

The European Elections: Despite the Crisis, the Neoliberals Save the Day

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“Disaster,” “an earthquake,” “electroshock,” “a historic shock,” “a thunderclap,” “a stroke”: the results of the most recent European elections have caused a veritable media storm throughout Europe, beginning with France where the historic victory of the National Front of Marine Le Pen has left commentators with a real hangover.

Amid the austerity, economic crisis and the loss of confidence not only in European institutions but above all in the political forces that drive them, the major trend of the vote on May 25— the far right’s vote spreading all over Europe –is not surprising. But looked at more closely, some of the important results call into question any one-sided interpretation. To begin with there is the landslide victory of Matteo Renzi's Democratic Party in Italy and the “relative strength” of the great coalition in Germany. Then too, strengthening the anti-capitalist left, there were encouraging results of Podemos and the Plural Left in the Spanish State and even more of Syriza in Greece which are political expressions of the popular mass mobilization of the last few years.

One of the first things to be noted is the high rate of abstention mentioned by all the commentators, a fact that offers some consolation to those who apparently reason that at least the non-voters didn't vote for the nationalist, populist rightwing: about 57 % of European voters decided not to go to the polls to vote. France, with a 56.5 % abstention rate, is situated right in the European middle of this disaffection, of this distrust or perhaps “desperation” that affects a large part of the population of the 28 countries called to elect the Parliament in Brussels. Still, compared with the abstention rate in previous European elections—57 % in 2009 and 55 % in 2004—this year's is in fact normal. The abstention rate even declined in certain countries such as the United Kingdom, Spain, Finland, France, Sweden, Romania, Germany, Greece and Lithuania. In reality, the increase in non-voting was principally found in the east, in Latvia, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Bulgaria, as well as in some southern countries, Cypress, Italy, and Portugal, and in the North in Ireland and Denmark.

If the elevated rates of abstention can be partly attributed to the rejection of the European Union by the popular classes, they tell us next to nothing about the evolution of the relation of political forces country by country over the five years that separate the last two elections. Abstention then is not an important measure for understanding the upheavals that preceded May 25. And also, as Manuel Kellner emphasizes, this view tends to lend support to the somewhat magical belief that abstention proves “the lack of legitimacy of the European institutions,” while it leads without a doubt to an underestimation of the real weight of European institutions and politics on the national realities and to a “lack of interest in what happens in other countries.”[1].

Government Parties in Disarray?

The second observation that strikes one is that some 43% of European citizens who went to the polls cast their votes against the parties that have been considered to be the representatives of European institutions and against the agents of the policies of austerity in their countries, as well as against a political class that they considered to be corrupt. The great traditional parties, in particular those that were in government, retreated everywhere. In France, the Socialist Party won a little less than 14% of the vote (compared to 16.5 % in 2009). It was rebuffed, confirming the earlier defeat in the

municipal elections, and not only in competition with the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) of former president Nicolas Sarkozy that finds itself in the middle of a financial scandal, coming in second with 20.8% of the votes (against 27.8% in 2009), but especially compared to the National Front of Marine Le Pen, which won with nearly 25% (compared to 6.3 % in 2009).

In the United Kingdom, the Conservative Party in power also suffered, falling from 27% in 2009 to 23.3% in competition with the nationalist, populist rightwing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) which came in first with 27.5 percent of the votes as compared to only a little more than 16% in 2009. In the Spanish State, the European elections appeared to mark the end of the two-party system (the Popular Party or PP vs. The Socialist Workers Party or PSOE).[2] The PP dropped from 42.2% in 2009 to 26.1% in this election; while the PSOE went from 38.8% in 2009 to just 23.0%. Altogether, the two parties failed to win 50% of the votes cast. The tendency was the same in Poland where the Popular Party fell to 31.3% compared to 44.4% in 2009; in Sweden, where the Moderate Party received 13.6 percent (compared to 18.8 percent in 2009), and in Hungary where the center-right Fidesz Party fell from 56.4% to 51.5%.

In general then, the parties in power, the Social Democratic and traditional conservative parties, were punished by an opposition vote against the “elites that impose austerity” and which have diligently applied the European Central Bank policies which bring in their wake subjugation, privatization, cut in public services, poverty, unemployment, the destruction of the social state, and the degradation of living and working conditions. Germany and Italy represent notable exceptions that challenge the oft repeated analysis of a vote against the European Union and a rejection of government parties.[3] In Germany, while the Christian Democratic Union / Christian Social Union coalition had been predicted to win with 40% of the vote, its vote actually declined from the 37.9 percent garnered in 2009 compared to 35.3 % in 2014, while the Social Democratic Party rose from 20.8 % in 2009 to 27.3 % in 2014. In Italy, the Democratic Party of Renzi collected 40 % of the votes cast compared to just 26 % in 2009, to which I will return...

“The convergence of rightwing government and neoliberal government is clear in the eyes of millions of workers,” wrote François Sabado in the heat of the moment.[4] The left has long rejected such a conclusion in order to justify the casting of a “useful vote” or support for the “lesser evil ” or the need to present an “ alternative to the right ” and other such arguments *ad nauseum*. In 2013, the Spanish leftist Miguel Romero mocked this in a little parable, writing, *“Some years ago there was a quite successful film titled Groundhog Day in which Bill Murray plays a character trapped in the nightmare of an infinitely repeating day. Something similar has happened with the various groups of personalities who are addicted to presenting themselves as spokespersons with the goal of ‘a battle against the right’ designating Social Democracy as the protagonist of such a struggle.”*[5]

This realization has been facilitated by an ever clearer neoliberal positioning of the European Social Democratic parties, which the “anti-austerity ” rhetoric of some of them (we think of Martin Schulz in Germany and of Matteo Renzi in Italy and even of François Hollande in France) has not been able to mask. European Social Democracy seems to be openly following the path of the Italian Democratic Party. Cutting the last of the “fictional” historic links that connected it to a rich tradition of popular struggles for social emancipation, it aims to become the party of a modernist bourgeoisie, such as that which exists in Italy, modeled on the U.S. Democratic Party. Should we be surprised that along the way it will lose some of its traditional electoral base which it obviously hopes to replace with the heterogeneous clientele of popular bourgeois parties?

In certain countries, such as Portugal, the Socialist Parties can still hope, though less every day, to make some gains in the opposition. So, the Portuguese Socialist Party (PSP) has done noticeably better than the other European socialist parties (from 26.5% in 2009 to 31.4%). In contrast, the decline of social democracy in other countries doesn’t seem to arouse much resistance on the left,

even in France where it has failed, apparently irrevocably.

The 2008 split which led to the establishment of the Party of the Left by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and to the creation as well before the European elections of a new organization called New Deal which also came largely out of the ranks of the Socialist Party—winning 2.9% of the vote—confirmed the rule that no left current can last for long within that party.

Overall, the European environmental parties experienced a greater erosion of support than the Social Democrats, no doubt because of the strong perception that they now form part of the mainstream Euro-compatible parties (they went from 57 to 52 seats in the parliament). In France the Greens paid a high price for their participation, crucial participation, in the government of François Hollande, falling from 16,3% to 8.9%, one of the biggest tumbles in Europe.

For its part, the traditional right also lost ground, with the European People's Party falling from 35.7% of the seats in 2009 to 28.5% today. This retreat, not surprisingly, touched to varying degrees the conservative political organizations of several important countries, among them the Spanish State, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Germany. It should be noted that this also account for the policies of the grand coalition governments (traditional right, Social Democratic, various "center " parties) tested for " confronting the crisis " and justifying austerity policies (in Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, Finland, etc.) The right has to walk a tightrope between its own Euro-skeptic and nationalist forces while also responding to the growing and uninhibited influence of the extreme right which has the wind in its sails. Angela Merkel, the iron lady of the Troika, engages with the advocates of the European Union while at the same time hardening her tone in order to keep in touch with the growing Euro-skeptic fringe of the German right. Just before the election didn't she emphasize that the European Union was not a "social welfare union"? [Suggesting that the EU was not a place where immigrants could go shopping for welfare benefits. - DL]

The Irresistible Rise of the National-Populist Constellation

These manoeuvres are the result of the hard national-populist right, ranging from Europhobic to proto-Fascist, which has today upset the European political situation. The election made manifest the growth of an "anti-system" vote and of a nationalist or regionalist retreat. Its cause is almost self-evident, taking into account the economic, political, and moral crisis which has affected the EU for the last several years. The high vote for catch-all parties, some of which, like Alternative for Germany (Afd), define themselves as "neither left nor right, " and which profit from the economic and social discomfort of the popular is obviously a vote in opposition to the Troika's policies, and this includes those in Germany who believe that the EU is too expensive and who reject parties that are "selling off national independence , people who are angry at the lack of understanding of the impact of austerity politics put in place so zealously by governmental parties.

The nationalist-populist vote expresses above all a rejection of immigration that is tinged with racism and which is aimed primarily but not only at people from non-European countries, but also expresses contempt toward the most indebted countries of the South of the Old Continent (the PIGS - Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain), supposedly lazy spendthrifts who are considered as the principal causes of the crisis. The UKIP puts itself forward today as the champion of the family with 27.5% of the vote (compared to 16.1% in 2009), becoming the leading political party of the country. It belongs to the Europe of Liberty and Democracy group which includes the Danish Peoples Party, another big winner in the election with 26.7% (compared to 14.8% in 2009), with Order and Justice in Lithuania (14.3% compared to 12.2 in 2009), with the Party of the True Finns (12.9% against 14% in 2009), together with Alternative for Germany (7%), and perhaps the Polish New Right, with around 7%.[6]

The real spoilsport, however, was the National Front of Marine Le Pen which won nearly 25% of the vote (compared to just 6.3% in 2009) becoming the leading party in France. Though the British UKIP refuses for the moment to collaborate with it, in spite of evident similarities in their views on immigration, Le Pen's FN plans to establish a new European parliamentary group with other related parties, some of which have also risen sharply, such as the Austrian Freedom Party (19.7% against 12.7% in 2009) and the Swedish Democrats (9.7% against 3.3% in 2009), though others are in decline, such as the Party for Dutch Freedom (13.2% against 17.0% in 2009), the Belgian Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang (4.1% against 9.9% in 2009), and probably the Italian Northern League (6.2% against 10.2% in 2009). Further to the right, we find the Nazi-Fascist Hungarian Movement for a Better Hungary or Jobbik Party (14.7%) and Greek Golden Dawn (9.4%), currently a pariah but with strong support from its base.

At the periphery of this nebula Beppe Grillo's 5 Star Movement (M5S) is the surprise guest, involved today in discussions with UKIP the possibility of its eventual affiliation to Europe of Freedom and Democracy. Grillo, who caused a veritable explosion in the 2013 elections, stumbled this time on the steps of the European Parliament. Confident of winning hands down, he ran under the banner, "Either them or Us." But several factors worked against the M5S and its leader : a nationalist-populist campaign riddled with anti-Semitism, which led him to lose support on the left ; the excommunications of several members of the movement in the course of the last few months which reinforced the image of an authoritarian party headed by unchallengable leaders; the poor management in certain local governments...As I wrote in 2013 (*New Politics, Winter 2014*), M5S is characterized by Italian *subversivism*, that Gramsci described as " a negative class position...that always turns to the right at the decisive moment." It did not take long for Beppe Grillo to play his hand, although some part of the movement has dissociated itself from him.

Yet, with or without M5S, the nationalist-populist constellation is ever more deeply rooted in the European soil. It does not appear in the guise of the fascism of yesteryear, although some of its activists and voters claim that legacy, even if it always issues from the fecund womb of the foul beast, as Brecht said in 1941. This is more or less the case of all of these formations. Their speeches are ultra -nationalist, racist, patriarchal, imperialist, anti-socialist, and based on the stigmatization of the poor and the "less productive," and sexual minorities, as well as the domination of women. Thus, the leader of the New Polish Right, Janusz Korwin-Mikke recently stated that rape was normal, because women want it.... But it is also a "vote representing an attitude that comes from the gut." Nigel Farage, the leader of UKIP, summons up the picture "of the barfly who you buy a beer and then together denounce all politicians and ruminate against immigrants." [7] These movements are principally attractive to members of the petty- and middle-bourgeoisie (doctors , teachers, small businesspeople), but also have a significant following among the popular classes (workers, public employees, and the unemployed). They may also, as in the case of the French National Front, attract young people.

In most countries, these far right parties certainly nibble at the popular electoral base of conservative parties, but they also impinge on the social democratic vote, pushing the government parties to adopt their rhetoric or to follow suit, in particular when it comes to immigration restrictions and national security. Of course, there are a lot of other things to ask about these movements. Who are their sponsors? Where does funding to facilitate their rise come from? What links have been established between them? What kind of relationship do they have with clearly fascist or nationalist groups? Their progress is all the more worrisome given that they do not seem to lead to the social and political mobilization necessary to counter them. Some 8,000 young people did participate in a demonstration on May 29 against the victory of the National Front in the European elections, and that first impulse should be continued and extended.

The Italian Exception?

Matteo Renzi is the big winner in the latest European elections. As the international press likes to say, he is an "anomaly," just one of many such "exceptions" that, seen from afar, seem to punctuate the history of contemporary Italy since the beginning of the twentieth century. The Democratic Party, which won 25.5% of the votes in the Lower House in February 2013, won 40% of the vote more than any other Italian party has won since 1958. The country that British Marxist Perry Anderson recently described as "the real weak link in the EU, at which it could theoretically break," is thus distinguished by a vote that will perhaps help to stabilize it. Yet the Renzi government has a policy of austerity and social dismantling just as zealous as that of his predecessors.

Several factors explain this success within the context of the weakness of the social resistance movements. Firstly, the young chairman Matteo Renzi, darling of the international and national press, has only headed the government for a few months. And he spared no efforts in speaking out against European austerity and German domination, he called for the revision of the EU treaties and he contested the idea that there had been a "recovery." So he was able to pose as the man who wanted change and right now, change which would improve the living conditions of all Italians (for example, by adding 80 euros to every worker's pay check), while at the same time remaining the liege man of the bosses (*Confindustria*, the employers' association newspaper, devoted 12 pages to support his campaign in the European Parliament). Renzi is thus the prototype politician who "best combines demagoguery of charity with the destruction of what remains of the achievements of organized labor." [8]

Finally, Matteo Renzi is presented as an alternative to the old Democratic Party, thus assuming no responsibility for the policies pursued hitherto by his predecessors. Criticism of the dinosaurs, by figures such as Massimo D'Alema, who has been accused of "destroying the left," were accompanied both the announcement of the return of the Italian Democratic Party to the Socialist International and the emergence of broad governmental agreements, even including Silvio Berlusconi. So Renzi was able to win "left" voters, recovering some votes that were garnered in 2013 by Grillo's 5 Star Movement, but also to win "right" votes, given the collapse of the coalition of Berlusconi (People of Freedom - PdL), which alone collected more than 35% of the vote in 2009. Added to this is precisely the failure of M5S which in February 2013 had created a stir by becoming the largest party with 25% of the votes in the House and 23% in the Senate. In the recent election, however, it got only 21% of the vote.

The Left that's Coming...From the South

The left, however, is not without hope, particularly in southern Europe where austerity policies have already brutally battered the region which is also where the most important social movements have taken place up until now. In Greece, Syriza won 26.6 % of the vote (compared to 4.7% in 2009), asserting itself as the leading political force in the country, even though the mass mobilizations are declining. In the Spanish State, Podemos, a new political force arising out of the *indignados* movement, won its 8% of the vote in its first ever election, becoming the third political power in Madrid, Asturias, and Aragon, and the fourth most powerful party in the country. A true "catalyst popular indignation," this slate represents an undeniable turning point for the radical left, not only in terms of its modes of organization (encouraging the active participation of its members), but also in its chosen repertoires of action. To this victory must be added the showing of Izquierda Plural (a broadening of Izquierda Unida) growing from 3.7 % of the vote in 2009 to nearly 10 % today. Counting the left nationalist slates in the Catalan, Basque, and Galician regions (The Republican Left of Catalonia or ERC, and the People Decide made up of the Basque Bildu, the Galician Nationalist Bloc or BNG, and the European Spring) the anti-neoliberal left presence rose from 6.25% in 2009 to 26% today.

In Italy the slate "The Other Europe with Tsipras" (a reference to Alex Tsipras, leader of Syriza) also

created a surprise with 4% of the votes, even more striking because this organization had little media coverage. This group is a collection of movement activists, notably No Tav (the mobilization in the Suse Valley against the high-speed Turin-Lyon train), but also including intellectuals and journalists (Barbara Spinelli, Andrea Camilleri, and Marco Revelli) who are close to the daily *Repubblica* newspaper. Quite a hodgepodge for sure, but a slate that locates the struggle on the European terrain and could open the way to a transnational expression of the anti-neoliberal left. In Portugal, however, the Left Bloc, that some accuse of having made concessions to the Socialist Party, and which has recently suffered from divisions and departures from the group on the left and the right, fell sharply—from 10.7% in 2009 to 4.6% today. The Communist Party, which is still seen as a mobilizing force in alliance with its environmentalist satellites, rose from 10.9% of the vote in 2009 to 12.7%.

In the North, the situation appears more mixed. New political forces have arisen, such as the Swedish feminist and anti-racist organization, Feminist Initiative, which won 5.3% of the vote (compared to 2.2% in 2009). Founded in 2005, it is the "worst nightmare" of mainstream parties. In Ireland, Sinn Féin itself also increased from 11.2 % in 2009 to 17 % of the vote today. Added to this is the result of French-speaking Belgium Workers Party (PTB) – Open Left (GO), up from 1.1% in 2009 to 5.5 % today, which benefitted from the call of the Charleroi city FGTB (the main trade union confederation) to break with the policy of the Socialist Party. While Die Linke (The Left) party in Germany remained stable at 7%, the situation in France is undoubtedly the most calamitous, overdetermined by the disappearance of social movements together with the loss of the battle against the pension reform in 2010. Since then, social struggles have remained atomized and have literally disappeared from the radar screens.

In the European elections in France, the Left Front won only 6.3% of the vote, much the same as it had at its founding in 2009, despite the attractiveness of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), which then collected 4.9 % of votes. I must say the Left Front may have suffered slightly from the presentation of the "New Deal," which came out of the Socialist Party calling for a program of Keynesian stimulus. But it probably suffered more from the decision of the Communist Party to put up a common slate with the Socialist Party in many municipalities just a few months before the European elections. As Jean-Luc Mélenchon wrote on his blog on May 30: "Our Left Front has a large foot in the system, as shown by the sequence of the Municipal elections. As a result, thanks to some geometrically varying arrangements and alliances, beyond their local legitimacy or not, have literally associated us with the spectacle of arsenic and old lace of the system. Therefore we made ourselves equivocal or, quite frankly, we ended up being suspect at a time when suspects are submitted to bad treatments! In just one election campaign, all our efforts to become politically autonomous have been destroyed for many people."

However, the Left Front, gasping for air as it dealt with the tempestuous struggle between the Communist Party and the Left Party of Mélenchon, apparently did not (or has not yet) benefited from the several waves of defectors from the NPA, who, with other forces, formed the Ensemble (Movement for a Left Alternative) last November, hoping to establish a third pole in the Left Front. As for the NPA, the situation is even more serious, since it won only 0.3% of the vote in 2014 (compared to 4.9% in 2009), a result which probably reflects the degree of confusion among a good many of its supporters since 2009. The overview is not complete without mentioning Workers Struggle (LO), which continues to go it alone with about 1% of the vote. The challenge therefore remains: to build a united front of the entire anti-neoliberal left remains the key objective; within it, each political tendency should continue to discuss and organize democratically to defend its positions while respecting moments of common struggle to support and encourage social mobilization, but also to make clear the existence of a combative left at election time.

The European election results are clearly more mixed than they appeared in the first accounts

written in the heat of the moment. Although the growing number of nationalist-populist, rightwing groups attest to the depth of the current crisis, the "Eurocrats" limit the damage. Bourgeois and social democratic parties have in effect kept their hands on the control levers, especially in countries that historically formed the core of the EU (Germany, Italy, and Benelux). Even in France, where the Socialist Party is undergoing a profound crisis of political legitimacy, the government Hollande Valls continues its journey. Germany of course but also Italy, deemed the weak link of neoliberal Europe, offer the EU an unexpected reprieve. This situation does not facilitate the task of the radical left, caught between the rising brown tide of the right and austerity parties in power, it does not seem to be able to capitalize on popular discontent, except in Greece and in the State Spanish, thanks no doubt to the mass struggles of the latter period.

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Translation by Dan La Botz

[1] Manuel Kellner, " European Elections in Germany : Right-wing Success, Stagnation of the Left ", 26 mai 2014, www.europe-solidaire.org.

[2] Jaime Pastor, " Elections européennes dans l'Etat espagnol : déclin du bipartisme, ascension de Podemos et renforcement du souverainisme en Catalogne ", 26 mai 2014, www.vientosur.info.

[3] Cinzia Arruzza, "The European Conundrum ", *Jacobin. A magazine of culture and polemic*, Mai 2014, www.jacobinmag.com.

[4] François Sabado, " Les élections européennes : une Europe à la dérive et un tremblement de terre en France ", 27 mai 2014, www.europe-solidaire.org.

[5] Miguel Romero, " La política de la marmota ", *Viento Sur Web*, 9 nov. 2013.

[6] Selon le porte-parole de la Nouvelle droite, Tomasz Sommer, son chef de file inclinerait pour la constitution d'un nouveau groupe libertarien, centré sur l'Europe centrale et orientale.

[7] Dave Kellaway, " European elections in Britain : Farage shakes it all about-The United Kingdom Independence Party keep through ", *Socialist Resistance*, 26 mai 2014, <http://socialistresistance.org>.

[8] Cf. Andrea Martini, " Europee 2014. Lo scontro elettorale dei piccoli titani ", 23 mai 2014, <http://anticapitalista.org>.