particularly in Poland, Spain and France, the European Union has certainly developed into a formidable economic region that includes advanced capitalist/imperialist states and their colonies/neocolonies. So far the inclusion within the Union has been confined to white, Christian nations, though this may change. The nation-state has given way in large measure to supra-national institutions.

This has led to a crisis of the state and the democratic system as monetary policies are being regulated and controlled not by the governments, but by private financial and banking interests, who are the creditors. According to Article 104 of the Maastricht Treaty, the central banks cannot be forced to provide credit to the government and monetary policy cannot be used as a means of state intervention in the broad interests of society, that is, to mobilise production or to generate employment as it was the case in the post-Second World War period. Real political power is now with the creditors rather than with the elected representatives. And across the political spectrum all political parties have a consensus regarding the necessity of carrying out neo-liberal reforms in

the economy, even if this hurts citizens badly in terms of economic stagnation and increasing unemployment.⁴⁴

The anti-globalisation activists and ordinary workers, farmers, students, immigrants and other citizens who are out on the streets in the metropolises very often would like a restoration of the sovereignty of the nation-state. They are nationalists, sometimes even ultra nationalists. However, restoring the full sovereign power of their respective nation-states within the parameters of globalisation is not possible as the global corporations require the fragmentation and destruction of the domestic economy, particularly and first of all of the economies of the so-called developing countries. The poverty that is thus created in the Third World is needed in order to make them into cheap labour reserves for First World capital, but it also impacts back on the economies of the advanced capitalist world. There is a contraction in the demand for their goods, and this in turn affects economic growth and employment in the OECD countries. The outsourcing of jobs from high-wage to low-wage economies also contributes to a decline in consumption in the First World as a result of unemployment and stagnant, even falling real wages. In its turn this impacts on the ability of the Third World to sell goods to a shrinking Western market. On a world-scale there is a contraction of spending, which leads to a global level stagnation of the world economy. Production and consumption become largely production of luxury goods for a small segment of high-income consumers spread in enclaves throughout the world. As income disparities increase dynamic growth gets concentrated in the luxury goods economy, whereas there is a contraction in needs based consumption, in fact there is an increase in starvation deaths and suicides.⁴⁵

Under such conditions the reality of national oppression and the slogan for sovereignty and national self-determination are relevant not only in the case of colonial/neocolonial countries, but also in the case of some of the advanced capitalist countries and regions within them. For instance, even in the UK there is a feeling that the country has become a puppet state of the US. The North Americans control the UK, its foreign and domestic policies. According to Tony Benn, who has been an MP, Cabinet Minister and foremost voice of the left within the Labour Party: “We don’t have our own nuclear weapons - the Americans lend them to us, and we can’t use them independently” “even if you wanted simple things like jobs, trade union rights, no means test for pensioners, no student loans, no privatisation and no war—even if you wanted those things, for the US you’d be a rogue state.”⁴⁶ Even Germany regained full sovereignty from the allied powers only after reunification in 1990.

However, it cannot simply be a question of restoring the status quo ante as these Western nations have been and continue to be oppressors of other nations. It is not a progressive solution to want to return to an era of capital-labour partnership, that is, to the model of a social welfare state. This was a model that nurtured a labour aristocracy at the centres of the world capitalist economy on

the backs of the labouring peoples of the peripheries. The nation-state is facing a crisis in Western Europe today, but it will have to broaden itself to include the periphery on an equal basis. The question of national sovereignty cannot be solved within a narrow eurocentric/francocentric or anglocentric framework. It must be taken up and resolved within the context of a general application of the principle of self-determination of nations - applicable to the nations of East Europe as well as to the neocolonial nations of the Third World. It has to be on the basis of internal equality and non-discrimination against migrants from these countries and be directed against the racist, divide and rule politics of global capital that benefits from this racism and in this way perpetuates national oppression.

In the context of the European Union, if the historically rival nation-states are able to achieve a united Europe overcoming nationalist barriers, it does have the advantage of precluding wars among these nation-states, which have caused devastation in Europe and elsewhere. But for this unity to have real meaning it must be combined with free self-determination and national development for each of the peoples and nations constituting it and not just for some. The social aspect must also be included in the course of achieving national liberation. National liberation must include the class aspect, the anti-capitalist aspect and the goal should be that of a free and voluntary unification in a Socialist European Federation, which was also Lenin's dream and expectation at one point of time in history. But this Socialist Federation of European states must have an internationalist perspective of becoming part of a world federation of socialist states and must act accordingly. Such unification will be the difficult product of whole historical epochs. And ultimately with the withering away of states there could be a withering away of the borders between states without the withering away of national cultures.⁴⁷

Notes and References :

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* *The Washington Consensus refers to trade liberalisation and privatisation policies initiated in 1990 by the IMF and the World Bank with the consensus of the US Treasury Department. These reforms were meant to open up the markets of the so-called developing countries to penetration and exploitation by the multinational corporations by lowering tariffs and other barriers to the free movement of goods across borders.*

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9. Peter Gowan, op. cit., p. 8.
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13. See Susan Watkins, op. cit, p. 8
14. Ibid., p 9.
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27. See for e.g., Michael Dusche: Discourses on Multiculturalism in Continental Europe, paper presented at the International Seminar on Multiculturalism in India and Europe, held at the School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi on 6 and 7 Nov. 2003. See also Jutta Limbach: Making Multi-culturalism Work. Speech delivered at the Canadian Embassy in Berlin on August 3, 2005. Source: sightandsound.com
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34. Report in *The Hindu*, Nov. 4, 2005. (Source: Associated Press).
35. Samir Amin: Capitalism in the Age of Globalisation. The Management of Contemporary Society. 1997.
36. See Peter Gowan, 2003, op. cit., p. 19.
37. See Jean van Heijenoort writing as Marc Loris: The National Question in Europe. 1942. Reprinted in *Fourth World Bulletin*. Spring/Summer 1996. (Available on the Internet).
38. See Jiirgen Habermas: Towards a United States of Europe, *The Standard*, 10 March, 2006. See also Guy Verhofstadt's Manifesto for the 'United States' of Europe (available on the Internet).
39. "Unsere Emeuerung. Nach dem Krieg: Die Wiedergeburt Europas." *Frankfurter Allgemein Zeitung*, May 31, 2003. The text, written by Habermas and signed by a number of other European intellectuals (not including East European ones) such as Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco and so on appeared simultaneously in a number of European dailies.
40. Peter Gowan, 2003, op. cit., pp. 28-29.
41. France under Napoleon had exterminated a large number of blacks in Haiti and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean to put down a ferocious uprising in Haiti at the start of the 19th century. New docile slaves from Africa were imported to replace those killed. Incidentally, many French officers had refused to take part in the massacres. Germany in addition to being responsible for the holocaust was also responsible for the killing of 65,000 Herero persons in what is now called Namibia at the time of their uprising against colonial rule in 1904-07. The Belgians were responsible for genocidal plundering in Congo and of course British atrocities in India are too well known to bear repetition.
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43. Peter Gowan, 2003, op. cit., p. 30.
44. Ibid., pp. 23-24.
45. See Michel Chossudovsky, The Globalisation of Poverty. Impacts of IMF and World Bank Reforms. Other India Bookstore, Madhyam Books and Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology. 1997, pp. 24-25.
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