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Portugal: What is at stake

This is not a Portuguese, but rather a global, phenomenon, although it manifests itself differently in each country. I am talking about the right's unwonted aggressiveness whenever and wherever its domination is challenged, and which is expressed in abusive language and in tactics that go beyond the limits of democracy: in the manipulation of fear to erase hope, falsehoods proclaimed as sociological truths, lack of emotional restraint in the exchange of ideas, etc. By "right" I mean the combined social, economic and political forces that subscribe to the global goals of neoliberal capitalism and to everything this entails for national policies in terms of growing social inequalities, the destruction of the welfare state, control of the media and the narrowing of the plurality of the political spectrum. Whence comes this radicalism on the part of politicians and commentators who until recently appeared to be moderate and pragmatic, sounding like realists with ideas or idealists without illusions?

Portugal is now entering phase two of the global implementation of neoliberalism. At the global level, the neoliberal economic, social and political model is defined by the following traits: precedence of market logic in the regulation not just of the economy but of society as a whole; privatization of the economy and liberalization of international trade; demonization of the state as regulator of the economy and a promoter of social policies; concentration of global economic regulation in two multilateral institutions, both of them in the hands of European/North American capitalism (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), to the detriment of the UN agencies that used to oversee the global picture; deregulation of financial markets; replacement of state economic regulation (hard law) by self-regulation controlled by multinational companies (soft law). Since the fall of the Berlin Wall the model has presented itself as the only possible alternative with regard to social and economic regulation, its ultimate goal being to turn domination into hegemony – in other words, to lead the very social groups who are harmed by the model into thinking it was all in their best interests. In fact, the model did extremely well over the last thirty years, namely by being adopted by two major social-democratic parties in Europe (Tony Blair's British Labour

Party and Gerhard Schröder's German Social-Democratic Party) and by presiding over the logic of European institutions (both the Commission and ECB).

But every social model is subject to contradictions and resistance. This one is no exception, and in fact its consolidation has suffered a few setbacks. The model is not fully consolidated. For example, the Transatlantic Partnership has yet to become a reality, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership may fail to do so. When confronted with the fact that the model is not yet fully consolidated, its protagonists (with financial capital hovering in the background) tend to react more or less savagely, depending on their assessment of the imminent danger. Here are a few examples. There was the emergence of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), aimed at introducing a measure of nuance into the model of economic globalization. There has been violent reaction, with Brazil and Russia in particular being the target of intense neutralization policies. The Greek crisis, which would have been called a minor crisis back when the present model had not gained dominance in Europe, was considered a threat because of the possibility of its spreading to other countries. The humiliation of Greece was the beginning of the end of the EU as we know it. The possibility of a US presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders, claiming to be a socialist (*i.e.*, a European social democrat) does not pose any serious danger for the moment, and the same may be said of Jeremy Corbyn's election as general secretary of the Labour Party. As long as they are not viewed as a danger, they will not be the object of violent reaction.

What about Portugal? The President of the Republic's intemperate reaction to the proposal for a leftist government led by the Socialist Party and with the participation of the Left Bloc and the Communist Party seems to indicate that the neoliberal model – which became firmly entrenched in Portugal over the last four years – views this political alternative as a serious danger, hence the violent reaction. We should keep in mind that what we have here is merely the semblance of ideological polarization. Portugal's Socialist Party is one of the most moderate social democratic parties in Europe. So what we are really talking about is the defense at all costs of vested interests, whether long established or on the rise. The neoliberal model is opposed to the state for only as long as it is unable to hijack the state, because it most definitely needs the latter to ensure concentration of wealth and to hijack the highly profitable business opportunities thus generated. Let us bear in mind that, according to the model, politicians are economic players whose stint in politics is crucial in terms of looking after their own economic interests.

But the attempt to hijack the state reaches way beyond the political system. In fact, it has to encompass every single existing institution. For example, there are institutions of paramount importance, such as the Court of Auditors, which oversees multi-million business deals. It is equally imperative to hijack the justice system and see to it that it uses double standards: severity when investigating and punishing crimes allegedly committed by politicians on the left, and benign negligence with regard to crimes committed by those on the right. There are historical precedents for such hijacking. As I wrote some twenty years ago, “Throughout our century, courts have always been, from time to time, the subject of controversy and keen public scrutiny. We need only recall the courts of the Weimar Republic right after the German revolution (1918), with their double standards for punishing far right and far left political violence” (Santos *et al.*, *Os Tribunais nas Sociedades Contemporâneas – O caso português* [“The Courts in Contemporary Societies – The Portuguese case”]. Porto. Afrontamento, 1996, page 19). At the time it was all about political crimes, whereas these days we are faced with economic crimes.

The fact is, however, that in the European context such violent reaction to one setback may well run into a few setbacks itself. The instability deliberately caused by the President (by inciting the Socialist members of Parliament to disobedience) rests on the assumption that the European Union is now willing to throw out its entire social democratic tradition, in view of the fact that what happens today in a small country can also happen tomorrow in Spain or Italy. It is a tricky assumption, given that the European Union may be undergoing greater changes at its center than is imagined by the periphery, and all the more so because this is as yet a surreptitious change, which can only be glimpsed in the encrypted reports of Merkel's advisers. Doesn't the pressure exerted by the refugee crisis on the European fabric and the growth of the far-right call for some flexibility, so as to legitimize the European system in the eyes of larger majorities such as the one that voted for the parties on the left in the latest Portuguese elections? Isn't it preferable to enable a government led by an unequivocally pro-European, moderate party rather than risk ungovernability and thus allow that risk to spill over to other countries? Shouldn't the Portuguese be given due credit for seeking a way out that is far removed from the pent-up tensions and the erratic unfolding of the Greek “solution”? And as to the young people who only a few years ago filled the streets and squares with their anger, how will they react to the President's outrageously partial stand and the anti-institutional animus that drives it? Does the right really think it has a monopoly on this animus?

The answers to these questions are vital for our country in the near future. For the time being, one thing is certain. The President's thoughtlessness established the litmus test for the Portuguese to assess candidates in the coming presidential elections. Once elected, will you, or will you not, consider that all democratic parties are part of the democratic system and have an equal standing? If, in future legislative elections, a coalition of left-wing parties based on a majority of votes is to be formed in Parliament and a proposal for a new government is submitted to you, will you or will you not swear it in?