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Ruling the Void

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Ruling the Void

Abstract

Over the past few decades, political parties in the Western world have moved to the center-right of the political spectrum. In the process, there is a wider gulf between the policies favored by the party elite and their voting constituents, especially on the left.

Keywords

Political parties, political spectrum, European parties, Greece, Austerity

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Over the past few decades, political parties in the Western world have moved to the center-right of the political spectrum. In the process, there is a wider gulf between the policies favored by the party elite and their voting constituents, especially on the left. Socialist parties in Europe are indistinguishable on economic issues from their conservative or Christian Democratic counterparts. From Greece to France, the dominant socialist parties have supported key aspects of the austerity measures backed by the European Union and Germany's Christian Democrat Prime Minister Angela Merkel as a response to the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. The double-standard of EU austerity measures is rather clear: a bailout for the financial sector at public expense while the costs of the financial crisis are borne by the European public. [Nowhere are these effects more apparent than Greece](#), which has seen a collapse of its public healthcare sector and a redistribution of wealth upward as part of austerity policies managed by caretaker EU technocrats and supported by all the mainstream parties of Greece, from the Socialist Party to various center-right parties.¹

These recent developments in Greece (and throughout much of Europe) would come as no surprise to the late political scientist, Peter Mair, author of the book, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing Out of Western Democracy*, Verso Press, 2013. The book, consisting of chapters that Mair completed just prior to his death, builds on a lifetime of work in which Mair develops his thesis that political parties have been undergoing a steady decline across most Western countries over the past two decades. The decline is measured by a decline of legitimacy, lessened voter identification, reduced turnout of voters in elections, and by the homogenization of policy preferences that has eroded the significance of party labels. Why is this important? According to Mair, and other political scientists who share his concerns, Western representative democracy is gradually severing the linkages between constituents and party elites that once provided legitimacy for the system. Labor and socialist parties have fewer linkages to grassroots organizations, and operate more like technocratic organizations established to manage the system independent of voter preferences. This is especially true on economic issues, where the convergence of party preferences can be traced from the early 1990s to the present. Capitalist globalization has created structural pressures on left-wing governments to reduce the social welfare state and to increase the incentives for private investors to keep their money in local financial markets.

The structure of the European Union has promoted, encouraged and facilitated the influence of corporate technocrats in governance. The European Central Bank, modeled on the German Bundesbank, works to enforce a debt and deficit architecture that is designed to facilitate financial and investment flows while weakening the ability of governments to pursue expansionary policies, especially during times of recession when the assets of financial investors are privileged above the wages, pensions and security of workers and the poor. The rise of neoliberal corporate lobbying networks, well-documented by David Cronin in *Corporate Europe: How Big Business Sets Policies on Food, Climate and War*, Pluto Press, 2013, have steadily expanded their influence over the three major decision-making bodies of the European Union: the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers. Corporate influence relies heavily on policy-planning organizations that are corporate funded, as well as think-tanks that emerge from corporate foundations. And corporations also lobby

¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/tough-austerity-measures-in-greece-leave-nearly-a-million-people-with-no-access-to-healthcare-leading-to-soaring-infant-mortality-hiv-infection-and-suicide-9142274.html>

aggressively on issues that affect particular firms, providing policy “expertise” that often guides EU technocrats in the framing of policy initiatives. The distance of the EU from the constituents of member states acts to reinforce the trends that Mair has long documented throughout Western European political systems: a severing of the connection between constituents and their elected representatives. The result is a “hollowing out” of democratic accountability.

It is easy to overstate Mair’s thesis, which runs the risk of romanticizing the embedded liberalism of the past, where social welfare budgets were higher and labor parties were more embedded within a constituency of labor unions. Corporate power was always supreme in Europe and in other capitalist countries, while in the so-called Communist bloc, state capitalists profited at the expense of workers and the poor, while oppressed groups chafed against the institutional and cultural patterns of discrimination that were highly entrenched within the system. The difference is not that embedded liberalism had a kinder, gentler face, because in many realms it did not. However, the incentive structures of embedded liberalism led corporate elites to share more of their profits with the public in the form of higher wages and higher taxes. Labor unions were relatively stronger, socialist and labor parties stood for more redistribution of wealth than their conservative counterparts, and the politicization of party preferences was driven in part by mobilized constituencies that could exercise some amount of power at the grassroots level. As long as capitalism was circumscribed by more restrictive global rules of engagement, including restrictions on flows of capital from one country to another, there was more room for maneuver within domestic structures of accumulation—especially if capitalists could still profit substantially from these arrangements and especially if capitalists were firmly in control of management decisions in the private economy. But capitalism as a system is perpetually driven by the motive of profit maximization, and when opportunities emerged for capitalist elites to break free of the strictures of embedded liberalism, they took full advantage of these opportunities. The break with embedded liberalism [is evident by global statistics that trace a steady reduction in the percentage of corporate profits that flows to workers over the past twenty-five years of global capitalism](#) (which is occurring in both social democratic governments and more conservative governments across the world), a trend which parallels Mair’s documentation of the hollowing out of political parties and Western democracy.²

The circumstances behind the politics of embedded liberalism were shifting as early as the 1970s with the emergence of the new capitalist globalization, explored well by Martin Hart-Landsberg in his book, *Capitalist Globalization: Consequences, Resistance and Alternatives*, Monthly Review Press, 2013. I have also explored this territory with my co-author Daniel Skidmore-Hess in our 1999 book, *US Politics and the Global Economy*, Lynne Rienner Press, and more recently in my edited book, *Corporate Power and Globalization in US Foreign Policy*, Routledge Press, 2012. The essence of these works is that capitalist production has become globalized in the current period of accumulation. This means that corporations have become transnationalized in their economic and market power, creating cross-border production platforms alongside cross-border political organizations that has allowed for expanded leverage within a wide range of nation-states, a topic explored in extensive depth and breadth by William Robinson in his latest book, which focuses on the current crisis of global capitalism.³ The move to technocratic political parties that are more homogenized in their policy preferences is a direct outgrowth of

² <http://www.worldwatch.org/global-wage-gap-continues-widen>

³ Robinson, William I., *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

capitalist globalization. The structural power of corporations has been enhanced by global production strategies and by stronger political organizations that exert influence with all mainstream political parties, from socialist to Christian Democrat to conservative. This process has occurred in all Western capitalist democracies, and the results are rather predictable: A disconnect between constituent voters and the political parties that claim to represent them.

Unfortunately, the political void is being filled by the growth of far-right parties in Western Europe and the far-right tea party and libertarian forces in US politics. Those of us who define ourselves as leftists and socialists are increasingly shut out of the political system in favor of parties and ideologies that are more compatible with the “logic” of capital accumulation and social division. The left has mounted a response in Greece [in the form of Syriza](#), which is one of the more encouraging developments that have sprung from the European economic crisis, and could perhaps be a model of left organizing going forward in Greece and elsewhere.⁴ A Syriza-type working class mobilization within and across the borders of nation-states is essential to build momentum toward an alternative set of policies that can be supported by those that lack any voice in the current climate of technocratic corporate capitalism. Further blogs on this site and commentaries on my companion academic journal site will explore these themes in more depth.

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/03/syriza-future-greece-europe-radical-left>