

Is it Possible to Think Europe Beyond Capitalism?

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Abstract: The paper argues that the original crisis, upstream of that today, is rooted in the establishment of the government of the euro as a substitutive authority following the decline of the 20th-century political parties. The latter were mediators between capital and labor, acting in a political space that the search for a way out of capitalism had opened since the mid-19th century. In the early 1990s, the euro marked the revival of the ideal of a non-negotiable capital and, at the same time, the definitive decline of the political parties. The present "crisis of Europe" is the further decline of that substitutive authority, which opens a very uncertain scenario. In the current Europe labyrinth, Arianna's thread can only be what aims to create an entirely new road of a "beyond the capital." It is necessary a perspective that can measure up to the new conditions of the non-negotiable capital restored after the twentieth century's exception, and at the same time to take stock of the state communism and the process leading to its end. A complementary condition, equally essential, to rethink Europe politically is to distinguish between Europe as a set of multiple inventions of thought and a geo-cultural space.

Keywords: Euro, political parties, Long Sixties, non-negotiable capital

The series of themes that opens the Outline of this issue of *Crisis & Critique* on the "Future of Europe" touches on key points to be clarified in a situation as opaque as today. I will, therefore, follow the route of the proposed questions, starting from the first, which is the most incisive and far from self-evident. Is not today's "European crisis" the result of decisions that, in turn, aimed at dealing with a crisis? Complementary issues, the singularity of the original dilemma, and its possible connection with the decline of the "left." Moreover, two issues of a strategic nature. Can be Europe reinvented politically today? And, what Europe can be in the new circumstances of conflicts between great capitalist powers at the world level (USA, China, Russia). Finally, an essential test, what policies to adopt about nomad proletarians?

I propose some working paths on the first three points, the establishment of the current forms of government in Europe, the crisis they were trying to tackle, and their current crisis. On a possible political rethinking of Europe, I confine myself to some preliminary considerations. Rarefaction of political thought marks our time, new theoretical perspectives should be invented to think politics, and I hope that this issue of *Crisis & Critique* opens a new space for reflection.

1.

My starting point is to suggest that the original crisis, upstream of that today, is the crisis of political parties of the twentieth century. Today, "Europe" indicates mainly the euro, understood, not only as a new currency but as a new form of government. In the early 1990s, the euro is not an administrative readjustment of the European state system,

nor is the realization of an idea of the relationships between European countries tracing back at the end of World War II, even less is an answer to monetary needs as such. The euro is the new government authority, or "governance" as it is said more often today, that European economic and state potentates impose with the utmost urgency at the time of the collapse of the previous forms of authority, consisting primarily of the parliamentary parties.

The chronology of the process of the establishment of the euro helps to clarify this step. The Treaty of Maastricht is contemporaneous with the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is indeed a decision made in previous years and accelerated after the fall of the Berlin Wall when it becomes clear that the Soviet bloc is on the verge of disintegration. However, the fact that the preparatory meetings of the Treaty (December 1991) and its formal approval (February 1992) take place in the same months of the end of the USSR shows the maximum timeliness of those decisions, to which all European governments adhere almost unanimously.

Despite the ideological exultation for the "triumph of democracy" and the "end of totalitarianism", current currency at that time and today still mainstream, the end of the socialist states centered on the USSR actually opens up a scenario of profound instability in the forms of government in Europe, in the face of which powerful forces immediately arise to find substitute solutions. In the span of a few years, the system of parliamentary parties enters an irreversible crisis. The Italian situation is indicative of the rapidity of this crisis. Just the day after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, the Italian Communist Party changes its name (in the Democratic Party of the Left), initiating a process of self-dissolution whose extreme offshoots reach the present day. The year after the end of the USSR, in 1992, the crisis of the Christian Democracy and the Italian Socialist Party also began, overwhelmed by corruption investigations. In short, the entire apparatus of the so-called "First Republic" parties are undoing at the very moment when the device of the treaties establishing the euro is coming into force.

The euro imposes a series of constraints, especially concerning the autonomous capacities of national governments' economic and financial policies, to which the European parliamentary parties submit themselves without substantial objections. Their very nature explains the unanimity to accept these constraints. They constitute a transfer of authority to a supranational superior governmental body by the whole of the party apparatuses, whose authority had been in decline for years. A decline that started more than two decades earlier, but that the end of the USSR brought out in all its gravity. The urgency to find a substitute authority was, in that time, the vector of the decisions to establish the euro and its specific government apparatuses.

All the parties competed to speed up this process and to make it incontestable, namely, with the inclusion of those constraints imposed by

the euro system in the very Constitution of the individual states, as the limit of 3% of the deficit on GDP. The new authority of the euro imposes itself not only as superior to the previous one but as unquestionable. "Europe is asking for it" was the most repeated slogan to impose "austerity" policies, that is to say, the rapid dismantling of all policies aimed at reducing inequalities, the "welfare state," which in previous decades had oriented government interventions of European capitalist states.

2.

Various aspects of this story remain to investigate. First of all, why does the dissolution of the Soviet Union bring about the crisis of the parliamentary parties so quickly? Had they not been two distinct camps of states, capitalist and socialist, separated by an "iron curtain"?

Looking carefully, far from being strictly separated, they both composed the horizon of state forms of much of the twentieth century. The existence of a politics aimed at an organization of society and government beyond the limits of capitalism has deeply marked the history of political parties. This perspective of a road "beyond the capital" had been the real condition of the existence of political parties.

The mass parties were not the natural evolution of the previous "parties of notables." The system of the twentieth-century parties – the one that allowed Lenin to say "the masses are divided into classes and the classes are represented by the parties" – could only be established starting from the legalization of the workers' parties. Yet these organizations, initially illegal and harshly opposed by the capitalist governments, embodied the "beyond the capital" perspective – the "idea of communism," as Badiou says – that arose since the mid-nineteenth century with Marxism. In short, it was the existence of workers' parties that allowed the formation and extension of parliamentary systems.

In the tortuous history of the twentieth-century party systems (self-destruction of the workers' parties with their support for the First World War, the seizure of power of the Bolsheviks in Russia, the Nazi-fascism, the Resistance), the most flourishing period was the thirty years following the World War II. The establishment of a vast set of socialist state systems, from Yugoslavia to China, which claimed to embody an alternative to capitalism, had the effect of stabilizing and consolidating party systems in capitalist countries.

Although Cold War ideology branded socialism as the negation of parliamentary democracy, the proclamation of the existence of a "beyond the capital" entailed that in the capitalist nations the peculiar role of the party system reached its peak. In fact, during the Cold War, one key point in the competition between the two systems of government was which of them provided the best conditions of welfare and equality. In the European capitalist countries, those that the French economists have called "Les Trente Glorieuses" were, at the same time, a period

of reduction in social inequalities, economic growth, and affirmation of the parliamentary political parties. For over thirty years, they formed the ground for negotiation between capital and labor.

3.

When and how does this negotiation ground close? So when and how does the role of the twentieth-century political parties come to an end? Of course, the collapse of the USSR and the satellite countries marks the closure of state space outside capitalism. However, it is necessary to consider the whole process of which that passage is the deferred result.

I propose that to examine the crisis of the parties, and the urgency of a new principle of authority that leads to euro, it is necessary to distinguish two cross processes and to take into account a temporal décalage. Upstream of the process of decay of political parties, is the political configuration of the Sixties and their violent closure, though it happened ten years before the collapse of the USSR.

What we can call the Long Sixties start in the first half of the 1960s and end up in the late 1970s with a series of coups, between 1976 and 1980: the arrest of Maoist leaders in China after Mao's death, arrest of leaders of Autonomia Operaia in Italy, coup in Poland against Solidarnosc. The 1980s are an intermediary phase. The crisis of the parties does not fully emerge but proceeds underground to explode only at the end of the decade. In fact, since the 1980s, the closure of the previous limitations of capitalism has been solidly established. This passage is the most tangled to decipher.

The core of the global political configuration of the Sixties, I suggest, was the critical examination, by large mass movements, of the historical experience of a "beyond the capital," concerning both the socialist countries and the left parties of capitalist countries. The closure of the long Sixties primarily consisted of suppression and discrediting of any value of that mass scrutiny, labeled as a senseless disorder, anarchy, and terrorism.

However, the political Sixties had existed and had decisive long-term consequences, despite the forced interruption in the late 1970s. The nucleus of that critical examination was the idea that the fundamental condition for the existence of a communist politics should be the mass experimentation of new roads outside capitalism and the assessment of previous experiences. Without constantly renewing and rethinking their foundations, the twentieth-century exceptions to capitalism were destined to go back to the rule. Such a crucial political thesis was the nub of Maoist criticism of "capitalist restoration" in the USSR, and the thrust of the Cultural Revolution.

Therefore, the end of the Sixties inevitably leads to closure of the entire previous existence of a political space "beyond the capital." If those critical questions to the routes undertaken to overcome capitalism were worthless, those same routes had no value in themselves.

I suggest, therefore, that the disintegration of the USSR was a delayed consequence of the Long Sixties. Consider the effects of the suppression of the Polish worker movement in the late 1970s. That movement, whose shutdown marked the end of that innovative political season, had addressed the crucial question: was it possible to experiment with the political existence of workers outside the ways of state communism? And ultimately, did those roads lead beyond capitalism? Did they allow a genuine alternative to the wage slavery regime? The 1967 January Storm in Shanghai raised the same question, as well as the worker radicalism of the 1960-70s in Italy.

The coup against Solidarnosc obliterated that mass scrutiny but was also the primary antecedent to the collapse of the USSR a decade later. When in a state of the Soviet bloc, a military coup suffocates a massive worker movement, as Solidarnosc was, which also involved the entire Polish society, the claim that such a state constitutes the political organization of the "working class" on the route beyond capitalism also vanishes. Yet at the same time, the very existence of a state-space heterogeneous to capitalism in the twentieth century loses all credit.

The Polish coup d'état completes the violent suppression of the Long Sixties, which began with the coup d'état in China in 1976 and with the radical denial of any political value of the Cultural Revolution. In the late 1970s, the turning point of Deng Xiaoping nullifies any difference of principle that the state communism had claimed to possess towards capitalism. From that moment, the Chinese government imposes a fully capitalist command on wage earners, in one of the most flexible labor markets in the world, protected by the authority of a communist party with 80 million members. (The issue of the resilience of the authority of the CCP, and its coordination with capitalist authority overcomes the limits of this article).

4.

While the Eighties are the closure of the Long Sixties, they are also the ultimate proof of the central thesis formulated by that political configuration. Without a fundamental clarification on the experience of the twentieth-century communism, and without new mass experimentations of that exception to capitalism, the triumphant return of the rule was inevitable. In a few years, the ideal of a non-negotiable capital quick returns in vogue. A capital, that is to say, available to negotiate, and of course negotiate downwards, just the price of wage, i.e., of commodities necessary to the reproduction of the labor force

Looking carefully, the ideal of non-negotiable capital is the basic tendency of capitalism itself, lacking those elements of moderation that the "beyond the capital" induced, and that served as the primary condition for the existence of the political parties of the twentieth century. The decline of the latter is inversely proportional to the restoration of the former.

However, the restoration of the non-negotiability of capital does not immediately eliminate the parties. While it initiates them into a radical crisis, this remains latent and only fully explodes at the end of the 1980s. For the whole decade, those parties even seem to have recovered their authority, self-satisfied to have cleared all the criticisms suffered for fifteen years, and at the same time, they consistently advocate the "neoliberal" turning point.

In Italy in the 1980s, the left parties are very active, so in the anti-terrorist legislation that eliminates any value of the Sixties, as in supporting measures that impose the increasing "flexibility" of labor, i.e., the extension of precarious work. The role of the Socialist Party in France is even more central. Mitterrand had come to power with a program of radical nationalizations, but in a few years, he worked hard to implement policies aimed at guaranteeing the primacy of financial powers, policies which in turn became fundamental in the establishment of the euro.

The right-wing parties, in turn, are obviously in the front row. Margaret Thatcher proclaims, "There is no alternative," which, together with the equally well-known "Less state, more market," is the slogan that opens the era of non-negotiable capital. The meaning is obvious: "no alternative" to capitalism, and the "state" to be restricted indicated precisely the terrain of negotiation between capital and labor. So "less state" also meant "the end of the twentieth-century parties," and "no alternative" meant that no distinction between "right" and "left" made more sense. The right-wing parties, too, existed within that negotiating space. In general, the latter negotiated on behalf of the capital, while the left-wing counterparts on behalf of the labor. There were undoubtedly intermediate positions, mutual opportunisms, dependence on the interstate competitions of the Cold War, but the negotiation between a right and a left who considered themselves mutually "alternatives" had been the *raison d'être* for both.

In the 1980s, despite the apparent consolidation of government, the proclamation of the exhaustion of any "alternative" undermines the very structure of the parliamentary party systems. Their authority, that is to say, the ability to obtain obedience rapidly weakens. That authority rested on their role as mediators between imperatives of valorization of capital and the conditions of existence of ordinary people. With the collapse of the states alternative to capitalism, which ultimately legitimized that mediation, the loss of authority of the parties appeared to be irreversible.

Hence the urgency, at that precise moment, to establish a principle of substitutive authority in European capitalist countries. No coincidence that such an authority pivots around the role of a currency. Following the symbolic order of capital, the general equivalent of the exchange quickly becomes the new governing authority of Europe. Marx wrote that the government is the "managing committee of the

bourgeoisie." In the era of non-negotiable capital, the "bourgeoisie" has its own "managing committees," taking autonomous decisions of which governments are mere executors.

5.

To complete this review, perhaps too brief, of political archaeology of euro, I try to outline some of its developments in Italy. Despite all the particular local conditions, due to the fact that the parliamentary system was right on the borderline of the Cold War (the two major parties, DC and PC, defended the stance of the two superpowers), therefore was subject to the most destabilizing consequences of the collapse of the USSR, the Italian situation reflects a general trend.

In the 1990s, the undoing of the parties of the "First Republic" leads to the emergence of a "personal" party organized around Berlusconi's companies, with the alliance of the neo-fascists and the secessionist Northern League. The new government puts an end to half a century of relations among the parties of the so-called "constitutional arch" (those that had participated in the drafting of the new Constitution after the Second World War). To contend for power, a "center-left" composed of an alliance between the remains of the two leading contenders of the previous era, the Communist Party and the Christian Democracy.

These post-parties aggravate the disintegration of the parliamentary system of the First Republic. For short periods, they seem to be new forms of authority, but their differences are more and more insignificant on crucial points. Both the parliamentary blocks confirm adherence to the policies of European austerity, aggravate the flexibility of labor contracts, and dismantle the previous welfare policies. In practice, the transfer of authority to the euro government goes on, and these parliamentary alliances gain in exchange temporary reflex authority. Despite the differences in the facade, everyone speaks in the name of "Europe."

The global economic crisis of 2007, which from the United States is rapidly toppling over Europe, also overwhelms in Italy this readjustment of the "substitute" parties of the previous parliamentary system. In the early 1990s, "Europe" imposed a "technical" government that was no longer an expression of the parties, but was headed by an adviser of Goldman Sachs, that is one of the financial holdings that had caused the catastrophic subprime crisis, and who are now determined to make the ordinary people pay the bill. The President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, boldly declares that "we have lived above our possibilities." The government of the euro not only imposes drastic austerity measures but also imposes the narrative that the "waste" of lazy peoples, who must be adequately punished by their governments, are guilty of the financial crisis. Syriza's turnaround against the popular referendum of 2015 and the acceptance of the diktat of the "troika" was the most exemplary episode.

In the decade following the crisis of 2007, on the one hand, the decomposition of the parties worsens, and in practice, they have nothing in common with the parties of the 20th century, but on the other hand, the authority of the euro proves insufficient. New potentates try to replace the government of the euro, proclaiming themselves defenders of a "sovereignty," that is, of an authority, which defends the identity of the "people."

Within a few years, in Italy a tiny party that formerly was beating the drums of "identity" of some northern regions, and invokes even "secession" against a South of thieves ("robber Rome" was the slogan), is transformed without blinking in the standard-bearer of national Italian identity, and achieves rapidly exorbitant consensus (almost 40% in the last European elections). Significantly, the Northern League (now "League for Salvini") proclaims the defense of an "identity" as such, without any need to sustain historical, cultural, and even "ethnic" values. Nor it gave any explanation of the insults to "national unity" on which it had marched for over twenty years.

The success of the League arguably depends on the precariousness of any "identity" as such, the Achilles heel of every subjective existence, both individual and collective. The end of the parties, which as a whole "represented" the unitarian image of the "fragmented body" of "nation," aggravates the vulnerability. Moreover, this "defense of identity" consists exclusively of the destruction of the Other, in this case, the nomad proletarians who try to reach Italy. However, since the Other is intrinsic to the Same, its destruction is self-destructive, following what Lacan called the "suicidal nature of narcissism."

Today's situation is very opaque but always fueled by coups at the top of the power system. For now, Salvini's rapid rise has been held back by his very greed for power. He had appealed to a popular plebiscite that granted him "full powers," without foreseeing that other power groups could join forces to overthrow him, despite having left him a free hand for over two years.

At this time (October 2019), the government is composed of a coalition between two "parties," which until recently were mutually hostile (M5S and PD). The prime minister is the same one who had supported the rise of the League until the previous month, but he has no electoral mandate and does not belong to any party. It is difficult to predict the stability of this coalition, which is the result of a temporary compromise and is subject to competition from other power groups that seek to undermine it. For now, the government stands in the "golden mean." It tries to be a little "Europeanist" and a little "sovereignist-populist," it can neither defend at all costs the government of euro nor focus solely on a self-destructive defense of "identity."

6.

As for the strategic questions posed by the Outline, in this moment of political bewilderment, my arguments are here even more tentative than the previous ones. Nevertheless, I still run the risk of asserting two conditions to rethink Europe politically.

First, in the current Europe labyrinth, Arianna's thread can only be what aims to create an entirely new road of a "beyond the capital." It is necessary a perspective that can measure up to the new conditions of the non-negotiable capital restored after the twentieth century's exception, and at the same time to take stock of the state communism and the process leading to its end. Rethinking the essential novelties of those experiences and not repeating their impasse is an urgent task for every new political experimentation, but it is also an inescapable analytical condition. The present circumstances of capitalist domination remain unintelligible without examining them as rooted in the whole process of that end.

Another condition, equally essential, is to distinguish between Europe as a set of multiple subjective inventions in all fields of thought and a "European" geo-cultural space. The issue is, in the last analysis, the distinction between thinking and knowing. Sure, without the first, the second could not exist. Without inventions of thought, there would be no knowledge, culture in all its meanings. However, thought is not transitive to knowledge; subjective inventions are not the building blocks of a culture. Instead, they are exceptions to a given cultural space; indeed, the more they are essential and profound, the more they constitute discontinuities in the field of knowledge. It is well known that to exist they have always had to fight long battles against the current.

The same is also true for Europe. About all its immense tradition of thought, the problem is how to regain the novelty of those inventions. In other words, how to rethink their universality, at a distance from any particular "European" determination? The idea that it is a question of saving a cultural "identity," leads to the worst roads, and ultimately concerns how to defend certain governmental circumstances. In any case, it implies the annihilation of a threatening otherness, also in the milder vision that a "dialogue" among culture can be established only by cultivating and defending the different identities. However, is it ever possible a "peaceful dialogue" among cultures? Are there not, instead, only encounters, essentially aleatory, among singular inventions of thought localized as exceptions in various cultural spaces?

But Europe, one hears, is at least the source of modern thought, even the "homeland" of fundamental concepts of which it would be essential to claim the origin. Let us say clearly: the concepts, the intellectual creations in every field, have no homeland. What does it matter that Marx was German, or European? Only by addressing the "proletarians of all countries," he measured the value of his discoveries. Just as, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Mao turned to rebel

students, reminding them, not that they were "Chinese," but that "only by liberating the entire humanity can the proletariat liberate itself."

To rethink Europe politically must necessarily pass through an infinity of political inventions able to look at a way out of capitalism, or as says Badiou accurately, a way out of the "Neolithic." But this way can be found only by the capability to keep the distance from any defense of "European identity." Only new "stateless" inventions may recapture all the roads that, both in Europe and everywhere in the world, have explored the communist perspective, and to find new ones.

7.

In the current world situation, the search for a new road beyond the capital, and at the same time, the renunciation to identity narcissism, are conditions even more essential for rethinking Europe politically.

On this issue, the developments of recent years require correction to the set of critical analyses on "globalization" prevailing in the last few decades. It emerges now clearly an acceleration of the contrasts between the two world's major capitalist powers. The "trade war" between the US and China, seemingly destined to worsen, shows the illusory nature of "peaceful globalization" in the sense of a worldwide extension without conflicts of the capitalist rule. This misjudgment echoes the thesis of Kautsky's "ultra-imperialism," which during the First World War Lenin harshly criticized.

Indeed, a century later, the situation has changed, the conditions of existence and the contemporary tendencies of imperialism are different, as well as the contrasts that cross them. More precisely, the current conjuncture is not merely that of a global extension of the capitalist rule, but of its re-establishment after a period of exception. Capitalism was intrinsically "globalized" since the time of Marx; the current one is capitalism reestablished after a time of alteration of its original rules. But it is vain to believe that there can be "peaceful" capitalism.

It is hard to predict in what sense will the contrasts between the USA and China evolve. However, what could prevent today's "trade war," which is also a war on technology and finance, from becoming a military war? A comparison with the Cold War would be misleading. In that case, a principle of moderation of the military clash was due not so much, as is often said, to the mutual "nuclear blackmail," but to the opposition between different ideologies, systems of government, even "visions of the world." Today, conversely, lacking any difference in principle, mirror propagandas of identity, which each of the contenders deploys to strengthen its domestic authority, fuel the conflict. "Make America great again" means recovering the supremacy as a world superpower. What can prevent the "Chinese Dream" to be the desire of becoming a new world superpower?

Europe is undoubtedly in a weak position, both in terms of economic and military power and government stability. Which "euro government" could be able to achieve authority with a call for making Europe "great again" or appealing to a "European dream"? Of course, in Europe, individual national governments can play the card of the defense of identity, as in fact they do, but in a scenario of military conflict among superpowers, it would be a bluff, not without its ferocity. In any case, any appeal to national identity, which is ultimately the result of today's weakening of the authority of the euro, weakens the "European identity."

Is this good or bad? It is harmful in terms of conflicts among capitalist powers. On the other hand, if the condition for rethinking politically Europe is to invent new ways out of the capitalism, remote from any identity of Europe, this weakness also has a positive aspect, it is a significant obstacle less, the propaganda of a "dream" of becoming, or returning to be, a "superpower" plagues less public opinion. In a situation of conflicts among "strong identities," a weak "European identity" can become the "weak link in the chain" of contemporary non-negotiable capital. That this weakness can be an advantage, be it clear, does not depend at all on the current governmental circumstances as such, but depends on the ability to invent new political roads.

8.

Finally, as for the nomadic proletarians who reach the borders of Europe. First of all: what are they looking for in Europe? They seek happiness, seek a place to invent the conditions of existence worthy that they cannot find in their countries. They are men, women, children of great courage, they are not victims, much less threatening aggressors of the identity of the places and "cultures" in which they try to move. The only fair policy towards them is not to hinder their search for happiness; theirs as of anyone else.

Let us take a young European philosopher who "migrates" to the United States or another European country, in search of conditions of existence of his intellectual life, of his thought, of his philosophical desire, conditions that he does not find in his country for the most various reasons. What is the difference between his nomadism and that of a young African peasant woman who, overcoming immense difficulties, reaches Europe to try to exist, to live a dignified life, to pursue her subjective happiness?

The difference in principle between a philosopher and a longshoreman, Marx wrote, is less than between a hunting dog and a watchdog. Even less is the difference between a migrant philosopher and a migrant peasant. That the first pretends to teach the latter why she must not seek happiness, when the latter would never imagine to teach that to him, is one of the absurdities of our time from which we must free ourselves.