

Remember the Restoration?

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The logic of “emergency” accompanying the politics of dealing with the crisis that we in Europe are currently experiencing is driving governments to adopt measures that bring them into opposition with the societies to and for which they are supposedly responsible. Austerity, neoliberal reforms, the dismantling of the welfare state, unemployment, the accumulation of wealth alongside impoverishment on a massive scale—all of this creates an ever-widening gap between state and civil society. On the one hand, political elites who hold themselves accountable to markets while ignoring society; on the other, a society (or, better, whatever is left of society after its transformation into a hopeless mass of consumers) that is struggling to regain its political role. A neoliberal Europe that appears dominant and entrenched thus faces the challenge of a small but very active segment of the population (which in some cases, as in Greece, manages to prevail in electoral contests) that is promoting an alternative paradigm for Europe, one of social equality and solidarity.

This situation presents certain features that resemble a similar situation two centuries ago. Of course the analogy cannot be entirely complete. But let us concentrate on the actual process of transition from one model for Europe, which at a particular historical moment seems to dominate, to another, which at the same historical moment seems implausible.

In 1815 Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo, and with him whatever was left of the ideals of the French Revolution. The monarchies which were now restored promised to guarantee peace and security for a Europe wearied by lengthy wars. The “Holy Alliance,” the secret agreement between Russia, Austria and Prussia (with the later accession of Great Britain and France) made it clear that they would use any means at their disposal to fight revolutionary and liberal ideas and to establish a new status quo in Europe. Everything had to resemble the pre-Revolution situation. The “Metternich system” (named after the powerful Foreign Minister of Austria) thus initiated what was perhaps the most reactionary and anachronistic period of modern European history, what we call the Restoration. The Europe of the “Holy Alliance” became synonymous with absolute monarchy, counterrevolution and anti-constitutionalism, with strict surveillance and censorship, military repression and violence. It became synonymous with states’ blindness to the needs of civil society, to the new conditions that history had created

The transition from the Europe of the “Holy Alliance” to the Europe of nation-states, constitutionalism and liberalism, didn’t happen from one day to the next. It was a fermentation of ideas and revolutionary initiatives that lasted upwards of thirty years. The first indication of the need to create an alternative paradigm for Europe were the revolutionary movements of 1820-21 in Spain, Italy and Greece. These were suppressed by the direct military intervention of European powers. The only revolution that survived

was the one in Greece, raising a storm of support among intellectuals and the liberal portions of European society. The second wave of revolutions occurred in 1830-31. This time the epicenter was France, but the events set off a chain reaction that spread through much of Europe. The third and last wave of uprisings was in 1848. With the possible exception of Greece, participation in these movements never happened on a massive scale: led at first by the Carbonari and other members of secret societies, they later were joined by the liberal classes of the military, and finally were embraced by intellectuals, students and other political activists. Nor were the revolutionaries' claims—national self-determination and the drafting of a constitution—met at once. But a dynamic was created that in the end forced the states to take matters into their own hands and, in the course of a few years, overturn the artificial order which they themselves had created.

But what was the attitude of the intellectual and political classes of the time toward these events? I believe that we can distinguish between three forms of reactions during that period of transition: a) some (the so-called "reactionaries") defended the status quo tooth and nail, either because they were ruled by an instinctual antirevolutionary sentiment, or because they hadn't realized that the world was changing, or because they had linked their interests and indeed their entire worldview to a world that was slowly dying; b) others (the so-called "conservatives" or "moderates") saw that the world was changing, but wanted to make sure that change would not take place via a total revolution or overthrow of order, but through gradual reforms and through the guarantee of education, a stance that presupposed their tacit cooperation with the old regime; and lastly c) still others (the so-called "radicals" or "revolutionaries") believed that the only force pushing history ahead was radical revolution and coordinated action, which is to say the solidarity of the people across nations.

At any rate, 1820-21 marked the beginning of the end for the Restoration system. As much as the Europe of the "Holy Alliance" seemed like the only way, as much as the phantoms of the French Revolution and its Napoleonic transmutations still haunted the nightmares of people, as much as hope had been submerged under the guise of order and security, the Europe of the peoples managed to emerge victorious in the struggle against the Europe of Metternich, and the governments were finally forced to reckon with the needs of the societies they were called on to govern. The immobility imposed by the Restoration could not hold back a dynamic society, which first through tiny cracks, and later through the transformation of ideas, finally allowed history to move forward. Not always of course with the expected results. Let's not forget that most of the revolutionaries of the nineteenth century died in the bitterness of defeat. They saw their ideas being co-opted by their enemies, in whose hands they triumphed. But in a certain sense, short-term failure paved the way for long-term success.

It was in this way that the old Europe foundered and a new one emerged. And it is in this that, today, too, Europe will be forced to give up her detached role, to come down off the stage and meet her people.