

Social-ecological crisis & crisis of democracy: a view from Southern Europe

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**Fourth International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity
Leipzig, 2-6 September 2014**

1) Crisis from a geographical / South European perspective

- mainly financial dominant explanations of the crisis
- uneven geographical development and historical regional inequalities important
- a Southern European perspective - not as 'peculiarity' or 'exceptional' case
- political histories and socioeconomic structures as the inescapable context to deal the multifaceted crisis

2) 'Crisis talk' from a left and ecological perspective

- crisis strongly connected to the neoliberal settlement of the 1970s
- generalized globally, and impacted all the core capitalist countries
- not enough attention has been paid to environmental and resource factors
- environmental character of the crisis challenges the very basis of capitalism
- avoid mono-causal explanations - leave room for variations through time and across space
- crisis a conjuncture: different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions come together

3) Beyond economism: political aspects and social responses

- 'hollowing-out' of democracy - a "post-political" neoliberal order
- widespread alienation from politics, rise of corruption, growth of far-right
- after 2010 'lack of plasticity' of authoritarian elites; growing crisis of political representation
- crisis will transform deeply the political landscape
- 'no turning back' to 'golden' neoliberalism: authoritarian capitalism or escape from dominant narratives

4) the dominant dogma of 'return to growth' and the alternative(s)

(schematically) three 'models' proposed as 'solutions' by different actors

- i) aggressive neoliberalism
- ii) progressive productivism
- iii) socio-ecological transformation

4a) aggressive neoliberalism

- 'double devaluation' of labour and environmental commons
- catastrophic consequences of austerity and 'economic adjustment' on the environment
- new growth strategy for economic development: "competitiveness, productivity, extroversion, investment stimulation, and employment opportunities" ...
- 'the poor sell cheap': new opportunities for capital in tourism, energy and extractive industries
- privatizing public assets and services · imposed over-exploitation as violent land dispossession
- an 'obligatory capitalist modernization'

4b) progressive productivism

- coming from left-leaning, socialist and progressive groups
- based on well-known dependence theories in the semi-periphery
- long-standing attachment of the Left to post-war ideological doctrine of growth and strong productivism
- reconstruction taken over by the 'people' & national 'creative' forces
- tend to marginalize qualitative aspects of development
- a top-down, technocratic spirit, skeptical to decentralization
- environmental concerns remain subordinated to growth objectives

4c) socio-ecological transformation

coming from the experience of the anti-global movements, the squares and the 'indignados'

alternatives for inclusive and meaningful democracy

- horizontal forms of internal organisation - build a political space 'here and now' - new non-hierarchical forms of social relations

initiatives to set up parallel socioeconomic structures, a very different exit strategy from the crisis, direction of any future radical political programme

- work cooperatives and occupied factories · social clinics and pharmacies · direct producers to consumers networks · movements against mining activities and polluting investments · groups against privatizations of land, water or public infrastructure · solidarity initiatives against evictions and electricity cuts · groups of young scientists for open source · neighborhood social centers · local exchange networks and alternative currencies

4c) socio-ecological transformation (cont.)

'orthodox' left critique: 'these experiments lack the critical mass necessary and cannot seriously challenge the system'

But, forms of solidarity and social economy have an important radical potential:

- adopt an anti-capitalist or a pro-degrowth stance: structural changes in the political and economic spheres
- prioritize social needs as starting point of alternatives
- solidarity, collective organization and politics can change things
- agency of social change: active participation indispensable for transition
- renegotiate established societal values & challenge production and consumption prototypes of capitalism
- re-politicizing the debate about what kind of 'development' in what kind of society we want

5) Conclusions and challenges: a politically unique opportunity

- deep de-legitimation of dominant capitalist narratives - formation of new opposing majorities - agenda of radical political change and changing established power structures
- emancipatory subjects try to find their way into the central political game → transformations in institutions, municipalities, regions, the state and the EU
- rise of Left political parties in Greece, Spain (SYRIZA, Podemos)
- 'Last Call manifesto... a 'paradigm shift'... socio-ecological transformation has become a central political slogan for EU Left

5) Conclusions and challenges: a politically unique opportunity (cont.)

- socioeconomic features not 'archaic leftovers' / Mediterranean mentalities may support a new (degrowth) narrative
- political features also create favorable conditions
- acknowledge the dead end of 'one size fits all' top-down policies / spatially differentiated strategies of sociopolitical actors are required
- Questions: employment creation to alleviate poverty urgently · multiple scales (bottom-up + top-down) · 'how to take the power back' · overcoming inequalities, redistribution of existing wealth, social justice
- an inspiration for societal change also in the European north? turn the neoliberal 'experiment' upside-down, an 'image from the future'?