**The End of equality? Not for France.**

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*"Capitalism delivers the means*
*but not the point of life"*
-Charles Handy-

Ever since the rise to power of centre-left governments in the second half of the 1990's in the European Union the concept of equality has been again intensely debated. There has been, so far, little success in accommodating this concept in the programs of centrist radicalism and fiscal restrain and transparency that social democratic political circles have tried to sell to their potential and traditional supporters. Equality, for the former group is a relatively unimportant concept as this sector thrives in the new economy, based mainly on technological advances. For the latter group, ostracized by this new economy, equality is still not enough. Granted, social democracy in Europe has had to adapt itself, since the end to the cold war, to the rules of the market in order to respond to the new political and economic environment and the erosion of their traditional voting constituencies. Also, in the absence of a better model and the utter failure of real socialism in Eastern and Central Europe the democratic left made the necessary moves to survive politically and stay relevant in a world that is becoming more integrated with the market-economy model and its own concept of equality. But in spite of Giddens intellectual and theoretical contribution to the equality debate in a book called the "The Third Way", the results of policies put in practice by centre-left government have been mixed at best. Social Justice – it seemed – was not the *prima facie* motive of the newly elected social democratic governments; especially in United Kingdom and Germany these new administrations they have been keen to present themselves as competent administrators of the state and the economy in an effort to remain in governmental culture.

The setting aside of significantly radical social justice aims by these governments hopes – in the specific case of the British Labor Party – not to irritate a right-wing press fiercely anti-left, and their then newly-found friends in the UK business establishment. All of this has rendered the "New Labor" Party in a state of ambiguity that leaves it with very little room for political maneuver much less radical transformation of the societies that have given them the chance to govern. Two questions arise then: considering the substantial transformation of social demands, should the parties that believe in social justice remain committed to the ultimate goal of reaching economic and social equality? Or should

they abandon social justice and embrace market and good public administration principles in order to achieve through these rules a more just, but still unequal, society?

Blair's interpretation of the Third Way seems to have more potential to answer the last question and to, apparently, be doing fairly well at it. Nevertheless, little attention has been given to the French experience. The struggle for equality has always been a part of the country's countless review of trials and errors throughout its contemporary history: five republics, authoritarian regimes and identity crises that put the French in a constant state of insecurity. In fact the non-French media, some of them sympathizers of the liberal approach to economics[i], only focus on France and its governmental culture in times of crisis, regardless of the fact that, in spite of its many failures, this nation is nowadays one of the largest economies in the world. There is something inherent in the French system that makes it work and cohabit with the global economic strategy but at the same time protect its citizens against its imperfections. This is understood in France, not by political parties, but by its civil society. The principle of equality in France is still an important issue and some elements in French civil society, especially public sector workers, will protect it at all cost. With that put into perspective, this article will argue that in the French case the 'end of equality' – though debated by the left – remains crucial in spite of attempts to discard it as a social and political goal.

There are two elements inherent in French political culture that allows me to contest the argument of the 'end of equality': first, the social dimension of the Constitution of France's Fifth Republic and, second, the public sector strike which occurred in the winter of 1995 against [former Prime Minister] Alain Juppe's plan for the reform of the French social protection system. Both of these are crucial in understanding France's never ending task of trying to achieve a truly egalitarian society deserving of its famous slogan: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. In order to understand the main pillar of the argument that will be presented it is necessary to place the reasons of that particular manifestation in the context of the constitution. There we will find that France's proposals for equality were laid down even before the contemporary interpretation of the 'Third Way' came into being.

When public sector workers took to the streets in the winter of 1995 to protest the implementation of a plan to reform, meaning reduce, the French social protection system, the media took it as another typical response of a society that cannot arrive easily at consensus on the political arena. However, this mass movement had particular characteristics. First and foremost it was a truly public sector manifestation aimed not only at protecting jobs in this domain, but also at the preservation

of the social dimension of the Fifth Republic, which has sheltered countless generations of French citizens since its foundation in 1958. Second, it came just after the Right-wing coalition, composed of the RPR and UDF conservative pro-market forces consolidated themselves in the April 1995 presidential election. The accession of Jacques Chirac to the presidency of the Republic ended fourteen years of socialism à la Mitterand that produced minor achievements, but in the end was overwhelmed by corruption scandals and accusations about mishandling public funds.

In spite of the apparent show of electoral force by the right earlier in that year, the aftermath of this particular strike resulted in a situation of political insolvency for Chirac's administration and the government of Prime Minister Alain Juppé that was evident at the end of 1996. In a search for legitimacy to implement the unpopular fiscal policies that had the ultimate aim of France qualifying to enter European Monetary Union, the president used the executive power conferred by the Constitution to dissolve the National Assembly, France's Parliament, in May 1997. It was hoped that with this risky political move the majority, although reduced, would have sufficient political clout to implement Juppe's plan. Nevertheless, in a spectacular turnaround typical of France's volatile electorate, a centre-left majority was chosen giving the Nation its third cohabitation in eleven years. Again, the foundations of De Gaulle's brainchild, the Fifth Republic, would be tested in the midst of preparations for a crucial process in European integration: the founding of the Euro.

Why was the public sector strike of late 1995 so important and how did it contribute to the concept of 'equality'? James Cohen, professor of Political Science at the University of Paris, argues in his article: *French Public Sector Workers defy the Experts*, that since the 1789 revolution a 'republican dimension' (I call it social) has developed in France. According to this thesis, the French State's function is not only to guarantee fundamental liberties (*liberté*), but also 'equality' (*égalité*) and fraternity (*fraternité*). In other terms, the state will serve as a wall of 'social solidarity' against market shifts, an unstable element that creates conditions of misery and exclusion as evidenced by the recent financial crisis in Asia. This mission is present in the first article of the Fifth Republic's constitution: "France is a secular, democratic and social republic. It will assure all citizens equality before the law…". The preamble of the 1946 Constitution, which forms part of the present one furthermore establishes: the right to work and obtain employment (art. 5); the state's obligation to provide the individual and the family all the necessary conditions for their development (art. 10); and guarantees health care and material security, especially to children, mothers, the disabled and aged workers (art.

11). Cohen states that this 'republican dimension' is an implicit element in French political culture. Thus, even though most of the striking workers didn't seem to have a clear idea of Juppe's plan, they still looked at it with disdain. For all the pretence that it was necessary to sanitize public finances, which indeed it was, there was also an implicit intent to dismantle the French social protection system that forms the basis of the republican dimension; this last assertion was clear to the striking workers.

One might be inclined to ask: if it were indeed the elected representatives of the French state that toppled the initiative for reform of the Welfare system; how does one account for public sector worker's reasons to protect it if not to maintain their jobs? True, however, I believe, as Ian Derbyshire states in his book, *Politics in France*, that the French public sector has always been a crucial element in sustaining the State in this nation's frequent political crisis. It is also true that for all the excesses and errors committed during fourteen years of mitterrandisme its legacy was, undeniably, a strengthened and more role-conscious civil service. This in turn, transformed public sector workers in France into the embodiment of the social republic that is stated in the Constitution. With this in mind, public sector workers were able to adopt a strong moral stance in the name of public service and the defense of the egalitarian state. Workers and their allies rallied massively around these two slogans forcing the withdrawal of Juppe's Reaganite policies for reform. Also, the fact that French trade unions allowed workers at all levels, and even unaffiliated ones, to participate in fundamental decisions during the strike gave the movement a democratic dimension that appealed to the general public, more than half of whom supported it.

What then makes the French model problematic to present as an alternative model for the achievement of 'equality'? J.M. Guéhenno in a recent article in *Prospect* dismisses the concept that "France's system and culture while it is different, it works", as a very 'French' way of looking at France. I do not agree. The system does work, and while there have not been many success stories, in terms of state administration, the error lies within those who administer the French State, not the state itself.

I do concur with Guehenno's assessment in his critic of Andrew Jack's book, *The French Exception*, that it does not fully explain the paradoxical nature of the French system's handicaps and the ability of some governments to work around them. The problem with the social republic is that in the search of true equality for its citizens, through the social protection system, France frequently clashes with the free-market model. That is, the French State in its ongoing mission to provide that

'wall of social solidarity' has faced, and still faces, incredible pressure from inside and outside to drop it. This argument is further emphasized by France's vulnerability to world economic crises, which affect France in a severe manner due to the size of the welfare state and its strong presence in the economy. Even before Blair's radical centrist ideology, Valery Giscard d'Éstaing tried to implement his version of a 'Third Way' in 1974. But he could not fulfill it because his country, heavily dependent on fossil fuels, fell victim to the Oil Crisis of 1973.

In this sense, François Mitterrand's failure to understand his predecessor's shortcomings made him as well victim of the economic crisis when he took over the presidency in 1981. At a time when fiscal restraint should have been exercised, Mitterrand did the contrary. His expansive policies aimed to further advance the egalitarian state came at a really bad time, pushing France deeper into economic recession. This validates Guéhenno's point that: "a crisis of the French State is a crisis of France. It also explains the true nature of the paradox: the ineptitude in which the state is handled contrasts heavily with the caution that should be exercised if its social nature is to be maintained. In any case, this should be a justification for better public administration practices and not for dismantling the social protection system.

Consequently, in the 'end of equality' debate, another question, posed by Guéhenno, arises: "ten years after the end of the cold war, is France condemned to a choice of remaining 'special' and losing ground, or accepting radical change – with the risk of loosing its 'frenchness' and maybe the secret of its success?". I think this is the wrong question to ask. It is clear that France laid down in its constitution the foundations for building a genuine egalitarian society. This system, it is also clear, works in spite of pressures, from within and without, to reform and change. It cannot, will not, change. This is not because of France's stubbornness or some inborn 'French' characteristic, but because its civil society, public sector workers included, won't allow it.

The question to be asked, then, is: are the ruling bodies of the world economic system willing to pay some attention to the French example, or will both be locked in an endless confrontation on how to deal with situations that create poverty and exclusion, such as the volatile and unstable nature of the market? I think the answer to this can be found in the recent experiences of Seattle and Davos. The Non-governmental critique of the economic establishment's faults underlines that what is wrong with it is precisely what the French Republic's constitution is trying to address. The resiliency of the public sector in maintaining the social republic only strengthens this point.

The events that occurred in the winter of 1995 are crucial to the understanding of France's social and egalitarian nature. I agree with Cohen's earlier assessment on the republican dimension. I also agree with Guéhenno's statement about how the French have come to rely on their judicial system as the guardian of legitimacy. To this should be added that both: the judiciary and France's civil service play a complementary role in the process of the French system's legitimization. They act, respectively, in protecting individual and collective rights against the excesses and inanities of the French State.

In light of this, it is not up to social democratic parties, or the democratic left for that matter, to decide whether there is or should be an 'end of equality'. Unless the French decide to scrap the Fifth Republic's constitution in the near future, the blueprint for reaching an egalitarian society is there. Even though the constitution originated from social-gaullist thought, the left can identify with its wording but not appropriate them. This document belongs to the French people, and by association to its co-citizens in the European Union. It has penetrated into French, but also European culture in ways that transcend the state, the government, and any interest groups that support it. France's republican regime is not an enemy of the capitalist world system. It recognizes it, cohabits with it, follows it and abides by its rules. It only maintains that it will not permit that market fluctuations to affect its citizens. It will keep its wall of social solidarity. This is a tenable position, as the dynamic attributes of capitalism will permit it to adapt to any political regime, including the one in France.

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[i] The Economist – especially – loves to bash the taxation regimes currently working in France.