



Workers' Liberty



The left should not "Trumpify" itself*

Michel Husson, *Workers' Liberty*, 21 November, 2016

On 23 January 2015, several days after being named as the Finance Minister of the new Greek government, Yanis Varoufakis answered questions from *Channel Four*. His first objective, he explained, was to take emergency steps to reduce the social effects of the crisis, and the third was to re-negotiate the debt. Between these two, and before even getting to the question of the debt, Varoufakis named as his target the system of oligarchy: "We are going to destroy the Greek oligarchy system".

These intentions were not followed through with, but Varoufakis clearly understood that a double rupture was needed in order to provide an alternative to economic and social disaster: not only a break with the austerity imposed by the Troika, but also, within Greece, a break with an oligarchic system made up of absentee ship-owners, predatory CEOs and financial speculators.

Social question and "national" question

What is the relationship here with Brexit, the election of Trump, or the rise of the [French] National Front? Perhaps it can be found in the fundamental asymmetry of the anti-system discourse which contributes to their success. The method consists of subordinating the social question to the national question, or more precisely, to the way that the nation is inserted into the world economy. Concretely, this consists of instilling the simple idea: all our problems, including social problems, come from outside. The people responsible for all our problems are strangers "by nature": that is, globalisation, China, Mexico, refugees, the European Commission, etc.

Certainly, at home, this anti-system discourse opposes the parties "of the system", but the main objection to them is not so much that they serve the interests of banks and multinationals and have therefore acted in a socially regressive way. To be sure, establishment parties have been accused of being responsible for unemployment and inequality, but only insofar as they are allied to Brussels, or the World Trade Organisation, and therefore subject to the whims of the global system.

USA! USA! USA!

"We are going to take back control of our country and make America great again". That was the fundamental theme of the Trump campaign, and we heard its partisans acclaim it during his first declaration of his candidacy with cries of

* « [La gauche devrait-elle se "trumpiser" ?](#) », *AlterEcoPlus*, 10 novembre 2016. Translated by Edward Maltby.

“USA! USA! USA!” Re-establishing the USA in its role as the world’s uncontested primary superpower, or to reclaim the benefits of British insularity, this is the background music for the anti-system proclamations.

Ignacio Ramonet [a left-wing journalist, editor of the Spanish edition of *Le Monde diplomatique*] recently unveiled “[Donald Trump’s proposals that the mainstream media is hiding from us](#)”. Alongside Trump’s narrative of victimhood vis-à-vis the media (a classic), two main propositions take centre stage in Trump’s programme: denunciation of the ills of globalisation, and protectionism. Five million industrial jobs have been lost in the USA and, says Trump, this is due to relocations, free trade, and Chinese competition. Therefore, he promises to increase duties on Chinese and Mexican products and to denounce free-trade agreements which have been concluded (NAFTA) or which are being negotiated (TTIP).

Confusionist fog on the left

In a recent comment piece, Antoine Bevort and Philippe Corcuff denounce the “confusionist fog on the left”. Even if the title of their piece, “[Ignacio Ramonet Trumpified?](#)”, might seem too much, their criticism nevertheless indicates a real problem. Ramonet’s article really reads like a list of themes which we ought not cede to the right. His list continues with “refusing neo-liberal budget cuts to social security”, the increase of taxes on traders and the re-establishment of the Glass-Steagall law which was repealed in 1999 by Bill Clinton. In short, Trump is setting himself up as the defender of the middle class and the poor: the enemy of finance, so to speak.

It is this aspect of Trump programme which “the mainstream media is hiding from us” and which we should take into account. That is certain. But Ramonet “is hiding from us” the fact that Trump’s project is also to privatise Obamacare. And above all, how can we take seriously the demagogic refrain (“we will cut taxes but without touching social welfare”) which we know so well in France thanks to the rightwing Presidential primaries?

For Trump, as for Sarkozy, Juppé or Le Pen, the social rhetoric is really just decoration: it covers over what lies at the heart of their discourse, which is the assertion of sovereignty or an identity (which is more or less under attack). The strength of this discourse rests on a simplistic representation of the world, which is to say, primitive, or even tribal: all our ills come from elsewhere, from abroad. It is possible to construct a mass psychology with its basis on the fear of the future and of the other. The long shadow of the national question falls across and obscures the social question.

We must not, we are told, allow the right to monopolise the “national” question: the left should develop its own sovereignty narrative – a left-wing one of course – for which quitting the Euro should be the central plank. If that is the lesson that we draw from Trump, then the identitarians and the xenophobes are in for a great time.