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ROBERT W. MCCHESNEY: THE DOLLAROCRACY IS DEVOURING PEOPLE AND DEMOCRACY

Capitalism is increasingly undermining the very possibility of democracy existing in anything but an official manner. With the continuation of a crisis which would seem never to end, there is a need for citizens to think about forms of post-capitalist democracy, in which egalitarian policy is more important than the needs of investors and corporations. The vision offered today at the Festival of Economics by Robert W. McChesney, Professor at the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, is somewhat disarming: in advanced countries, in Europe and above all the USA, productivity has increased whereas people's income has decreased. "This inequality undermines the principle of democracy. Power and wealth are in the hands of a few, at the expense of many. We must change the system, removing power from the big corporations, above all of a military nature, to reconstruct the infrastructure of the new democracy, where political power is freed from economic lobbies and information reacquires a role which has by now been lost and which not even the Internet, with its original idea of information from below, has been able to rebalance".-

The image of the USA, the paladin of freedom and democracy, is placed in discussion in the lecture by Robert W. McChesney, called to Trento Festival of Economics to talk about post-capitalist democracy. "The political economy of the United States and Europe", began McChesney "is experiencing the paradox of a strong increase in productivity, accompanied by a fall in the quality of people's lives. Today steelworks produce six times as much as they did in the 1970s, but the workers are no better off, quite the opposite. Their per capita income has not gone up and in future the gap will increase even further".

According to McChesney, stagnation is and will be the norm for western economies: "There is no way out of the tunnel. We are not talking about depression, but simply about lower salaries and wages, hence less widespread wealth, to which governments respond by reducing welfare services and increasing fiscal pressure, believing that resources can be better used. Austerity is however destined to favour stagnation". McChesney identifies the causes of inequality in the "historic" tension between capitalism and democracy: "They are mortal enemies. Modern capitalism is a system founded on inequality: those who have economic power also have political power. If we could only succeed in minimising inequality, we would have a different and better form of capitalism".

The power of finance and the private sector is so extensive in the United States that corruption and the ability to condition the governmental machinery is evident at the highest levels: "We are not talking about bribes, but about the ability to place people useful for the interests of those who manage wealth within the public and governmental structure". Economic and financial lobbies are thus able to condition democracy, according to McChesney, and the most powerful lobby is the military sector. "Military expenditure is the only expenditure supported by financial environments. The United States is a nation with an economy based on defence spending".

Militarism and democracy do not go hand in hand and the founding fathers of the American nation had grasped this, whereas American history has gone in the other direction.

However, while people in the middle and lower classes are not well placed, there are sectors which are even

worse off: namely information. The major newspapers and organs of information have seen their role collapse, particularly as the supervisors of democracy and vested interests (political, economic and financial) As McChesney states, "Just as we have seen it grow in the last few decades, the information system is now in decline, and the difficulties of the press in finding new resources to guarantee investment in news mean that we risk being deprived of full information about the behaviour of politicians and influential people". Not even the digital revolution of the Internet has been capable of giving new life to information, also made up of new voices and awareness: "The Internet has destroyed the basis of journalism and is becoming a tool for large companies, who use the web to attract consumers. I believe that the new drive of the digital revolution will increase inequality even further".

With such a discouraging picture it is difficult to look forwards to the future with optimism. At the end of the session McChesney presented his road map for the future, which involves going beyond the current capitalist system: "We must work on moving from a society at the service of wealth to a society of real people, creating a system that works for the mass of people. We will arrive at post-capitalist democracy if we think about how to revive democracy, changing the relationship between business and government and attacking economic differences".

McChesney has no lack of ideas about which levers to use in the migration to post-capitalist democracy: "We need to eliminate the social gap and re-establish the infrastructures of democracy, in which there is also a place for a healthy, well-funded and censor-free media. The biggest investment needs to be reserved for education, to ensure that even the poorest child has access to the same opportunities as a child born in a rich family. We need to prevent large companies from controlling public life – for example, the Internet should be managed by the public and not the private sector – just as no private interests should be able to draw profit from militarism and the indiscriminate exploitation of environmental resources, but above all we need to incentivise new and small companies to deal with the economy in a different way".

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