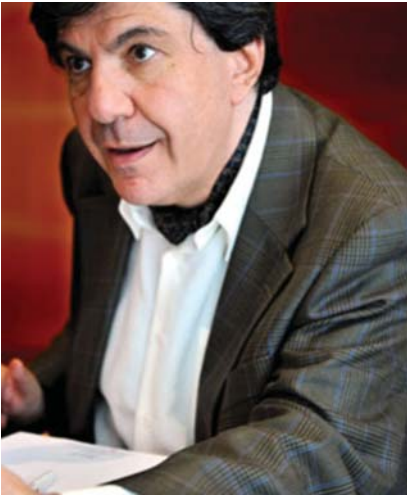


# CORRUPTION OF THE ELITE HAS NURSED POPULIST MOVEMENTS

Jacques Sapir

POSITION



JACQUES SAPIR — a leading European expert in Eastern European economics, and the director of the Higher School for Social Studies in Paris. He is an expert on problems of Russian and Soviet economic development, a member of editorial boards of several French scientific research journals, and he is a research advisor of several organisations and programmes, such as the European Committee, TACIS, PHARE, and others

■ *In the 19th and 20th centuries the progressive agenda was defined by a struggle for wider civil, political, and economic rights. What is the progressive agenda in the context of the 21st century? Has it changed in comparison to the previous centuries? What are the core points and main sources of struggle between progressive and reactionary forces?*

The progressive agenda has been enriched more than it has been changed with the beginning of the 21st century. Human and social

rights are still today a matter of concern today, even in ‘developed’ countries, were we are enjoying a democracy more formal than real. But, at the same time new rights have been added to the ‘classical’ list of human rights and they have also been playing a role in the current radicalization of public opinion. The most obvious is what we could call the right to have a non-polluted environment. It is an important new right and one that will probably lead to large collective action and struggle. Another right emerging now is the right of ‘equal protection’ toward natural disasters or the risk of disaster. In a society where there is an increase of this kind of risk, because social density — non-intentional interaction between people — is rising fast, but also because of the spread of advancing technologies, the demand for protection is increasing too. This could be met through applying the ‘precaution principle’ but then you are running the risk of paralysing your society. If you are to relax the ‘precaution principle,’ and frankly I don’t see how we could do otherwise, then you have to provide an equal degree of protection for all.

The combination of ‘old’ and ‘new’ rights is now defining the arena for the confrontation between ‘reactionary’ and ‘progressive’ forces.

If you support the need for a real, and not just a formal, democracy, for better distribution of wealth and resources, for a fairer access to education and health through public implementation and provision, for a greater control of economic activities that have a potential to degrade the environment, for a bet-

ter protection against human-induced ‘natural’ risk; then yes, you are on the progressive side.

If there is one thing that hasn’t changed it is the fact **that reliance on individualism in the social sphere and contempt for anything resembling a collective is still a trademark of conservatism** and even of a reactionary approach to the world.

■ *Is the English sociologist T.H. Marshall right in saying that the history of the West is the history of the progressive establishment of rights, such as civil, political, and economic ones? Do you agree that today the struggle of progress and reaction is about giving people economic rights?*

Yes, it is true that reactionary and progressive forces are clashing over economic rights. What defines the ‘reactionary side’ if we can speak about a unified side, is a constant attempt to free himself from collective action and to impose constraints on the will of people. Of course, these constraints are supposed to be ‘technical.’ Nevertheless, the ideology of depoliticizing economics was spelled out in the first half of the 20th century by Austrian authors, Von Mises and Hayek, and has been a cornerstone of reactionary positions ever since.

Economics pretend to be both descriptive, analytical, and prescriptive. For some, economic decisions should be taken away from the direct or indirect influence of citizens and be drafted according to ‘laws,’ which are supposed to be similar to those of the natural sciences. But economics are a social science and economic law, when it exists, is only tempo-

rary and contingent to a precise context.

**The hullabaloo surrounding State interventions in economy is precisely the direct application of this attempt to de-politicize the economy.** A democratic State is meant to be the expression of citizens' will and is supposed to take care of their needs and interests. This is why the question of the role of the State in the economy still defines the line where reactionary and progressive forces clash.

■ *Can the establishment of globally governing institutions be called a part of the progressive agenda of the 21st century? Similarly, can the fight against a violation of human rights and the practice of international intervention, for example in Libya, be called progressive?*

What global governance are we talking about? When Georgia bombarded the city of Tskhinvaly where was the UN? In just one night, the Georgians killed as many people as Gaddafi's troops in 6 weeks in Misrata. We pretend that we care about protecting human rights in Libya yet we turn a blind eye to what happens to Palestinians. Current institutions are not designed for global governance but rather to protect the interests of a group of countries. This is why describing the current situation as 'global governance' is not just a mistake, it is a parody, an insult.

What we are seeing in Libya is actually a continuing corruption of this system, of course made openly in good faith. The n°1973 resolution was drafted to prevent a government to use its air force against its population. But France, Great-Britain, and the United States have turned this resolution on its head to intervene more and more in the now ongoing civil war. This is clearly an abuse and something not only largely ineffective on the

ground but also something that discredits the UN system more and more. Moreover, Western intervention has not clearly expressed its goal. First, we learnt that the ousting of Mr. Gaddafi was not an aim. Now, it has clearly become one. At first the intervention was not to include ground troops. Now it is more and more probable that we are to see, in one form or another, Western ground troops in the field. The constant switching of their

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aims and means demonstrates just how much some countries have taken the n°1973 UN resolution as a blank check.

This is why we can't call this intervention progressive. Right now we don't know if this intervention will or will not succeed or what is to be the ultimate destiny of Mr. Gaddafi. But one thing is to be sure: the UN system has been again delegitimized by Western powers, and this is something that will invariably push more and more countries to seek their own safety through the development of nuclear power. The general level of risk in the world has no doubt been greatly enhanced by this intervention.

■ *Who are the reactionary forces in the present-day world? Who supports them, and what is the basis for their support?*

Reactionary forces very rarely advance unmasked. Or, more precisely, if political and social forces, which can be labelled as 'reactionary,' support part of the reactionary agenda, then political forces usually associated with the progressive side of the spectrum

support another part. We can see that with the evolution of Socialist parties in Europe, now supporting privatization of utilities and making budget trade-offs that are slowly destroying utilities. To some extent, these parties have joined, at least partly, reactionary forces. Of course, reactionary forces are still largely built on politics of hate, on the fear of middle-class and the upper-blue collars to go down in a situation where there is a large eco-

nomical slump both in the USA and in Western Europe. But what is striking in the current situation is the fact that contesting the social system and its growing unfairness is now taken also by forces we would have thought once to be 'reactionary.'

There is also a European particularity. Everybody knows that the European Union is in crisis and that the Euro, as a single currency for countries with huge economic and structural differences, is doomed. Populist movements have now included the denunciation of the EU and the Euro as part of their agenda. In France this is very clear and could be traced to the success of the 'No' vote (55% 'No', 45% 'Yes') in the 2005 referendum. Part of the left has traditionally opposed the European construction. But now, this opposition has declined greatly inside Socialist parties.

The end result of the intellectual decay of the traditional left in Western European countries is to leave an open field to populist forces. A recent poll showed that more than 36% of blue-collar workers were ready to vote for the National Front in France against

only 17% for the Socialist Party candidate and 16% for President Sarkozy. The same situation is now developing among youth (less than 35 years old) and educated people. No longer can we speak of the National Front voters as representing minor parts of the French society. To some extent the same situation is growing in other countries.

This is making the political situation very complex now and, to some extent, **there are progressive aspirations in forces globally thought as reactionary. The degree of political confusion is very high.**

■ *The success of the nationalistic forces in Finland, the rise of the anti-immigrant attitudes in Europe due to the wave of migrants from Northern Africa, clamour regarding the Tea Party movement – does all this mean that in Europe and the USA a new reactionary wave is rising against a swollen social security system and excesses in the matter of human rights?*

The situation is pretty different in the USA and in Western Europe. Some populist parties, mainly in France but in other countries too, are not protesting against too much social welfare but against too little. In the USA, the ‘Tea Party’ movement is closer to its traditional reactionary roots, with a high contempt against ‘big government,’ a support of Christian fundamental-

are no longer interested in Christian fundamentalism (once an important part of their ideology) and they pretend to defend the secular society built in France since the 1905 laws. They also agree with abortion laws.

There is however one point where the ‘Tea Party’ movement and Western European populist movements agree, and that is on their anti-immigrant attitude. But, even on this point it is important to note that the French National Front wants immigration to be stopped, with all illegal immigrants expelled from France. This is not so different with the centre-right parties. Here again we are seeing a sensible evolution.

The only European exception seems for me to be Hungary, where we are seeing a movement very much closer to reactionary forces in the 1930s. To a large extent, Viktor Orban’s government is closer to the ‘Tea Party’ movement than to other Western European populist forces.

■ *Is the relative success of reactionary movements the consequence of some excessive progressive agenda, offered as consideration for the shortcomings of current developments in society? Or is it but another obstacle to be overcome on the path towards a fairer society?*

The main problem doesn’t lie in

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ism, a global opposition to abortion, and the like. You won’t find these trends in the French ‘National Front’ or in other similar movements. They now support a strong state with a deep interventionist agenda in the economy, they

supposed ‘excesses’ of the progressive agenda but in the double standard practised by political elites toward democracy. On one hand, both left and right pretend that they strongly support democracy. On the other hand, their day to day record

for at least 10 years has been one of turning a blind eye to the will of their constituents, discounting votes as irrelevant (as with the 2005 referendum on the still-born European Constitutional Treaty), and introducing new limits under some technical guise to democracy. They have tolerated the growth of global companies to the point that they are now often as powerful as governments. These are the main reasons for the growing success of populist movements.

Political experts are calling these successes a threat to democracy. But it is exactly the contrary. **It is because democracy has been constantly weakened in Western democracies, because the degree of corruption of the political elite has considerably increased – which, in turn is a direct result of the weakening of democracy – that we are seeing populist movements on the rise.** Their successes are symptoms of the deep crisis of democracy we see in some Western countries, and more deeply in Western Europe. Of course, sometimes the very symptom can become part of the illness. It is not because you have some fever that you are ill, it is because you are ill that you have a fever. But too much fever can also kill you.

If we really want to build a fairer society the most important thing to do is to address this crisis of democracy. We need governments truly representative of their constituents, with enough power to curb the rise of private interests when they threaten those of the majority. Policies they implement ought to address the true needs of the majority (the ‘old’ and ‘new’ social rights). But I strongly doubt this will be possible with the current political elite. Yes, **we are entering times of trouble and revolution.** ■

*Yulia Netesova exclusively for the Yaroslavl Forum*