

On the French Referendum¹

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The referendum in which the French majority rejected the proposed European Constitution was obviously a historical event. But it is not such only because of the results whereby 55 % opposed a confusing text containing not only positive ideas, granted, but also — and mostly — unacceptable propositions. It is historical also, if not even more so, because it shows once again, in a frightening way, the gap that separates the people from the political-mediatic class and its so-called “representatives.”

On February 28, 2005, the French deputies at the Congress in Versailles approved the project for the European Constitution with a large majority (91.7%), a necessary step for the ratification of the treaty. If the decision was made by Parliamentary vote, as was the case in Italy, Germany and Austria, the

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text, then, would have been approved with an overwhelming majority (over 90% of the vote). However, it was rejected by 55% of the voters (70% of the eligible population participated in the referendum and the difference between the “yes” and “no” votes translates into 2.5 million votes). So, 90 % on one side, 55 % on the other: the shocking discrepancy between these two numbers shows that national representation no longer represents anything.

All major “governmental” parties, including the Socialist Party and Chirac’s UMP (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*), supported publicly the Constitution, as did all big daily and weekly newspapers, all radio and TV stations, all editors, briefly, all those who have some power, who swagger, moralize and pretend to speak on behalf of public opinion. However, the vote was against, and it sheds light on the discrepancy in priorities of regular citizens and the concerns of the oligarchy that holds the power.

Add to this gap between the people and the elite the gap between the voters and their parties, particularly obvious on the left. The Socialist Party (SP), which was officially in favor of the treaty, was massively disavowed by its supporters (55% voted against). The same holds true for the Greens (62% voted against), who for years have remained in an unnatural alliance with the socialists, and whose campaign in favor was quiet and without conviction.

For the general secretary of the SP, François Hollande, who lacks charisma and authority, it was a personal defeat that threatens his position. He finds himself heading a fragmented party in total disarray, and the latest blow to the ambitions will, more than ever, cause ideological conflicts. It also leaves the party in the worst possible position before the upcoming presidential election (April 2007), without clear political direction or unchallenged leader.

The referendum in fact expressed “a very serious French crisis,” according to the centrist François Bayrou. This crisis was not created by the referendum; rather, it only shed light on it.

The fracture is not only political but also social. The analysis of the vote shows that 60% of young population, 80% of workers and 60% of officials voted against. Unlike the referendum on the treaty of Maastricht in 1992, however, where only 38% of the white-collar workers opposed it, this time 56% voted against. Finally, the “yes” vote found approval only in the upper bourgeoisie, high-level officials, retirees and the unemployed. The opposition of a sizeable fraction of the middle class then is new.

The division between left and right appears once again to be completely obsolete, since there were votes for and against on both sides. The supporters of the treaty, denouncing the heterogeneous character of the opposition, made it clear that Valéry Giscard’s or Nicolas Sarkozy’s support was “compatible” with that of François Hollande’s or Lionel Jospin’s. They wanted to show that the division between left and right no longer corresponds to anything that they would not have gone about otherwise.

What was most remarkable, however, was that on the day after the referendum the political-mediatic class, which was convinced the treaty would be approved, learned absolutely nothing from its disavowal. Instead of coming up with a self-critique, it only regretted having used the referendum, i.e., to have made recourse to direct democracy, giving the word to the people. The conclusion that it drew is obviously that they should not give the word to the people, whose “unpredictable” behavior always remains questionable.

The same holds true for Chirac, who personally took on the task of promoting the treaty, at the risk of provoking his political opponents to vote against. He limited himself to only nominating a new Prime Minister, although the referendum was an incredible personal defeat as a result of which his popularity fell sharply, keeping up with those of Silvio Berlusconi, Toni Blair and Gerhard Schröder.

Philippe de Villiers, who voted against, did not miss the opportunity to cite Bertolt Brecht, who said, ironically, that in the event of total divergence between the people and the government, there are only two possible solutions: to change the government or to elect a new people!

All this indicates “the failure of the very principle of the representation to the extent where the representative institutions no longer function in the ‘democratic’ sense, i.e., from the people and the citizens to the power, but exactly in the opposite direction, from the top to the bottom,” as Jean Baudrillard wrote.

For the first time in a long time, there was a real debate around the proposed Constitution, in which information on the internet played the role of an exemplary counter-power. More than a million books on the constitution were sold during the weeks before the vote, which is already significant.

On May 29, the French people expressed a vote which amounted to democratic rebellion. Using all of the power it had, it expressed both its pessimism and its anger. It did not vote against Europe but against its current form and direction. In many cases, the vote against was pro-European, as argued the socialist Jean-Luc Mélançon. It was a vote against what has been presented for years as the “empire of the Good,” a vote against a technocratic Europe and liberal globalization, which do not prevent a vote for another Europe in the future.

The last lesson of this vote, and certainly not an insignificant one, is that the global victory of the vote against was only possible by the sum of the “no votes on the right” and “no votes on the left,” because neither one would have been able to win alone. This certainly merits more thought.