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REPLY



## Transcending the nation: a communist strategy in the era of globalization. A reply to Velissariou

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### ABSTRACT

Neoliberalism and austerity are not 'false policies', but strategies of increasing profits by reducing labor and welfare costs. In the process of dismantling labor rights and the welfare state, a part of the population is being marginalized. It becomes 'superfluous', and its living conditions approach those of the inflowing refugee masses. However, between indigenous and 'foreign' (refugee and immigrant) superfluous populations a clear demarcation line is being reproduced by state apparatuses and the ruling ideology: the demarcation line created by the nation, which excludes the non-nationals (refugees and immigrants) from the polity and certain state provisions. In fact, the nation may be regarded as a facet of the state itself: the 'historically homogenized' population of a given capitalist state. Marginalized Greek (or other European) 'nationals' tend to consider themselves 'superior' to (equally marginalized) foreigners. Fighting nationalism and, even more, transcending divisions reproduced by ideologies of particularism (often being reproduced in solidarity movements that focus on 'the rights of the *ethnic other*'), is a precondition for shaping of a radical left internationalism, through the consolidation of what is universal in all subaltern classes and communities: the need of proletarian unity, first of all within the country, struggling against capitalism.

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Sissy Velissariou's (2018) paper focuses on the 'Greek paradigm' as a characteristic example of the social and economic landscape created in developed capitalist social formations, especially in Europe, on the one hand by neo-liberal *austerity policies* and on the other by the *inflow of large immigrant populations* from Northern Africa and the Middle East.

## **Austerity policies in Greece and the EU**

By way of background, after the outbreak of the global economic crisis in 2008, Greece was actually the first Euro-area country where the neo-liberal 'shock doctrine' was imposed. This was an attempt to place all the fallout of the systemic capitalist crisis on the shoulders of the working people. In this framework, austerity is not a 'false policy', but a class strategy promoting the interests of capital against those of workers, professionals, pensioners and economically vulnerable groups. In the long run, it aims at creating a model of labour with fewer rights and less social protection, with low and flexible wages and the absence of any meaningful bargaining power.

On the surface, austerity appears as a strategy of reducing entrepreneurial cost. It reduces the labour cost of the private sector, increases profit per (labour) unit cost and therefore boosts the profit rate. It is complemented by economy in the use of 'material capital' and by institutional changes that on the one hand enhance capital mobility and competition and on the other strengthen the power of managers in the enterprise and bondholders in society.

The institutional arrangement of the Euro-Zone, with the European Central Bank (ECB) being deprived the power of a lender of last resort, deliberately reinforces neo-liberal policies. Member states will not always have the necessary liquidity to pay off bondholders, as is the case with Greece. This makes the downsizing of the Welfare State a precondition for financial solvency. The ruling European elites have thus voluntarily acquiesced themselves to a high degree of sovereign default risk in order to consolidate the neo-liberal strategies. In other words, they have jointly decided to exploit the crisis as a means to further neo-liberalize state governance.

However, what is cost for the capitalist class is the living standard of the working majority of society. This applies also to the welfare state, whose services can be perceived as a form of 'social wage'.

In the process of cost-cutting and dismantling the welfare state, a part of the population is being marginalized, being thrown out of the labour market, and losing access to social protection. It becomes a 'superfluous' population.

## **Refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and other war zones: the nation divides the two subsets of superfluous populations**

The inflow of refugees from the numerous war zones in the broader region was tackled by European states as mainly an issue of security, segregating refugees as a special category of inhabitants under state supervision, distinct from both citizens and (economic) immigrants. Their overall number was to be regulated according to international agreements (EU-Turkey agreement, quota regarding the distribution of refugees among EU states, etc.). Refugees were thus institutionalized as a transient population closely controlled by state authorities, and in this respect as a special category of superfluous population.

What is, therefore, common in both processes mentioned above and in detail analysed in Velissariou's (2018) paper, is the creation of 'superfluous populations', permanently excluded from the labor market and from any form of decent social policy

and protection. However, between indigenous and 'foreign' (refugee and immigrant) superfluous populations, a clear demarcation line is being reproduced by state apparatuses and the ruling ideology: the demarcation line created by the nation, i.e. the national identity of the indigenous majority, which excludes the non-nationals (refugees and immigrants) from the polity and certain state provisions. In fact, the nation may be regarded as a facet of the state itself: the 'historically homogenized' population of a given capitalist state.

The capitalist state 'condenses' the overall rule of capital in a social formation, at the same time presenting it as being in the 'common interest' of society. In other words, the capitalist state must always homogenize communities belonging to its political territory into an *indigenous population* supposedly possessing *common interests* and distinguish it from the 'other' (the populations of other states or territories, also the 'foreigners' immigrating from these other territories).

Modern nation-building and nationalism have played an important role in the homogenization of a capitalist state's indigenous populations: the nation constitutes the historically shaped and specifically capitalist unity (cohesion) of the antagonistic classes of a social formation, tending to unify the 'internal', and demarcate and distinguish it from the 'external', i.e. the 'non-national'. This means that even if a part of the Greek (or any other European) 'nationals' face similar conditions of economic and social marginalization as refugees or immigrants living in Greece, they still consider themselves different and, in most cases, 'superior' to (equally marginalized) foreigners, for being citizens of the Greek state (and members of the Greek nation).

In recent history, the 'expulsion' of the 'foreigner' from a national framework often took tragic forms (think, e.g. of the war in former Yugoslavia!). The nation manifested itself as a totalitarian tendency of ethnic purity and ethnic cleansing: negative discrimination against 'minorities' and whomever does not become part of the nation, sometimes to the point of violently expelling them from the main body of the nation. As Nicos Poulantzas puts it

The enclosures implicit in the constitution of the modern people-nation are only so awesome because they are also fragments of a history that is totalised and capitalised by the state. Genocide is the elimination of what become 'foreign bodies' of the national history and territory: it expels them beyond space and time [...]. Concentration camps are a modern invention in the additional sense that the frontier-gates close on 'anti-nationals' for whom time and national historicity are *in suspense*. (Poulantzas 1980, 114–115)

But it is not only the separation of state 'nationals' and 'foreigners'. The 'national identity' of each group of 'foreigners' further complicates things. Problems arise also from national rivalries or ethnic tensions between different groups of refugees or immigrants, e.g. Afghans vs. Arabs, Albanians or Romanians vs. 'Slavs' etc., thus creating additional divisions among superfluous populations.

## Revolutionary universality vs. all forms of (ethnic, cultural, religious, etc.) particularity

A main merit of the paper is that it focusses on this cleavage among the exploited and marginalized social classes in contemporary capitalist societies and stresses the need for the shaping of a radical left universalism, through the consolidation of what is *universal* in all subaltern classes and communities, as opposed to the particularism of ethnic or other *identities*: the propensity and need to fight for a better life.

This universalism can be the ground for a new communist strategy: a non-national community of proletarians struggling in solidarity against capitalism, for a democratic, egalitarian and just society.

Velissariou (2018, 7) aptly shows that all approaches stressing particularity as the base for solidarity to refugees or immigrants ('the rights of *the Other*' etc.) simply reproduce the segregation imposed by the capitalist state; it cannot surpass the limits of philanthropy:

The game will be lost for the radical Left if it addresses the workers, who are already victimized by neoliberal economy, or city populations, who feel threatened by denizens and 'foreigners', on the basis of a moral duty to include the dispossessed and the excluded in their lives.... What gets lost in this is the position of universality embodied in the excluded.

In stating this strategy, Velissariou (2018, 8-9) is aware of the difficulties. Above all, the 'subjective factor', the radical Left, shall be itself transformed:

For the Greek radical Left it is urgent to dissociate citizenship from territoriality so as to demarcate a common political space that pauperized and dispossessed Greeks could share with the war refugees and immigrants [...] a common terrain emerges, which is purely political and could contribute towards the construction of a shared identity: both are the victims of globalized capitalism and are equally subjected to state biopolitics.

The 'objective factor', i.e. social and economic relations, seems also to be negative: ethnic, cultural, religious, etc. *identities* favor particularism and divisions among the proletarian and superfluous populations. However, there always exists, according to Velissariou (2018), an antinomy within 'objective factors':

Neoliberal capitalism constantly reproduces a *common condition* for all categories of exploited and superfluous populations: 'the harsh model of regulation, control and segregation of the refugee populations, [...] ironically reproduces precisely the biopolitics imposed on the Greeks by the EU austerity agenda' (Velissariou 2018, 3).

An 'objective factor' favoring the revolutionary transcending of national segregation and nationalism is thus present.

## Further thoughts

We may read the political conclusions of the paper as a call for a new internationalism of the exploited and marginalized classes, this time not (only) between proletarians of 'all countries', but, first of all, *within the same country*; an internationalism encompassing the proletarian masses of different ethnic groups living in the country. The large inflows of refugees and immigrants in Europe during the last decade and the impoverishment-marginalization of large indigenous masses of citizens in Greece and other EU countries have created the prima facie possibility of such a new internationalism.

In support of this argument, I would like to add at this point a few more thoughts.

- (a) The neoliberal form of capitalism itself promotes a tendency towards de-territorialization and denationalization: the significance of forms of governmentality *beyond national politics, beyond national rhetoric, beyond national cohesion or national territorialisation* is constantly growing. In other words, neoliberalism itself promotes forms of governmentality based on technologies of power deriving from internationalized monetary and financial processes and regulatory norms. In a recently published book I co-authored, we stressed the following:

There are three key abstract elements that characterize this process of regulation: 1. It has a *heterogeneous population* as its target [...] 2. It deals with *collective* phenomena [...] 3. Collective phenomena are grasped in *statistical terms*. (Sotiropoulos, Milios, and Lapatsioras 2013, 164–165, emphasis added)

As non-national forms of governmentality based on market rules play a decisive role, different parts of the population resort to practices and political initiatives beyond national politics. For example, how else can we interpret the outcome of the two referendums in the Italian regions of Lombardy (Milan) and Veneto (Venice) on 22 October 2017, where more than 90% of the voters in each region voted in favour of autonomy from Italy? Given the fact that, from an ethnic point of view, neither Lombardy nor Veneto are regions nationally differentiated from the rest of Italy, the referendums expressed aspirations for new, *non-national* capitalist polities!

- (b) A non-national capitalist social formation and capitalist state is absolutely feasible. For whole centuries, capitalism prevailed in most parts of Western Europe and elsewhere without the capitalist state being a national state and without capitalist social formations being related with (or supported by) any nation. The process of nation-building was initiated in Europe centuries after capitalism had established its rule in many social formations and parts of the continent. Nationalism and national identity emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, roughly in the wake of the French Revolution.

As Karl Marx has pointed out in *Capital*, ‘the capitalist era dates from the sixteenth century’ (Marx 1990, 876). And he adds the following: ‘in Italy, where capitalistic production developed earliest, the dissolution of serfdom also took place earlier than elsewhere’ (Marx 1990, 876). For centuries capitalist states existed on the Italian peninsula and in Atlantic Europe, without being national states. (For a detailed analysis see Milios 2018).

Eric Hobsbawm situates the beginning of the age of nations and nationalism in Europe after the American French Revolutions. More specifically, concerning nineteenth-century Italy, i.e. three centuries after the establishment of the ‘capitalist era’, he writes,

In the days of Mazzini ... for the great bulk of Italians, the Risorgimento did not exist so that, as Massimo d’Azeglio admitted in the famous phrase: ‘We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians’ (Hobsbawm 1992, 44)... the only basis for Italian unification was the Italian

language ... even though it has calculated that at the moment of unification (1860) only 2,5% of the population used the language for everyday purposes. (Hobsbawm 1992, 60–61)

As Hobsbawm's analysis documents, the nation emerges only when nationalism and the 'national idea' becomes a mass movement, or at least is recognized as an ideological, sentimental and political stance by a considerable part of a population. In early capitalism, allegiance to the state by the subaltern classes was safeguarded without the mediation of a national or racial identity, but rather by a feeling of common belonging to a polity, combined with a nearly religious sense of common belonging. The 'other', the 'alien' and even more so, the 'enemy', was not the 'ethnic' alien or immigrant, but the subject of a foreign state.

Early capitalist states having existed in the historical period prior to 'the age of nationalism', in many cases (e.g. the Venetian Republic and its colonies, Genoa, the Dutch Federation etc.) created forms of economic and social interaction which facilitated the expanded reproduction of capitalist relations of exploitation and domination, while simultaneously preserving a multicultural and multilingual society. They were always ready to exploit the advantages of accepting 'foreigners' into their state or colonial territory.

(c) The target of the radical Left cannot be, however, to (re)create a non-nationalist and non-racist capitalist society, but to overthrow capitalism and build a socialist society, in transition to communism. In the present historical conjuncture, this presupposes the formation of a struggling 'alternative non-national community [...], not a network of solidarity, important but essentially limiting, but an anti-capitalist paradigm of life' (Velissariou 2018, 14).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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