

Can the Left resist the Right ward slide of Europe? *Thozhilalar Koodam*, 1 March, 2016.

Marcello Musto examines the political developments in Europe

Marcello Musto, Marxist Sociologist from Canada, gave a lecture on 23rd February at Madras Institute of Development Studies on the political developments in Europe and the condition of leftist political parties.

Coming as it does, at a time of great crisis in Euro Zone and the generalized global recession, the talk was highly relevant. V. Geetha, feminist historian, introduced Marcello Musto and highlighted the important work that he has been carrying out in reviewing and re-interpreting history of Marxist thought from the more recent and hitherto unpublished works of Marx and Engles that are emerging into the academic world.

During his lecture Marcello Musto briefly traced the political scenario as it unfolded since 90s after the 'Fall of Berlin Wall', that effective marked the fall of soviet style communism in East Europe and led to greater integration of East Europe into the European Union. He described the left as becoming too defeatist and the disappearance of ideological barriers between centre left (social democrats) and centre right. As the social democrats succumbing to the right wing agenda, dismantled the welfare state that dominated governance in Europe, it has led to the steady erosion of middle class and increased unemployment especially in east Europe that has peaked at 35% of youth population. Other countries such as Greece have even gone higher with over 50% in youth unemployment. Even as European countries grapple with the extreme social costs of this trend, they have been forced to cut down on social sector spending by nearly half. Such policies have decimated the social democrats and allowed for right wing parties to take power. Even where centre left parties have come to power, they don't have much to present in terms of alternatives to working class. But more importantly it points to the power of an undemocratic troika of institutions with EU, that seem to control national governments. The troika, comprising of the European Commission, European Central Bank and IMF, have even forced governments to write these policies into their constitution, titling it as 'Fiscal Compact', binding limits to fiscal deficit which is meant to protect the value of their currency, the Euro.

In this condition, Marcello Musto discerned four critical trends in European politics. One a new left politics is coming back in many countries, that is more inward looking, more willing to network with ideologically similar parties and becoming the counter to the present dominant narrative. He also mentioned that in some parts, the radical left has to even place itself in social democratic footing that has been obliterated, in articulation of welfarist demands. But this

period has also seen a steady growth of an attitude of 'anti-politics' among the people who feel that political parties and political ideas have little to offer in terms of tangible results and they should have more support for 'technical' governments. This anti politics culture is also giving rise to 'populism' where political leaders come up with populist ideas that is not based on rational or ideologies. He mentioned that it does mark a period of 'end of ideologies', where being 'ideological' is considered pejorative. The last and the most disturbing phenomenon has been the rise of the neo fascist tendency and related political parties across Europe. He mentioned that there is heightened xenophobia in Europe and a war on liberal culture. 'Nationalism' is trumping 'welfarism', and is seemingly on the rise in even Scandinavian countries that have been liberal bastions for long.

Discussing further about the possibilities of left politics, he mentioned the case of Syriza in Greece and Podemos of Spain, and said that the parties and the governments do not enjoy the same loyalty among their populace they used to have decades ago. In this situation, he said, an important dilemma for the European left, is the issue of maintaining the European Union. It has not emerged as the creature it was hoped to be and has rather become a centralized, undemocratic force that is pushing policies to the right and impoverishing populations, yet it has allowed for greater movement among the people and has bound them in new ways. He concluded with the question facing the left: So what should be the attitude of the left towards the Union and how are they to engage with it in the future?

The lecture brought out interesting dimensions of political developments in an important yet distant part of the world to the audience. It also pointed to some very interesting trends that resonate with our present condition, where we see the key features of a resurgent fundamentalist political force, the high pitched rhetoric of 'nationalism' drown out the concerns and issues of a wide range of people. As V Geetha pointed out, it also brings back the issue of 'economic determinism' in that, in spite of a very vibrant and diverse culture and politics, all of Europe is being driven into a direction determined by a handful of people, controlling a few financial institutions. It also raises difficult questions for the left in India, that has seen steady erosion of its base and a lack of inspirational agenda that can invigorate the working masses and draw them towards their ideas.