

Brussels +/- – The Future of the EU from a Leftist Perspective

written by Eszter Turai

translated by Eszter Berényi

At the event held on the 22nd of November Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, merce.hu, Társadalomelméleti Kollégium (College for Advanced Studies in Social Theory) and Új Egyenlőség (New Equality) jointly discussed the crises, current state of and future prospects of the European Union from a leftist perspective. The discussion was based on a series of 21 articles that appeared on merce.hu (back then Kettős Mérce – Double Standard) under the header Brussels+/- in spring and summer of 2017. They touched on not just various policies but also on more general and broad analyses. The opening statement was followed by an introduction to the discussion, then a panel discussion.

The opening statement was made by **Eszter Kováts** (FES), one of the organisers of the event. She recalled FES's November 7th event and the [volume](#) *Future of the European Union – Feminist Perspectives from East-Central Europe* which served as a basis for that event's discussions. The goal of both events was to show alternatives to the false antagonisms normally seen in Hungarian public discourse. The event held on the 7th was about dismantling and nuancing the cultural battle dilemma of “progressive” vs. “regressive” in the discussion about women's rights while the event on 22nd was about doing the same to the rhetoric of “We belong to Europe!” (alternatively: “catching up to the West”) and “Let's stop Brussels!”

In his introduction to the discussion **Éber Márk Áron**, sociologist, an editor of Új Egyenlőség, a member of Helyzet Műhely (Working Group for Public Sociology “Helyzet”) and assistant professor at ELTE's Faculty of Social Sciences first gave a short summary of the article series, then gave a brief lecture on the history of the formation of the EU and finally introduced a few current questions. He said that most articles formulated a constructive criticism of the EU and a quasi-consensus can be drawn from them that regards the EU as a basically neoliberal formation. Based on this the EU does not adhere to our vision of Europe, it doesn't achieve the domination of democracy and humanistic values. Éber put the statement that the EU is more akin to a geopolitical project serving the interests of capital in a historical context of several centuries. In the 13th century, the early days of the formation of a world economy Europe occupied a marginal space and even in the 15th it was vastly behind the great Asian powers. It was thanks to colonisation and the resources that brought that it was able to become, despite its initial disadvantage, a world-wide economic and geopolitical power. With the end of the five centuries long colonial era, which roughly corresponded with the end of WW2 Europe's place in the geopolitical order and its world-economic situation was becoming precarious and the region became unstable. The European Union was an answer to this crisis. Economic integration, a common market and cooperation between member states made up for colonial losses, strengthened Europe's position as a great power, ensured peaceful relations among member states and last, but not least increased economic efficiency. The evolution of the EU was always subordinate to these goals which became even more evident after the neoliberal turn in the 70s. Éber, based on the analyses of Helyzet Műhely interprets this turn as a crisis of the (world-economic) centre and territorial expansion and the deepening of integration as answers to this crisis. Considering this it is obvious that the relationship between the EU's core and periphery should not be analysed in the paradigm of “catching up”

and modernization. From Brexit to the ever more alarming international political developments to Eastern-European trends the question now is how the current problems the EU faces will change it? And the question that was even more important for the event itself: what lies ahead from a leftist perspective for the EU? Is there a chance for a Europe that is based on solidarity, is sustainable, democratic and equal?

Taking part in the panel discussion besides Éber were **Csaba Jelinek** (Helyzet Műhely, one of the co-authors of the series), **Mariann Dósa** (social policy expert) and **Alpár Losonc** (professor of philosophy at the University of Novi Sad, also author of an article of the series). **Nóra Diószegi-Horváth** (mérce.hu) moderated the discussion. From the subjects touched upon and viewpoints expressed two bigger trends emerged. The first was about evaluating the current situation and understanding how the EU works and the other was focused on leftist visions and modes of actions.

Csaba Jelinek said, in accordance with Éber's opening statement that analysis should start with the EU's material foundations. The EU's 'right and left hand', meaning economic policy that is blind to internal inequalities and cohesion, social and developmental funds aimed at equalising, should be viewed together. Even though the EU seems to promote solidarity in certain areas the whole picture reveals the capitalist logic that lies underneath. What effect does this have on East-Central Europe? One dimension of it, Jelinek pointed out, is that behind their ideological antagonisms local elite groups have very similar economic policies in practice, thus the country's position in the semi-periphery seems more potent than disagreements between political actors. Even if there are conflicts between the current government and Brussels Fidesz gets its funds to maintain its power from EU sources.

Contrary to the notion of a right and left hand of the EU Mariann Dósa said that the EU – given its role as explained by Éber and Jelinek – doesn't and cannot have a social aspect, what is usually viewed as such is nothing more than cosmetics and damage repair. This is evidenced by the official language that has replaced leftist phrases (solidarity, fairness) with neoliberal ones, such as "social inclusion." Using this language, it becomes far less evident that the so called social dimension is about how to channel the most people into the job market and evades such things as how this same job market wrecks employees. This "newspeak" of the EU was referenced several times, for example Éber said that this alien and bureaucratic language also makes it harder to reflect on the EU.

Alpár Losonc problematised the relationship of capitalism and democracy which has always had its internal conflicts, but since the neoliberal turn the balance has been completely offset and in recent times the latter only acts as a weak force holding back the former. The biggest question of the post 2008 era is why right-wing powers are in the majority, why no effective leftist strategies have been formulated. Losonc characterised both the European left and the EU as "being the crisis" in the Gramscian sense that the old form cannot die and the new cannot yet be born.

Moving on to the subject of political action and possible solutions Losonc posed the question whether the root of the problem was neoliberalism or capitalism. In case of the former movements must fight for a return to a sort of normality while in case of the latter much deeper, structural questions must be faced. Compared to early Marxist thought, with the classical working class now gone it has become an essential question of what group could be the subject and actor social change. A related dilemma is where the fault lines of society lie: should we talk about the protection of vulnerable minorities or a conflict between the elites and everyone else? Dósa argued for the latter saying there's a need for a leftist politics that brings

back the narrative of the 1% vs. the 99% and that points to systemic problems. Jelinek partly agreed but stressed political realities. For example, in Hungary today a populist leftist rhetoric is missing, and it cannot be created one minute to the next.

The other key point of contention related to the activist perspective was to what degree it was a viable option to fight for change at the level of European politics. Dósa argued that the problems of the EU are so deep-rooted that it is completely pointless trying to fix them. It is a waste of resources to have left leaning people fighting in the European Parliament instead of investing their energies in more useful projects. As a first step there should be locally organised groups that can later develop into an international movement. If viewed from this perspective Brexit could be an interesting experiment that lends possibility for the growth of a leftist discourse around Corbyn. Jelinek illustrated the difficult position of local or state level political action with the example of Greece, which showed that states that occupy a weak position are so vulnerable to more powerful actors and are so embedded internationally that they hardly have room to manoeuvre. He also stressed that it is strategically important to have people who can see “behind the scenes” and represent left issues in Brussels. A comment from an audience member argued that fighting for democratisation of the EU is also an option, this is what Varoufakis’ new movement is doing. If we take into account current economic and political realities, then turning our backs to the EU might not be the best route to take. If two-speed Europe becomes a reality and we are further forced out of the centre the common market will remain and we will still bear its drawbacks. There was consensus that in European societies there is demand for the leftist framing of issues, for action against social inequalities and injustices and against labour market vulnerability. What is missing is a voice that can effectively and authentically represent these demands.