

THE FRENCH CHALLENGE TO NEO-LIBERALISM IN THE WEST

THIS SUMMER in Paris there was much to celebrate, or almost celebrate. The French soccer team came within a hair's breadth (or a head butt) of winning the World Cup; a new bridge over the Seine (the 37th) was inaugurated bearing the name of Simone de Beauvoir, thus acknowledging a year after Sartre's centennial the importance of his paramour; and finally, there was a big hullabaloo, not over the 400th anniversary of Rembrandt or the 250th of Mozart, those celebrations were for other cities, but over the 70th anniversary of paid vacations (*congés payés*). It was in the summer of 1936 that, not the Popular Front government, but the workers themselves through a concentrated series of strikes, negotiated at Matignon for the first time a contract guaranteeing not only the 40 hour work week but also 14 days paid holidays, prompting Trotsky to claim that "The French Revolution has begun," and a member of the Front Populaire to coin that year's workers' battle cry *Tout est possible* (Everything is possible). Fittingly, for the land of the paid vacation, the French are at it again. In the last year and a half, through three remarkable events, they fashioned the most sustained challenge yet mounted in the more prosperous Anglo-European world to the neo-liberal hegemony of the market and its, as Jacques Rancière describes it, ideal system of government, oligarchic democracy.

First, 2005's 'Non' to the European Constitution was a conscious refusal of the formal democracy which the Constitution would have installed, as well as a recognition that the lifting of government restrictions on corporations and the lifting of all forms of protection for public sector employees would increase the sustained rate of unemployment that has marked European development for the last 10 years. Next, in late fall, another eruption; a loud cry for help from those in French society usually marginalized, as the youth of the banlieues (literally suburbs, but in France closer to American inner cities) exploded in a series of multi-ethnic, or more accurately, "class" riots. Not dissimilar to those in the US in Los Angeles in 1992, these riots struck a blow in the more affluent Northern Hemisphere for the ability of workers to move as freely as corporations and to be granted the same rights. Less than four months later, the streets erupted again as university and high school (*lycée*) students and their professors beat back one of the central planks of the neoliberal order, precarity, the idea that all jobs are temporary, which effectively means that capital has infinite flexibility, while workers

who Marx pointed out are not free but are always compelled to sell their labor if they are to continue to eat, lose their freedom. The French students and workers forced the government to repeal a law passed in the dead of night with almost no debate that would have allowed employers to fire without cause any worker in their first two years of employment.

The French challenge, though, is a mixed one, one that constantly erupts and then is repressed as the official parties in power, including the supposedly left Parti socialiste (PS) and the mainstream media, register each shock wave and then quietly ignore it. However, it is then able to be theorized and movements are beginning to be built both from each eruption and from the right's reaction to it. I would like to suggest in fact, given the nature of this series of aborted *mini revolutions* followed by their analysis by French left intellectuals, that France is participating in what amounts to a series of global centers of resistance to neo-liberalism particularly as practiced in the US and Britain. In the 19th century, as Hegel and Marx were writing, the uneven social, political and economic revolutionary development was often described as broken into three areas; England being the economic center, the moment of dynamic, though at the same time barbaric capitalism realizing itself; France as the political center, a position it held partially due to having four revolutions in less than 100 years from 1789 to 1871; and Germany as the place where these political and economic developments were theorized, with the triumvirate of Kant, Hegel and Marx each influenced by the French Revolution of the period in which they were writing.

So I would argue that today in the challenge to this now stultifying capitalist order, there are also three centers. The economic center is China, where the mixed economy provides both barriers to international capital investment but at the same time allowing a dynamic, if equally barbaric, expansion. The political moment is in Latin America where a left debate is clearly being waged between the state and party sponsored Socialism of Chávez' Venezuela; and the still movement oriented progressivism of Morales' Bolivia; and where the left leaning governments of Chile, Argentina and Brazil struggle to contain the popular feeling against the vicissitudes of market capitalism. The theoretical moment is in France, the first Anglo-European country to seriously challenge these ideas, increasingly dominant since the Reagan-Thatcher 80s. Lest this description be regarded as just another Eurocentric phantasm, where once again it is the mind, or theory, that has its moment in the West (and acknowledging as well the importance of the theory that is also originating from Latin America including the Zapatista-inspired current alter-globalist bible *How to Change The World*

Without Taking Power), I would argue that France has become the center of theorizing after the fact because, like Germany in the 19th century where the confluence of repressive political forces permitted no development beyond an enlightened monarchy, in France the hegemony of market capital has thus far permitted only sporadic eruptions followed by their theorization. It is the repression, common to the West, that France has in common with 19th century Germany, as well as a prehistory of revolution and its theorization, not some innate development of “mind.” It’s a conjunctural similarity, not a metaphysical one.

NON, NON, A THOUSAND TIMES NON

The first of these recent eruptions was the rejection of the elite-centered European Constitution designed as a trade-off whereby the European peoples would, in return for a socially liberal pact in parts 1, 2 and 4 with a maximum guarantee of individual liberties, grant nearly unlimited control over their economic lives to multinational corporations. This is the image of democracy Jacques Rancière describes as consisting of maximum freedom to consume, of “unlimited individual desires” within an oligarchic framework with a ceding of the right to govern to technical “experts.” These experts are represented in the Constitution by the domination of non-elected corporate boards and the elected supra European parliament.

The French rejected the Constitution primarily for two reasons: it was read as a pact that would lead to increased unemployment (the highest no voting was in the sections with the highest unemployment) and it was seen as promoting a European government that would move to eliminating local political control. (There then followed a more mixed No in Holland where again the Constitution was read as promoting unemployment, but where there was also a large xenophobic vote registering the fear of “open borders” as a fear of the infiltration of the non-European other.)

For the moment, the Constitution is dead, with the parliamentarian whose duty it was to promote it recently resigning, claiming that in his office there was now nothing to do. Though an early attempt to revive it betrayed the thinking of the elite, the idea was to open the human rights sections 1, 2 and 4, to a popular referendum while submitting section 3, the one that is crucial to the economic elite and to the everyday “economic” freedoms of most people, only to the legislatures. If anything, the defeat of the Constitution furthered in the minds of the elite “*la haine de la démocratie*”

and made them more resolute not to again put to a vote an issue that so crucially affected so many people. After all as we've learned in Iraq and Palestine, and to paraphrase Henry Kissinger from 1973 about oil and Arabs, "Democracy is far too important to be left to the people."

In the wake of the No there has essentially been two strategies on the part of the elites. One is to deny the overwhelming coming together of the country (nearly 70% of voters in one of the largest electoral turnouts in French history, in voting no), and the other is to make sure that the radical democratic energy released in the country-wide debate be channeled instead into the maneuvering for the 2007 presidential elections, with the elections themselves seen as a way of again dividing opinion and splintering it.

The shameful conduct of the Socialist Party is emblematic in this regard. The members of the PS voted overwhelmingly, 59%, No despite the command by most of their leaders to vote Yes. In the wake of this direct challenge to the leadership, the party has practiced a blatant strategy of denial. François Hollande, the party number one, was damaged by his inability to deliver the Yes, so he traded places with his spouse Ségolène Royal. She has attempted since coming to top the polls as the favored Socialist candidate to establish her right or middle of the road credentials to the point where she has this summer occasionally sounded more entrenched than the rightwing neo-liberal candidate par excellence Nicolas Sarkozy. After the riots, she floated the idea of compulsive military service for the disadvantaged kids in the banlieu who wanted jobs and when asked if this was a Socialist solution, she responded, "Whoever said the left was anti-military?" She will henceforth be referred to as Hilary Royal.

The point here is to not give voice to that majority of the party that is far to the left of the parliamentary elite. The rest of the left is splintered as well, and goes under the sobriquet in the press of "far left"; this includes the Communists (PCF), the Trotskyites (LCR) and the alter-globalists, whose ideas collectively held sway in the referendum. It is then a great service to the neo-liberal hegemony that all groups that threaten its supposed consensus are termed "far," be it left or right (right, of course, being those anti-immigrant followers of Le Pen.)

The "far left" is also divided, with the Communists hoping their candidate Marie-Georges Buffet, under whose auspices the anti-constitution vote was organized, will prevail in a united Communist-Trotskyite front, while the alter-globalists consider the candidature of Jose Bove, the ubiquitous farmer

whose tossing of the chair through the window of McDonalds in 1999 was the Paul Revere moment of the anti-global movement. The Right, on the other hand, seems united behind Sarkozy who, post the riots, has himself taken to more openly appropriating *le discours lepéniste*. That is, Sarkozy, an open Blairite backer of privatization and precarity and former mayor of one of the richest cities in France, Neuilly, has mainlined the worst of the far right, its racist and xenophobic rambling, while carefully excluding the anti-neo liberal content. In this way the elections are perfectly disassembling and splintering a sentiment that could, if expressed in a united fashion, overwhelm the corporate and political elites.

ONCE MORE ONTO THE BARRICADES: INTO THE BREACH WITH THE NEW SANS-CULOTTES

"The barbarians who threaten the society are not from the Caucuses or the steppes of the Tartars; they are in the suburbs of our manufacturing cities."

Description of the "rioters" from the French Revolution of 1830

While the No coalition may have fragmented for the moment, a portion of the society previously described as "non-political," that label itself simply indicating their refusal to take part in the politics of institutional accommodation, suddenly took center stage in French politics and society in October and November 2005, introducing themselves as a new force with which to be reckoned. *Les émeutes* (the riots) began on October 27 with the deaths of Ziad and Bouna, two teenagers from Clichy-sous-Bois, just north of Paris, who were electrocuted when they ran into an EDF power station eluding the police. That night the ville erupted and the car burnings began. The riots then spread in the next week and a half, first to many of the remaining cities outside Paris, and then to all of France, with the speed and ferociousness of the sweeping across the continent of the Revolutions in Europe in the 19th century. The burnings increased astronomically, from 250 on November 1st in the outlying cities (*banlieues*) around Paris to a total of 9,193 cars burned in 300 separate communities across the whole of France. They were in fact the first modern moment in French history, certainly since the war and the installation of the 5th Republic (perhaps excepting a few days in 1968), where street riots reached the proportion of Revolutionary France's defenders of the barricades. Sarkozy's characterization of the rioters as "racaille" (ruffians) is certainly in line with previous descriptions of people's struggles by the French elite, as in the quote above from two centuries ago which, if you substitute the word Arabs for Tartars, describes as well the

reaction to last year's opening salvo of this new revolution.

What the riots were and were not about has been a matter of intense speculation and debate in the country. I want to propose that one thing they were primarily about was communication. These sons and daughters of mostly African immigrants are part of a culture that has been marginalized since the moment their arrival in France was encouraged in a first wave after World War II where they helped to rebuild the country from the ravages of the war. So what did the rioters communicate and how was this an attack on the tenets of Neo-liberalism?

First there two main grievances, both expressed in the opening incident. The three teens, of whom one survived and was thrown into a coma, ran into the power station fleeing the police. The EDF station itself is a symbol of the complex of neo-liberalism sweeping France. The French state-owned utility was that day partially put on the stock market and available for private investment now as a stock, an opening gambit in what will be the major debate this fall, whether France's electric utility will be privatized. Of course privatization is part of the complex that has resulted in the huge unemployment in the banlieues which in many ways are the "first victims of industrial restructuring". As capital has championed its ability and right to mobility across the globe searching for the lowest possible wage, resulting in plant closings in industrial areas in France and neighboring Belgium where the problems are roughly the same, workers have reacted by moving themselves, usually to escape these lower wages and to take advantage of stronger labor laws in the North. The riots are in this sense a cry by these workers, or their disenfranchised children, who want rights equal to those of their parents and of French society before the restructuring and mass exodus of capital. In that sense they represent a worker response to capital's unlimited mobility, a worker's mobility, and they are willing to pay a price to battle for this equality. The riots saw 3,101 people detained with 562 incarcerated, 422 condemned to prison terms and an additional 577 minors appearing before judges. (In the US the coverage never extended to figures about the loss of freedom of the banlieue youth; the statistics focused solely on the loss of property, on the damage to the cars.)

The riots are also a reaction against the neo-colonial function of the police, seen in the communities as harassing youth, frequently stopping and arresting them, resulting in a police record and giving the police an excuse to then arrest them again. Two teens we talked to at Aubervilliers in the summer had been stopped and almost arrested that day for simply walking on the side-

walk. A confrontation will often occur with the police verbally jousting and losing the contest to the much more verbally facile, at least in this arena, teens, and then the police resorting to violence. Reports filed of police brutality are often ignored by the police and thus the *voie légale* (legal route) loses its legitimacy and, to be heard, the youth must resort to means beyond the law.

The attacks were not only on cars, which of course signify a mobility that these teens do not have, but also pointedly on sites where youth felt locked out of, including: the educational system (attacks on 92 colleges, 49 lycées or high schools and 106 schools) with its discouraging of banlieue youth from entering higher education and its disregard for their cultural traditions in the lycées and schools; the public transport system (140 attacks on the metro and outer borough train lines) since this is a symbol of exclusion, with the banlieue teens having to pay extra to even get into Paris, since there are few metros in their villes and with the public transport system closes at night, leaving them trapped in the city for the night if they want to come in to go to a club; and factories (attacks on Renault at Aulnay-sous-Bois and on unlicensed factories for example, which employ sans papiers and take jobs away from French citizens in the banlieue) which, though state subsidized, have laid off workers or discriminated in hiring.

Finally, the riots were simply about a marginalized group speaking in a way that would finally be heard in what one French commentator called “a form of citizenry by default.” The slogan of a series of riots in Saint-Denis in 1998 was *On n’est pas des moins que rien* (We are not less than nothing.) To that slogan may be added this group’s demand of “une place dans la vie,” the cry to be recognized and granted a position in French society. The riots also expressed the impatience of these teens. They are fed up with business as usual, which in French society means that when people take to the street, politicians make speeches about how awful the situation is, then simply allow some time to pass and hope the whole thing will be forgotten (this will sound familiar to anyone following the political response to Katrina in the US.) The young have reached a point where they now regard these facile promises as either blatant lies or, if there is some minimal action taken, they realize that the action is not about helping them gain equality but about making sure that they are appeased enough to guarantee social peace. When we visited the banlieues of Aubervilliers and La Courneuve, one of the teens there was very proud of being interviewed by the press and indeed he had become media savvy and was a good interview, and why not? When the banlieue kids present their point of view to the press, they’re called manip-

ulators, but when the elite present their view, they're called "experts." He told us that while the job situation had changed somewhat and there was some interest in creating job openings, the harassment and general disrespect had changed for the worse with the police now likely to arrest kids just for being in the vicinity of cars.

The last note about the riots is that they were truly ecumenical and not, as some foreign observers tried to intimate, led by "Muslim extremists." Just as in the LA rebellion of 1992, these were class, not race riots with as Jacques Chirac pointed out about the French soccer team, "black, blanc, beur" (black, white and Arab) and even, as in LA, Asians who live in the neighborhoods, participating in what was perhaps the first series of riots in the West to severely question whether the current global order can allow or participate in global equality.

THE STUDENT PROTESTS OF 2006: DROPPING INTO THE SYSTEM

The third shock to the French system followed less than four months later in the wake of Jacques Chirac's Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin slipping through the senate at midnight in February a bill, with no prior consultation with any workers organizations, which legalized precarity. The CPE (*Contrat première embauche*/first work contract) allowed employers to fire without cause an employee in their first two years of work. While Americans, who have accepted the idea of no longer having any job security, will shrug their shoulders and say 'So what,' in France, this law struck at the basis of the worker's ability to plan their life, including planning a family, based on the fact that when they were hired it would be for life.

The law was opposed in a series of mass demonstrations, and borrowing from the banlieue experience, some violence and car burnings in the center of Paris where they had not taken place before. The demonstrations for several days in March brought out not only university and lycée students but importantly also the eight largest unions, including the often conservative CFDT, in what was the first time since 1945 that all eight were united on a single issue and which to some observers recalled the heady days of the 1995 'winter of discontent' where the unions were also took to the streets in a series of protests.

The center of the protest was the Sorbonne. Mass protests there inevitably recalled the French student movement of 1968 but this was a very different

moment. 1968 was a time of abundance and still part of "*les trente glorieuses*" (the 30 Glorious Years), before the social pact at least in America and England was dissolved with the Thatcher-Reagan onslaught. In this student protest though, in the wake of the attempt in the West by corporate capital to have workers fit piecemeal into the system as needed in what is laughingly called flexibility, the issue is the refusal of the model, championed for Europe by Tony Blair who trumpets an England that, like America, boasts lower unemployment through less permanent and much lower paying jobs. If 1968's motto at least in the US was "tune in, light up, drop out," pointing to a moment that centered on cultural questioning of capitalist values, the more appropriate motto for 2006's protest is one that was adopted at Porto Allegre in the World Social Forum along with "The world is not for sale:" "Youth, and young workers, are not merely merchandise." The gap in the two mottos, one about abundance, the other about survival, shows the distance traveled in terms of the attack by capital on workers.

The protest succeeded and the law was rescinded by Chirac with the effect being that two important tenets of the neo-liberal order were successfully challenged: precarity and the rubber stamping of laws by experts with no consultation with those who the laws affect, considered the "non experts." One result of the protest was the mobilization of the student movement to also oppose a new initiative at the level of the European Union (EU) to adapt the continent's school systems to corporate needs by issuing "competency standards" across the continent that would replace national education standards. Clearly "competency" in the corporate model not only means learning effective business skills but it also means unlearning and disassembling a university culture that produces graduates who question corporate values. This effort also involves recognition by those now having come through the fire in the March protest that the EU as presently constituted is a force that opposes rather than furthers democracy. This new student movement sees the EU as an enemy and is urging a continent wide grass-roots organization aimed at dismantling the EU.

What is dawning on these students is the deeper revelation, in the words of a professor of political science at Saint-Denis, a university in located in one of the beleaguered banlieues, that "Current capitalism, motivated by its insatiable appetite for profit accumulation, can offer neither work nor dignity." That revelation may mean questioning the very foundation of the system itself, not just its contemporary neo-liberal evolution.

DEMOCRACY FOR THE FEW: PRECARIY FOR THE MANY

Where might these struggles go? How can they be taken farther? First, the presidential election. Any candidacy of Sarkozy should be a referendum on neo-liberalism. He is the strongest proponent of the position in France and he is a great polarizer (a friend who is adamantly apolitical and who hasn't voted in years told me he so despises Sarkozy's slickness that he would suit up and vote against him, and another said, vis-a-vis his role as interior minister, i.e., the minister of order, "He is a cop and a cop will not be president of France.") But Sarkozy is deflecting opinion away from his positions on precarity, foreign investment, and privatization by playing the internal security card. He stands for order, and the left's most vocal representative, Ségolène Royal, is not only letting him get away with it but, in true John Kerry mode, trying to beat him at his own game instead of giving voice to the clearly left majority position of questioning this new economic order. In the heat of the presidential battle though, things may change and the left could come together.

More trenchant and hopeful is a clear mistake the right has made in the wake of the riots. Playing the anti-immigrant card, Sarkozy has threatened to detain and expel many undocumented people (*sans-papiers* or *clandestins*). He has begun pulling school children out of schools and deporting them. The spectacle of teachers hiding immigrant children under desks from the police searches in their classrooms recalls one of the most ignoble moments in French history, the rounding up by the French police of the Jews to face Nazi deportation to the death camps. Sarkozy has had to gradually retreat from this position (there is a huge difference when the right makes a mistake between France and the US. Here, the left press, parties and movements bring the mistake into the mainstream to be debated, whereas in the US mistakes are most often ignored in the press and there are few repercussions.) Once again Sarkozy may have done something the left was incapable of doing on its own, that is, bringing everyone together. A rally last summer (on the grounds of the Cinémathèque at Bercy — cinema engagé indeed!) had Asian, Arab, African, Eastern European and French student activists all comfortably sharing the same space with one of the featured speakers, a member of the French pilot's union who was explaining that the Air France pilots were refusing to participate in flying immigrants out of France. This is a very hopeful sign of organization beyond petty electoral politics.

Finally, there is a growth in the new student movement which began wanting 'in,' but which has quickly moved to now questioning the fundamental

instrument of corporate institutional power in Europe, the EU, and organizing against it with other student movements around Europe. Once again, politics beyond flaccid, institutional, formal politics.

The French challenge to the dominant hegemony in these three moments is clearly a rapidly burgeoning challenge not only to the economic underpinnings of this global economic order but also to the governmental system that has evolved alongside it. Villepin's remark at the time of the student protests that, "In the Republic it is law and not the street that decides," is an exact indicator of the problem. His is a Republic that prides itself on being remote and out of touch with the people, one in which laws are passed by experts in the dead of night without consultation. Oligarchic democracy is democracy without the people and in France this last year and a half that trend is being reversed. The people are more and more in the streets trying to make their voice heard above the conversation in the media between the political and economic elites who constantly strive to silence them.

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