Political Crisis in Italy and Greece: Marx on 'Technical Government'

Posted Nov 17, 2011 by Marcello Musto
Marxism Greece, Italy News

In recent years Marx has again been featuring in the world's press because of his prescient insights into the cyclical and structural character of capitalist crises. Now there is another reason why he should be re-read in the light of Greece and Italy: the reappearance of the 'technical government'.

As a contributor to the *New York Tribune*, one of the widest circulation dailies of his time, Marx observed the political and institutional developments that led to one of the first technical governments in history: the Earl of Aberdeen cabinet of December 1852 to January 1855.

Marx's reports stood out for their perceptiveness and sarcasm. The *Times*, for its part,celebrated the events as a sign that Britain was 'at the commencement of the *political millennium* in which party spirit is to fly from the earth, and genius, experience, industry and patriotism are to be the sole qualifications for office'; and it called on 'men of every class of opinion' to rally behind the new government because 'its principles command universal assent and support'. All this excited Marx's derision, which poured forth in his article 'A Superannuated Administration. Prospects of the Coalition Ministry, &c.' (January 1853). What the *Times* found so modern and enthralling was for him sheer farce. When the London press announced 'a ministry composed entirely of new, young and promising characters', he mused that 'the world will certainly be not a little puzzled [to learn] that the new era in the history of Great Britain is to be inaugurated by all but used-up decrepit octogenarians (. . .), the bureaucrat, who served under almost every Administration since the close of the last century; other members of the Cabinet twice dead of age and exhaustion and only resuscitated into an artificial existence.'

Alongside the judgments of individuals are others, naturally of greater interest, concerning their policies. 'We are promised the total disappearance of party warfare, nay even of parties themselves,' Marx noted. 'What is the meaning of *The Times*?' The question is unfortunately all too topical today, in a world where the rule of capital

Also by Marcello Musto

Political Crisis in Italy and Greece: Marx on 'Technical Government' by Marcello Musto November 17, 2011

One Hundred and Fifty Years of Marx's Grundrisse: Incomplete, Complex and Prophetic by Marcello Musto December 01, 2008

Monthly Review Essays

The Obama Line, Samantha Power, and U.S. Intervention in West Afr…

Jean-Philippe Stone



December 2013 marked the beginning of the worst Ebola outbreak in history. Ebola, a severe hemorrhagic virus which causes muscle and joint pain, diarrhea, vomiting, and bleeding, spread from Guinean forests to the capita...

Daraja Press

over labour has become as feral as it was in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The separation between economics and politics that differentiates capitalism from previous modes of production has reached its highest point. Economics not only dominates politics, setting its agenda and shaping its decisions, but lies outside its jurisdiction and democratic control — to the point where a change of government no longer changes the direction of economic and social policy.

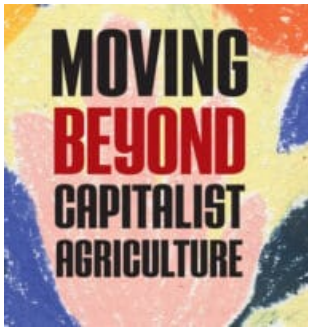
In the last thirty years, the powers of decision-making have passed inexorably from the political to the economic sphere. Particular policy options have been transformed into economic imperatives which, brooking no contradiction, disguise a highly political and utterly reactionary project behind an ideological mask of apolitical expertise. This shunting of parts of the political sphere into the economy, as a separate domain impervious to change, involves the gravest threat to democracy in our times; national parliaments, already drained of representative value by skewed electoral systems and authoritarian revisions of the relationship between executive and legislature, find their powers taken away and transferred to the market. Standard & Poor's ratings and the Wall Street index — those mega-fetishes of contemporary society — carry incomparably more weight than the will of the people. At best political government can 'intervene' in the economy (the ruling classes often need to mitigate the destructive anarchy of capitalism and its violent crises), but they cannot call into question its rules and fundamental choices.

The events of recent days in Greece and Italy are a striking illustration of these tendencies. Behind the facade of the term 'technical government' — or 'government of all the talents', as it was known in Marx's day — we can make out a suspension of politics (no referendum, no elections) that supposedly hands over the whole field to economics. In an article of April 1853, 'Achievements of the Ministry', Marx wrote: 'The best thing perhaps that can be said in favour of the Coalition ["technical"] Ministry is that it represents impotency in [political] power at a moment of transition.' Governments no longer discuss which economic orientation to take; economic orientations bring about the birth of governments.

In Italy, the key programmatic points were listed last summer in a letter (meant to remain secret!) from the European Central Bank to the Berlusconi government. To restore market 'confidence', it was necessary to proceed rapidly down the road of 'structural reforms', an expression now used as a synonym for social devastation: in other words, wage cuts, attacks on workers' rights over hiring and firing, increases in the pension age, and large-scale privatization. The new 'technical governments', headed by men with a background in some of the economic institutions most responsible for the crisis (Papademos in Greece, Monti in Italy), will set off down this road — no doubt 'for the good of the country' and 'the well-being of future generations'. And they

Moving Beyond Capitalist Agriculture: Could Agroecology Prevent…

Rob Wallace



The current complex of COVID-induced crises fits hand-in-glove with the system's "normal" operation. Stability has been the delusional realm of a small sliver of the Global North, awash in post-World War Tw...

Lost & Found

Boring From Within the Bourgeois Press: Part One

A. Kent MacDougall



Eugene V. Debs may be my all-time favorite American and Karl Marx my all-time favorite journalist. But my employer for a decade was The Wall Street Journal, and for another decade it was the Los Angeles Times.

Trending



Commentary, News
The U.S. is preparing war with China and

will come down like a ton of bricks on anyone who raises a discordant voice.

If the Left is not to disappear, it must discover again how to identify the true causes of the crisis that is now upon us. It must also have the courage to propose, and experiment with, the radical policies necessary to achieve a solution.

Marcello Musto is Professor of Political Theory at York University (Toronto, Canada).

var idcomments_acct = 'c90a61ed51fd7b64001f1361a7a71191';
var idcomments_post_id;
var idcomments_post_url;

| Print

‹
Lessons from a Long History of Dissent: From the Early Twentieth Century to Occupy Wall Street
Labor, Organized (#N17) ›

Russia at the same time

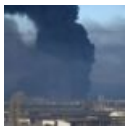

Newswire
What Putin says are the causes & aims of Russia's military action


Commentary
America defeats Germany for the third time in a century


Newswire
What are the Minsk agreements and what are their role in the Russia-Ukraine crisis?


Newswire
Russia, Ukraine and the chronicle of a war foretold


Newswire
Putin crosses the Rubicon. What next?


Newswire
Russia 'ready to talk' after militarily paralyzing Ukraine in hours


Newswire
The wealth of nations

Popular (last 30 days)


Commentary
What you should really know about Ukraine


Commentary, News
The U.S. is preparing war with China and Russia at the same time