

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2495>



Debt

What priorities, tasks and ambitions for the citizens' audit in Europe?

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV445 - February 2012 -

Publication date: Saturday 18 February 2012

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

At a time when the Greek Campaign for the Audit of the Public Debt is being imitated a little all over Europe, a first assessment of its activity is necessary in order to draw useful lessons for everyone. Indeed, since this Greek campaign took its first steps exactly a year ago, and since it was the first to try this hitherto completely new experiment in the planetary North, we should consider its gains and dilemmas, successes and setbacks so as to debate not the debt itself, but rather the political and social dimensions of the combat for the independent audit “from below”.

Having said all that, a first fundamental warning note is essential: while being very rich in practical and theoretical lesson, the Ecuadorian experience of a (successful) audit of the national debt cannot be repeated in Europe today. The reason is very simple: outside of an authentically (pre) revolutionary situation, there will never be a European president Rafael Correa to sign decrees facilitating the task of an independent debt audit commission. And in the event of such a pre-revolutionary situation, the question of the debt audit will tend to be eclipsed before the urgency of other tasks.

This first observation is rich in very practical lessons. Initially, it helps us locate with more precision the ambitions and the mission of the campaigns for the audit of the public debt emerging in Europe. Indeed, the “objective” impossibility of having a “European Correa”, results in the impossibility of the independent audits penetrating state secrecy concerning debt, i.e. having access to all the documents necessary to identify the illegitimate (and scandalous) part of this debt. At a time of the diktats of the supranational Troika, when the bourgeoisie violates its own Constitution and empties its parliamentary system of almost all democratic content (see the case of Greece which is very far from constituting an exception to the rule), it would be illusory and also naive to believe that the invocation of democratic rights alone could force the guards of the capitalist temple to open their files to facilitate the realization of an audit of (their) national debt.

However, the difficulties of the European debt audit are not summarized only in the active obstruction of the authorities of the country in question. Actually, it is from now on the Holy Alliance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission, supported by all the European chancelleries, which prohibits by all means or at least makes very difficult the realization of any full debt audit because it considers it - rightly moreover - as a veritable crime of lèse-majesté. The practical consequences are obvious: to conclude a full and detailed citizens' audit of the national debt in Europe is now practically almost impossible. This truth must be allowed, explained and stated openly because if not harsh reality will take vengeance on unfounded illusions, by quickly causing the discouragement of the activists if they become aware that they are pursuing a chimera.

However, this objective impossibility in the long term of carrying out an integral citizens' debt audit does not mean it is impossible to translate the “philosophy” of this audit into a powerful mass movement. Moreover, only the development of such a powerful movement could create a relationship capable of breaking the resistance to such an audit.

To undertake - and advance as far as possible – an audit of the debt first of all means to publicly pose the question of its transparency and its democratic management. This has the almost immediate consequence of demystifying this debt in the eyes of the citizens who have been educated not to concern themselves with affairs which come within the province of the “experts” and the governors, not to exert their democratic right of control of the acts of the “authorities”. It is a task which the campaigns for debt audit must assume in all priority if they want to accustom society to the idea (A) that it should not let others decide in its place, and (b) that it must take its destiny in its hands.

Is the audit the business of the experts only?

The indispensable condition to undertake and advance the debt audit successfully, to make it fulfil its highly educational mission towards society, is that it is not, from its beginning, the business of experts alone, even of left or radical experts. Indeed, considering the impossibility of collaboration from governments and the state, it is only a mobilized society and the “anonymous” citizens in the ministries, public services and the municipalities, the enterprises, faculties and offices who can inform the commission and its experts of the existence of illegitimate and scandalous debts, and who can provide confidential documents and direct the audit correctly. All in all, without collaboration or better, without the active participation of these “anonymous” persons having a direct knowledge of the scandals, the audit either will not exist, or will be condemned in advance to general information without ever being able to enter the subject of the illegitimate debts.

Obviously, such an approach to the audit must always take account of the fact that sooner or later there will be an intervention - even a muscular one – by the state to stop the investigation and to suppress the voices disputing the legitimacy of its debt. This means (A) that we do not maintain illusions on the possible final result of the audit, and (b) that we prepare the activists in the audit campaign, but also the whole of society, for the brutal intervention of those who want to block the investigation.

This realistic approach to the debt audit has the merit of not limiting in advance the field of investigation to the “official” public debt alone. Indeed, from the time we encourage the active participation of the citizens in the audit, we should expect that these citizens and their social movements, trade unions and other networks approach the audit commission (or campaign) to ask for its assistance and expertise to carry out audits of the debts whose existence was previously unknown. And, we must acknowledge it, it is especially the audit of these debts which is the most likely to lead to concrete and politically useful results because it is founded on the irreplaceable contribution of those who bring their knowledge of the area and the documents obtained thanks to their struggles.

Another practical consequence of this “realistic approach” to the debt audit is that the time at the disposal of this audit is not unlimited. In simple words, this means that the work of investigation cannot concern the totality of the debt in question, but that it must – from the beginning - concentrate on the few debts (two or three) which appear most scandalous so that the audit leads as soon as possible to tangible results. Because the credibility gained initially within society by the debt audit campaigns is not eternal, especially in these times of systemic crisis which quickly wears people out. Thus, to renew and keep intact this credibility we quickly need concrete results, however minimal.

The conclusion leaps to the eyes: we cannot have a citizens' debt audit worthy of the name without there being the active and direct participation of a mobilized society, without associating it, on a basis of total equality, with the social movements, the trade unions and associations of citizens of any kind who want to fight against the debt and for its audit. This being said, the presence of workers and other citizens mobilized in the campaigns for the audit of the public debt cannot be limited to this “utilitarian” role. Being confronted with a cataclysmic crisis of capitalism and its political regime which forces, at least in some countries, a large majority of the citizens to radicalize and seek radical solutions, we must finally raise the question of the real finality of the audit of the debt, i.e. what is for or better, what it should be for.

Here, under the current conditions of systemic crisis and class struggle, our answer must be categorical: it is not the citizens who must put themselves at the service of the audit, but it is the audit which must be used for the struggles of resistance and emancipation of the citizens. The debt audit is not an end in itself, it is only an instrument, a means to serve the struggle for the emancipation of employees and all citizens subjected to capitalist oppression.

So this must be the mission, the very first priority, the task, the ultimate goal and even the *raison d'être* of such a campaign: the encouragement in deeds of the mobilisation of the masses of citizens in anti-systemic revolt through

What priorities, tasks and ambitions for the citizens' audit in Europe?

the generalization of the audits undertaken by themselves, where they live, work, consume, study, care, breathe, communicate, express themselves, or spend their leisure or personal time.

Then, while respecting the autonomy of the social movements which are, in the last analysis, alone able to choose their objectives and their forms of struggle, the watchwords of such an approach can be only: "Let us ourselves control those who control us! Let us ourselves open their account books! Let us take our destinies in hand!"

But what does this "encouragement in deeds of the mobilisation of the masses of citizens in revolt" amount to? The answer is obvious: the first thing which this campaign must do is to address itself directly to society to explain clearly its intentions, the why, how and the final objective of what it wants to do. In other words, to accustom people to the idea that they are able, that they can and that they must be organized to carry out their own audits where they live, work, study and live.

It goes without saying that these rank and file committees of citizens enjoy a total independence in relation to the debt audit commission while joining it within the framework of the campaign. Here obviously, the key question of the autonomy of the social movements arises, which continues to pose problem for all the formations of the left. The debate around this question is practically as old as the workers' movement and we would not like to repeat here the arguments of principle in favour of the independence of the social movements. However, not to show a total respect for the autonomy of these movements is to cut off in advance movements such as the Indignad@s, Aganaktismeni or Occupy Wall Street which defend their independence jealously and are characterized by their pronounced mistrust towards the traditional political world.

But, will it be said, what would remain of the relations of an audit commission with its citizens committees if the latter were completely independent of it? The answer is not difficult: this independence does not exclude at all the existence of sustained relations on condition, naturally, that these relations develop voluntarily and on an equal footing. More concretely, the debt audit commission can and must gain the confidence of the citizen committees by showing itself, quite simply, useful to their struggles and daily interventions. How? By offering them assistance (possibly material also), advice, expertise, national and international contacts, but especially its global vision of the situation and its prospects according to the needs for the anti-capitalist struggle.

The debt audit commission can and must also be useful as a major (programmatic and political) reference for all these committees, it must put them in a network, facilitate their coordination, give them the concrete possibility to come into contact with similar campaigns and movements abroad, make them benefit from their experiences, organize for their activists courses of formal and practical education and so on. That is how a commission can gain the confidence of the committees and develop solid relationships with them, while scrupulously respecting their independence and their autonomy.

It is obvious that the placing of all these committees in a network cannot be done in one day, it takes a certain time. However, the prospect for this network creation must be stated and explained as of the beginning, not only because that would correspond to the truth but also because it is necessary that the action of the committees is impregnated as soon as possible with this tolerant and unitary spirit in the absence of which there is no social movement capable of inspiring the exploited, or disputing the power of the capitalist system. But, there is more: in systemic cases of prolonged crises and exacerbated class confrontations (such as for example in Greece today), we should not lose sight of the potentialities of the dynamics developed by the extension of such committees. Insofar as they are essential to the everyday existence of broad sectors of society, these committees can start to appear as the embryos of an incipient and alternative countervailing power. Although appearing still quite remote, such a prospect is no longer political fiction, if we take account of the gravity of the current systemic crisis, the radicalism of the popular revolt which it generates within our societies. Thus, a congress of all these committees daily exerting their control - and possibly their right of veto - on the management of the various public and private, national and local, authorities

would represent an enormous qualitative leap.

The same goes for all the movements which fight for the cancellation of the illegitimate debt. For example, in Greece the "Women's Initiative Against the Debt and Austerity Measures" which, while being completely independent, maintains relations of close cooperation with the campaign for the audit of the public debt, has in a few months been able to develop a solid argument explaining and "legitimizing" the specificity of the fight of women against the debt and its effects, and has led some exemplary actions. Such movements against the debt - for example against the debt of young people, journalists, artists, the unemployed and so on - can network with each other and enlarge the ranks of the movement of committees.

Unity is strength

In addition, with the widening of the crisis, a debt audit campaign only carried out inside national borders is from now on ever harder to conceive. In relation to a supranational class enemy which is united, tested, coordinated, armed, and above all determined on a long confrontation with the working class, the wage earners and all the oppressed, any attempt at resistance to neoliberal barbarism which remains locked up in its national borders is condemned in advance to failure. This assertion which was valid already yesterday for all social movements, is today even more true for any movement of radical contestation of the debt since the latter and the Draconian austerity policies that it generates are completely internationalized. While the extension of the debt crisis across Europe and its Arab periphery has a positive consequence: it gives birth to resistance whose climax is the creation of debt audit campaigns in a dozen countries.

Meetings, experience sharing, networking, coordination and especially programmatic development and common action of all these movements and campaigns in Europe (but also non-European, it is enough to think of those of Egypt and Tunisia) are currently a priority task for us all. As the saying goes, "United we stand, divided we fall".

In conclusion, we can say that the true *raison d'être* of a debt audit commission or campaign is to contribute to instigate, radicalize and start towards its emancipation a society already in revolt against the austerity plans and the system which generates them. How? By encouraging and, where appropriate by directly helping the self organization of the citizens in collective struggle against the debt and austerity, so that they are able to manage democratically their daily lives. All in all, so that they take their life and their destiny in their hands. No more, no less.