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## Another Exit Strategy?

in Counter Solutions – by Ashish Kothari – July 15, 2016



The Brexit earthquake, possibly the biggest since the 2008 financial collapse, provides another opportunity to question the economic and political structures that cause such quakes. I've heard only a handful of voices amidst the high-pitched cacophony of the Brexit debate that have gone beyond the the narrow and racist nationalism of the dominant 'leave' voices, and the free-trade nationalism of the 'remain' camp. There is really not much to choose between these two, if you believe in basic social justice and environmental sanity. Are there other options?

From my limited understanding of and exposure to Europe, I believe there are. They involve exiting *both* the centralization, elitism and neoliberalism of the EU, as also any brand of anti-EU nation-statism that advocates closing borders to migrants, discriminates against ethnic minorities, and perpetuates enormous disparities of wealth and power. Indeed, nothing short of exiting from a model of developmentality and modernity that perpetuates a strange mix of selfish individuality and unfettered economic globalization is needed; an exit from Thatcherism (and its variants in other countries) which, since the 1980s, has left millions of people without jobs worth calling jobs, very many of them all too ready to blame migrants for their plight.

I have been fortunate to visit a number of initiatives in Europe that provide glimpses of what such an exit could look like. These initiatives are not yet a major influence (except in some specific areas like renewable energy), but show the potential for radical alternatives. After a visit last year to Spain, I wrote about a possible second Renaissance, see <http://indiattogether.org/second-renaissance-in-europe-op-ed>. My latest visit was in April this year, with Lakshmi Narayan of the Pune-based wastepicker groups KPKP and SWaCH. During the trip we visited some fascinating initiatives in Greece and Czech Republic:

- PeriastrikesKaliarias (Per.Ka) is an initiative by 150 families of Thessolniki in northern Greece, to re-common an abandoned army camp. They grow food organically for self-consumption and local exchange. We were fortunate to be there on its 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations; under a banner proclaiming 'Free Seeds, Free Spaces, Free People', there was a lively fair going on with our hosts IriniKareta and Kelly Garifalli of Fair

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Trade Hellas also putting up a stall. Since Per.Ka is (technically) an illegal occupation, there is a constant threat of eviction. Commercial interests are eyeing the land, but as Per.Ka member Adonis Karayorgas asserted, their own resolve and broader community support will make it difficult for anyone to privatize it.

- BioMe is a factory run by its workers, outside Thessolniki. A couple of years ago the factory owner declared bankruptcy, and wanted to sell off the machinery, but workers (who had not been paid for months) refused to let him. They took over, converted from chemical detergents to the manufacture of ecofriendly cleaning agents, and decided to run it democratically with equal wages. They are supported by a solidarity group of Thessolniki's citizens, who provide a consumer base, give technical inputs, and form a pressure point against eviction. Now housing a social health clinic and a store for refugee relief materials, the factory has become, in the words of worker DimitrisKoumatsioulis, 'much more than a production centre'.
- Social enterprises run on no-profit or cooperative basis, such as Pagkaki restaurant in Athens (Greece), Tri Ocasci cafein Brno (Czechia), and ROH (Revolutionary Trade Union movement) Café in Prague. At Pagkaki, under a painted slogan proclaiming 'We can do without bosses', member IroPanautopoulou explained their philosophy of creating enjoyable, non-heirarchical work, with excess revenues going into social causes (including supporting the Kurdish autonomy movement in Rojava). Fair&Bio, a coffee roasting set-up that sources only Fair Trade beans, started by our host MarkétaVinkelhoferová of the Ecumenical Academy Prague, employs physically and mentally challenged workers in a dignified, equitable environment. So does MlsnaKavka Café in Prague, while the companyEthnocatering comprises of Afghan, Iranian, and other migrants cooking and serving their native food ("integration through the stomach", one TV channel called it!).
- Cooperative shops that promote ecologically friendly, organic, fair trade, and other ethically produced items, such as Bioscope in Thessolniki and Fair&Bio in Prague. They also support direct relations with farmers and other producers. Related to this is the 'No Middleman Initiative' which facilitates farmers coming and selling directly to consumers; GiorgosVelegrakis of Harokopio University Athens told us of the 'potato movement' where farmers are reaching their produce directly to consumers at prices cheaper than what traders charge, yet making decent livelihoods. This started as a protest against the import of cheap potatoes from Egypt resulting in Greek farmers being unable to sell theirs, one of many examples of a viciously distorted 'free trade' regime.
- A time-banking initiative run by Mesopotamia social movement in Athens, with about 400 residents giving services free of charge as technicians, legal experts, housework, medical professionals, etc, to any other member in need. The network also runs a solidarity school in which about 100 network members form an assembly; this is one of 10 such schools in Greece, run on values such as democracy, multi-culturalism, and participation. Christos Kerolis, a network member, said they are showing an alternative to the privatization of education.

Such social and solidarity enterprises (SSE) or alternative economic activities are coming up in many parts of Europe (including, I am sure, in the UK, though I don't have personal experience there). Many are inspired by the 'squares' movement where people have occupied open spaces in many cities, demanding an end to crippling measures like austerity, action against the criminal acts of banks and big business, and more direct democracy. Many are linked to struggles against destructive mining, industrialization, and exploitation of cheap labour in the South. Several are linking themselves to the widening 'degrowth' movement that argues for substantial scaling down of Europe's production and consumption. Unlike the xenophobia that was a major driver of Brexit, with an unfortunately strong base in impoverished worker populations of the UK, members of these movements, themselves often with fragile economic livelihoods, are opening their arms to migrants. In Greece, Fair Trade Hellas and the network Solidarity4All support or provide a platform for many such initiatives. Researcher Nadia Johannisova told us that in Czechia, it is like a revival of the cooperatives movement of 150 years back (the Slovak Farmers' Society was in 1845 possibly the world's first savings and loan cooperative). The 'Social & Solidarity Economy as Development Approach for Sustainability (SSEDAS)' project, which supported our visit, attempts to build capacity of SSE initiatives across Europe.

Most of the people we met in these initiatives in Greece, were disappointed at the revolutionary party Syriza's capitulation to the EU. Analyst Theodoros Karyotis told us that this had made him and others even more convinced that people needed to take politics and economics into their own hands.

That, ultimately, is the exit strategy for the peoples of Europe (and the world). Even as we continue demanding accountability from governments, or support the rare party that will bring in progressive policies, we as 'ordinary' people need to build or re-create our own forums of direct democracy, localized economies of self-reliance with control over production and consumption, vibrant spaces that are open to all cultures, relations of sharing and caring, and forums for achieving equity and justice. It's an exit from the planet-threatening, spirit-deadening, iniquitous systems run by governments and corporations everywhere; and an entry into a radical ecological democracy where

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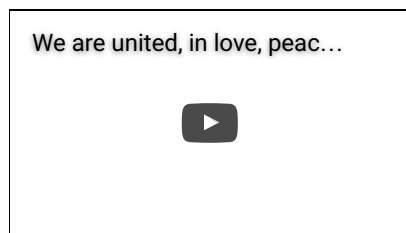
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K SHESHU BABU

July 16, 2016 at 3:35 am

Brexit or ' no Brexit' is not the solution. An integration if both policies with people-centric programmes should be a viable alternative. Main problem relates to poverty and unemployment which effects lower strata of society. This has not been addressed in UK for many years. The result is to be analysed in view of people's ire towards existing system rather than the narrow view of staying in EU or coming out. Fractured result indicates that people have no definite overwhelming opinion. The proletarian Angle should also be taken into account.

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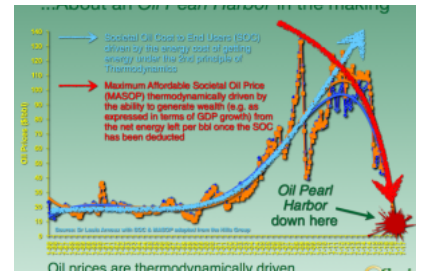
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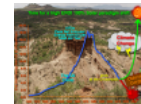
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I call the process we are in an "Oil Pearl Harbour", taking place in a kind of eerie slow motion. This is no longer retrievable. Within roughly ten years the oil industry as we know it will have disintegrated. The GIW is presently defenceless in the face of this threat



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