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Europe

Toni Negri in favour of free-market constitution

- News from around the world -

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Antonio Negri has said in the French newspaper Libération that French people should vote yes to the European Constitution in the referendum on 29 May.

He has reached what I think is this wrong political conclusion by applying the analysis of Empire, laid out in a book he co-wrote with Michael Hardt in 2001 [1]. This analysis is certainly attractive, but this shows its inadequacies and limits.

Negri's reasoning can seem pragmatic and concrete. That's why it has been praised by the French intelligentsia, who fear a No vote in the referendum. Negri says he is a "realistic revolutionary". This realism is dictated by his determination to prevent the rejection of the European Constitution.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Toni_Negri_at_ESF_paris_2003.jpg]

Toni Negri speaking at the Paris ESF, 2003

This rejection, he believes, would allow the interests of Empire to win. Empire, for Negri, is the new globalised, capitalistic society. He thinks of Europe as being a "brake on the ideology of economic unilateralism which is capitalist, conservative and reactionary. So Europe can become a counterweight against US unilateralism, its imperialist domination, its crusade in Iraq to dominate oil production."

The brake must not be that of what Negri calls "the shitty nation state that is destined to disappear". Instead, Europe is the political space in which the state can disappear, despite the fact that the constitution is, as Negri admits, neo-liberal and cannot be an alternative model for society.

"This isn't the point," says Negri, because the constitution is a "passage" towards a supranational state, "a new step towards a bit more federalism although this Constitution is not federalist enough." It is just an instrument therefore, "you have to be stupid," says Negri, "to think that you can build equality of the basis of a constitution." He explains that if France defeats the constitution the whole edifice will collapse, leaving the nation state as the only counterweight to Empire. If the No wins it is a return to mediaeval times, if the Yes wins, we have a chance to compare two models-the European and the American.

The no voter is conservative and obscurantist. The yes voter is "realistically revolutionary".

A French Yes will strengthen the drive for Europe to become a political, economic and military power, as we have known it since before Maastricht in 1992.

It is the slow, contradictory construction of a supranational entity, which would be a more functional instrument for navigating modern globalisation and therefore, and thus to be a political, economic, (military) counterweight to the US superpower.

If that is so, Negri's analysis of Empire has problems. This states that the planet is governed by multinational networks of power that transcend nation-states and other institutional spaces that exist such as the UN. Opposition to it cannot be based on states, but by an "exodus" of the multitude of people who are held down by this power.

The world is criss-crossed by a thick network of links, but this is only one part of reality. The war on Iraq demonstrated the limits of claiming there is an undifferentiated Empire. The US fell back on its traditional instruments of imperialist rule. The war split Europe, especially the French-German alliance. This could not be explained by

Empire.

So Negri argued that the US had performed a U-turn and had executed a "coup" against Empire in order to push its particular interests.

Negri faces contradicting himself again. Europe should have been a component of the problem, but now it is a brake on Empire. Empire becomes the US again, downplaying the capitalist nature of the European Union. What this doesn't take account of is that approval of the constitution would indeed be a counterweight to US power-but only because it would boost the European neo-liberal project.

This ends up mirroring something that was an option available to the workers' movement of the 20th century, and which the movement often fell for.

This ideology leads you to support the most progressive element of capitalism. Then you realise that the workers' movement has been sacrificed to the interests of the strongest capitalist player.

This is what is at stake in Europe today. A victory for European capitalism is not better than a victory for US capitalism. It is the anti-capitalist and anti-war movements that have created the supranational networks that we need to build up.

This workers' movement will imagine an alternative to both British and US models, without having to look to nationalism. The victory of the no campaign in France would open up the possibility of driving forward a process of solidarity.

Negri doesn't like the word socialism, so let's put that to one side. But don't make us out to be conservatives, because he is the conservative.

[1] Empire, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Harvard University Press, 2001. ISBN 0674006712. Click [here](#) for online version.