

Sixty years after, which Europe? European Union's False Choice

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Sixty years after the Treaty of Rome, Podemos MEP Miguel Urbán on rejecting both EU neoliberalism and xenophobic nationalism.

Last weekend marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, the European Union's foundational agreement.

The party for the occasion was all set, except for one thing: EU elites were confused about which tune to play, caught between celebrating past conquests and focusing on the word of the moment — speed. Which is to say, a Europe going at two or more speeds, depending on who we're asking.

Today Europeans need neither empty exercises in nostalgia nor discussions about who should go down the fast track and who down the slow one. The key question is not how fast we should go, or in what vehicle (be it a more federal one or a more inter-governmental one), but what direction the European project is headed and who it's leaving by the wayside.

The celebrations in Rome were marked by the publication of a white paper in which European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker established various possible scenarios for the EU's future — keep the current rhythm, step on the accelerator, apply the brakes, or go into reverse. Not a word was offered on the substance, the policies, that would define these routes. Nothing on youth unemployment, the migration crisis, cuts, violence against women, or climate change. In an umpteenth display of ignorance, Europe's elite closed their eyes to the crises affecting the continent and the concerns of those experiencing them.

Ignoring its population's real problems, the EU continues to be the most important mechanism for generating euroscepticism in Europe today. But does this owe to the European elites' disconnect, to their being trapped in an ivory tower? Or is it a strategy for diverting attention, for avoiding having to speak about the problems that impact millions of people every day? Or, still less, having to recognize their failure to resolve them?

With its aggressive foreign policy, the European Union has intensified conflicts around the world and contributed to fresh waves of forced migration. With its police management of its borders, it has turned the Mediterranean into an enormous mass grave, asylum into an exception and immigration into a danger for whoever is fleeing from bombs and misery. With its institutional xenophobia, the EU has normalized the discourse and proposals of the new radical right formations and the xenophobic populism that are today spreading across Europe, a specter of the past now Le Pen-izing minds across the continent.

Hollowing out sovereignty and democracy, and distancing political decision-making from the people subject to its legislation, the European Union has fed a general malaise, the series of Brexits and the rise of exclusive, identitarian nationalisms. With successive treaties, the EU has incorporated neoliberalism into its central normative corpus. Its collaboration with TTIP and CETA trade

agreements has driven through *lex mercatoria* over human rights. Through their management of the financial crisis, European elites have placed sovereign debt and the sustainability of pensions under threat, while increasing inequalities, poverty, and unemployment.

In under ten years, the EU has progressed from a proclaimed ambition to “reform capitalism” to leading the plundering of the resources, the withdrawal of the freedoms, and the dispossession of the rights of millions in Europe and around the world. Today the European Union is world neoliberalism’s leading and most advanced political instrument. Yet none of this appeared in Juncker’s White Paper, or in the discussions and celebrations in Rome last weekend.

Everything points to the “Rome declaration” — so solemnly signed last Saturday — formalizing the ‘Europe à la carte’ which Merkel’s Germany and other central and northern EU countries have dreamed about for years. The issue is not only that some member states will be able to advance more quickly than others along the road to European integration (something that was happening already — as we see from the eurozone and the Schengen area), but that these different rhythms will be applied to a pick-and-mix set of concrete questions.

There will be more Europe on some matters, in others, the brakes will be applied, and in some regards, there will even be less Europe. And we should be clear, the empty words that usually mark this kind of declaration will not be the only thing that matters. Europe à la carte has a very concrete, restricted menu: one focused on inviting members to join in with “more Europe” in the fields of security and defense.

For EU elites, this is the great (and apparently only) strategic stake for the coming period: while we cannot offer prosperity or democracy, at least we can provide security in the face of growing threats across the world. And to this end, they will drive forward “strengthened cooperation” among the member states who want it, creating a European defense fund, a common military and arms industry, or greater police and military coordination. They will do so in order finally — who knows how soon or how late — to see the birth of a European army.

In a European landscape characterized by an ever greater imbalance in its internal power relations — to the advantage countries with greater competitive potential — and with its institutions democratically delegitimized and lacking the resources and political will necessary to undertake redistributive policies and reverse the austerity agenda, the EU’s only real bet is to stake everything on militarization, defense, and security. Although they were not invited to the Rome dinner, certainly on Saturday the arms firms and their Brussels lobbyists will have organized parties around the continent to celebrate the EU’s new “speed.”

Sixty years ago, what is today the European Union was born as a project to create a single market, a customs union, and greater coordination between states in coal mining and steel production. Extractivism, free competition, and commodity circulation are the germ of the European project. Let’s not trick ourselves by presenting the policies of the last decade as somehow exceptional. Market logic and monetary and budget questions have always been the priority.

Advances in democracy, peace, welfare, and rights were welcome accompaniments when the conditions of capitalist accumulation allowed for them, but they never made up the ultimate objective of those who designed, constructed and today lead the EU. When the conditions were not favorable for this “social pact,” it became starkly apparent what really held the project together. The well-worn foundational myths dissolved and authoritarian austerity emerged as the only roadmap.

Daniel Bensaïd said that the struggle of the oppressed begins with a negative definition. Such is our rejection of the project of organizing Europe politically under the constraint of a monetary

straitjacket, debt-discipline, and a security state. Our alternative project for Europe must now develop.

We are fighting the EU project not in order to reclaim a threatened national identity and sovereignty, in the mode of the radical right. We do so from a class point of view, in the name of a social solidarity under attack from Euroliberalism. That means taking sides between the European elites' implacable competitive logic — the “frosty breath of commodity society” Benjamin wrote about, and the “warm breath of solidarity and the public good” defended by Bensaïd.

We could say that today Europe is in dispute. They want to trap us in a false dichotomy where we have to choose between a neoliberal EU or a xenophobic retreat into the nation. This choice is not only a trick, it is a mutually reinforcing one.

We need a Plan B for Europe — and its problem is not its speed, but its direction. Let's start to give form to a European project that recovers the roots of democracy in partisan antifascism, solidarity, peace, and social justice. A European project that neither excludes nor expels anyone, for it is a project no one would want to walk away from. That task has today become as urgent as it is indispensable.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 4.2.17:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/podemos-treaty-of-rome-european-union-eu-eurozone/>

* Translated by David Broder.

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