

European Union: The Nice summit or a superpower in search of a leadership

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Nervousness reigns in the highest European spheres as the Nice summit approaches. The Danish setback followed a series of failures: the fall of the Euro and the inability of Duisenburg and his cronies at the European Central Bank (ECB) to develop a coherent policy (from a bourgeois point of view); the absence of a coordinated reaction from the EU to the fuel crisis, with each government assuming the management of the class struggle in its own manner; and the fiasco of the “anti-fascist” intervention in Austria, cynically utilised to inaugurate “the birth of the political Europe”.

Once again the development of the EU is getting bogged down. The ‘benefits’ of the Portuguese presidency from January-June 2000 (full employment through the new economy) have rapidly evaporated. They were not enough to develop a “European-communitarian” spirit to the point where the interests of the national states could be relegated to the second level. As for public opinion, it is proving a disappointment to the social-democratic dreams: at a time when the economic conjuncture is bullish and the governments are making concessions, workers, instead of thanking their generous governors for their promises, have moved into action in a number of countries to recoup their losses.

The Danish ‘no’ has not unleashed a tempest, either on the financial markets or in the chancelleries. The former had largely anticipated the event. The second have adopted a low profile. Yet each EU government and political leader has had to meditate on this fact: half the population of a member-country has been able to resist a veritable political-ideological bombardment, lasting for several months and led by all the centres of power (state, political, economic-financial, trade union, media). This vote of resistance also brings to mind the enormous rate of abstention during the last European elections and the manifest setback to the ruling social democracy, principal architect of the Amsterdam treaty. The EU enjoys a very weak legitimacy in all the member countries (except the poorest countries and regions which receive, for the moment, the manna of subsidies).

Against this background, the EU governments are confronted with a series of problems of great breadth, linked to the passage to a European power, by supplementing the single currency (which entered into circulation on January 1, 2002) with a European army and the political-economic unification of the European continent. It is in this framework that institutional reform is posed, starting from economic and social upheavals internal to the “enlarged and powerful” EU, which of course affects the relationship of forces between member states, but also external relations, i.e. the presence of the EU on the world stage and rivalry with the US.

The Nice Summit will have to deal with sizable problems which go well beyond the formal agenda:

1. A paradox: the official agenda is only a remainder of the meeting in Amsterdam in June 1997 and boils down to three points: the size of the Commission (total number of commissioners, and how many for each country), the weighting of the votes of each member state in the Council of Ministers,

and the type of vote (unanimity or qualified majority) according to the matters being dealt with. With a supplementary point: strengthened cooperation, that is the possibility for some member countries to advance together in a particular area. Nonetheless, these are not merely “homeopathic” measures.

2. Immediately linked to this structure: the role of Mister CFSP (Higher Representative of Common Foreign and Security Policy), today incarnated by Javier Solana. Already secretary general of the Council of Ministers, which has entrusted him with setting up a proper executive apparatus, he must also incarnate the imperialist capacities of the EU and represent its states, and among these latter the most powerful. It is a crucial choice so far as the weight of the Council and the Commission are concerned. Prodi and others contest this situation, preferring to attach the function to the Commission. All the more so in that already the idea is being advanced of a “Higher Representative of Economic Policy”, who would be an interlocutor with the ECB and spokesperson of the Council.

3. This function is linked to the establishment of a “European army” (increasingly linked to a project of a European police and “European prosecution office”. Here, what is at issue is “internal security” and the maintenance of order, in the perspective of a new wave of immigrant labour). Although it is not formally on the agenda, the Summit should register a verdict on the progress on the ground (Kosovo, as it happens!) and deduce from it the conclusions for the institutional organization chart.

4. The absurd and untenable situation of a totally sovereign (and opaque) European Central Bank that manages “a currency without a state” and as a function of one sole and exclusive criterion, that of price levels (zero inflation!). In no other country of the world does such a situation exist (not even in the United States which is supposedly taken as a model). In good capitalist logic, monetary policy is part of economic policy of which it is an instrument. In the EU the Bank has a “dialogue” with the 11 finance ministers (the “Euro-group”) and decides, giving moreover its opinion on all the key social and economic questions! Economic coordination in the EU is limited to the broad guidelines of economic policies following the “stability pact”, which serves in fact solely to dragoon the labour movement. This incoherence now seriously annoys big capital. Formally this point does not figure on the agenda. But it is there under the surface, in fact at the heart of the executive apparatus which is to be built.

5. The oft-proclaimed enlargement of the EU (towards the countries of the East, as well as Cyprus and Turkey) should begin to be implemented in practice (Poland, Hungary), for a new postponement could provoke a gigantic moral and political crisis in these countries - with explosive social crises which could have a boomerang effect in the EU. Even if this happened without major conflicts, this “new EU” would be so heterogeneous that the main founders would be affected by it. Not only because of the number of members, but above all because of the differences in economic and social structures.

6. The Charter of fundamental rights - an emasculated attempt to give a certain protection to citizens of the European state which is under construction - involves a veritable social regression. It is dangerous, because, adopted as it is, it provides a point of “European legal” support to the national governments in dismantling the gains of a century of workers’ conquests (see the article by Marie-Paule Connan). However, indirectly, and involuntarily, it raises the problem of the incorporation of this Charter in the Treaties, and, from this, the problem of a European Constitution.

Faced with this problematic of historic dimension, consequence of capitalist globalisation, the informal summit at Biarritz presented a derisory spectacle where everything turned around squabbles about posts (who and how many) in the Commission or in the Councils Of Ministers (happily there was Kostunica to give a little relief). In reality, behind some narrowly functional changes, there are two basic questions, still present, never explicitly touched on:

1. The EU: Federation or Confederation (Bundesstaat or Staatenbund)?
2. What institutions to create a real political leadership?

Certain journalists have written that these are no more than “homeopathic” operations.

But wrongly: these measures, certainly not very exhilarating, have an obvious principal aspect. Abandoning majority rule is not simply a measure of functional efficiency (“how to take decisions in an EU which will go from 15 to 18, 25, 30...”): in abolishing the right to veto (the rule of unanimity) in favour of majority vote (“qualified” as it happens) one enters a regime of supranationality, of abandonment of national sovereignty (a country in the minority is obliged to apply the decision). This is proposed for the Council of Ministers, which is the real decision-making power in the EU (the executive, legislative and constituent body) and the heart of intergovernmentalism.

Nonetheless, officially the EU swears by the “communautaire” method of which the Commission is supposed to be the “locomotive”! If that happens, one does not imagine that the big three (Germany, Great Britain, France) or any one of them can be put into a minority on an essential question. That would immediately lead to a great crisis. Thus, it is necessary to assure a numerical preponderance of this trio inside the Council. Hence the weighting of the votes which expresses material weight (by a demographic criterion alone or by combining it with the GDP of the country). On the basis of the figures which circulate, the countries of the trio, which each have 10 votes, will have 30 (Schroeder is demanding 33), as would Italy, Spain would have 27, and so on. This would have consequences for the composition of the Commission. There, the weighting is defined differently: the big countries (the trio plus Spain and Italy) have each two commissioners, the other countries only one. What if the EU enlarges to 20 or more? Will every member country then have a commissioner? Impractical, they say. Thus, a smaller Commission in order to be more coherent and more efficient, for example one of 10 or 12 commissioners. That would not go without a regular rotation!

But a Commission without the big countries would be a weakened commission in dealing with the Council of Ministers. Chirac’s solution is that each country would be present in the Commission, but a sort of Presidency of the Commission would be set up, composed of the biggest countries.

Obviously, in this scenario, it becomes possible to extend the number of matters or clauses of the treaty which could be adopted and amended on the basis of a qualified vote: the countries of the trio would abandon entire areas of their sovereignty national (going from 70 to 120 clauses is spoken of), in exchange for a new supranationality shared between them!

What is at stake here is giving a legal, institutional basis to the actually existing mechanism which is the real motor of the EU: the bilateral (exceptionally trilateral) preparation between France, Germany and Great Britain of all the summits, and, between the summits, consultations on the taking of important political positions. This mechanism would be thus incorporated into the Treaties.

Thus, an enormous step forward would have been taken: a real political leadership would be created in tune with the EU’s ambition of becoming a superpower (dixit Blair but also Chirac, Schroeder being more discreet on such a subject) without being a supranational state.

In this scenario (which Chirac tried to impose brutally on the smaller countries during dinner at Biarritz), the centre of gravity would be displaced towards the Council of Ministers. The EU would head towards a confederation (abandoning the federalist perspective which implies a continuous and maximal transfer of the prerogatives of the states towards the supranational level).

A Confederation is distinguished, by definition, from a Federation and a Unitary State, by the narrow number of supranational prerogatives: currency, defence, law and order, questions of citizenship.

Freer “strengthened cooperations” will open this possibility, creating a more advanced and more coherent centre of gravity, to which the other states would be attached on the basis of a more limited commitment. All this being evolutionary, of course. It is for the moment the case in the EU for monetary union (Britain, Sweden and Denmark aren’t part of it), the Schengen treaty, the setting up of the Eurocorps. One can imagine that some Eastern countries will join the EU without participating in monetary union (without applying the Maastricht criteria and the stability pact, and without being present in the ECB). But it is doubtful that in the first case, the EU is pushing for homogenisation. In the second, this partial involvement in the EU could structure itself.

In this scenario, the contradiction between the institutional deepening of the EU and its enlargement is a false problem, artificially puffed up by the tactical needs of countries playing the game of the balance of power and by superficial journalists. In reality, there is substantial agreement between the trio (and others like Italy) on this perspective. Even if this agreement is shot through with contradictions, these are secondary. What obscures this basic dynamic is the difficulty the British government has in joining the monetary union and the necessity for Blair to make rhetorical concessions to a majority of the British population. But Blair (and big British and foreign capital) is in favour of membership. The European army under construction is an initiative by Britain (with France), on the basis of their common engagement in the Balkans and their irritation (also common) with the US. If this question is resolved, the other problem, that of the political management of the ECB, could be approached.

The EU and its vanguard (the three key imperialist countries) have the perspective of creating a political leadership in tune with their European, indeed global ambitions. It would be otiose to stress the threat that this carries for democracy in the EU and for the conquests of the working class.

Another Europe is needed - social, democratic, egalitarian, generous... For that it is necessary to do everything possible to stop this machine. There is only one way: the mobilisation of the labour movement and progressive public opinion around one idea: Stop right there! Break down the closed doors of an omnipotent European Council! The right to speak and make decisions must lie with the peoples of Europe! They must determine, through public debate, through a decision of their elected representatives, the fundamental bases on which they wish to live together: from the Pole to Gibraltar, and from the Atlantic to the Urals!

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P.S.

* From <http://internationalviewpoint.org/>

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