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The Subjectless Rule of Capital



Who is to blame for the increasing contradictions and distortions of late capitalist societies – and what can be done about it?

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Who are the rulers in capitalism? Preliminary observations seem to confirm what is, for the most part, the core principle of leftist ideology or theory: it is the capitalist class, the owners of the means of production, who seem to hold the reins of power – and they are therefore the ones responsible for the current state of the capitalist world system.

This conclusion seems justified at first sight, given the absurd level of inequality between rich and poor, between the mass of wage earners and the “happy few” of the billionaire caste, which has only been exacerbated by the neoliberal economic and financial policies of recent decades.

The data on the ever-widening gap between rich and poor seems downright bizarre: the 26 richest billionaires now own assets with a face value equal to that of the poorer half of the world’s population – that’s about 3.8 billion people. In the US, it is the wealthiest 20 people whose assets are equivalent to that of the impoverished half of the population.

In the Federal Republic, on the other hand, this ratio between billionaires and the destitute is 45 to 41 million. 45 mega-rich capitalists own just as much as the lower half of the population, and the income divide in the Federal Republic is now even more pronounced than in the United States.

The inequality of late capitalist societies, together with the emergence of a largely segregated caste of billionaires, goes hand in hand with an intensified, increasingly open assertion of the interests of the capitalist class. The ability of this class to successfully lobby has been reflected not least in the financial and tax policies of recent decades, which have almost exclusively favored the super-rich and large corporations.

US billionaires like the notorious Koch brothers finance a veritable political machine that puts their reactionary interests into law in Washington. As a result, there is a debate about whether the US has degenerated into an oligarchy dominated by a few billionaires.

In the Federal Republic, on the other hand, BMW billionaires from the notorious Quandt clan make donations to the CDU before the federal government once again undermines CO₂ emissions limits, which directly benefits the German car industry. In addition – with the rise of the New Right – there is the direct financing of right-wing extremists and populists by billionaires, as in the case of US President Trump and the German AfD.

The same applies to political inaction in the face of the escalating climate crisis. For decades, both in the US and in Germany, the lobbying groups of the fossil fuel-driven capitalist economy have spent millions of dollars to torpedo any serious measures to

combat climate change, and have largely been successful.

Capitalists, Class Struggle and Crisis

In the face of this informal power of the capitalist class, which can effortlessly put its economic interests into legal form through its lobbying machines, the causes of the current crisis seem clear, especially to the left: it is the increasing socio-economic division of society caused precisely by the seemingly behind-the-scenes ruling class of billionaires, the capitalists. The boundless greed or insatiable hunger for power of the capitalist class has led capitalism into crisis.

It seems to be similar with the ecological crisis: the greed of the corporate bosses of the oil and automobile industries, and their influence on politics, seems to be responsible for the fact that climate change, despite all the soapbox speeches, continues raging on, fueled by constantly rising CO₂ emissions.

Economic stagnation and the decades-long social decline of large sections of the population in the centers of the capitalist world system, appear as a consequence of the policies of the super-rich class, which is waging a real class war against the working population, as for example the billionaire and speculator Warren Buffet once said: "There's class warfare, all right, ... but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning."

The beginning of this "class war" is usually traced to the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, which, after the bloody prelude in 1973 in Chile, was first implemented in the US and Great Britain by Ronald Reagan and Margaret ("There is no such thing as society") Thatcher.

Meanwhile, the bouts of destitution that followed the housing crash in 2008, which devastated the US middle class, for example, have also contributed to the formation of a strong, class-struggle oriented left. In response to the increased animosity towards minorities which the New Right pushed after the crisis surge in 2008, the left in the USA and Great Britain have been calling for a class struggle, in which the class war waged by the super-rich would now be answered consciously by way of the political mobilization of the "bottom," the wage-earners. This left is also calling for a massive Keynesian investment program, the Green New Deal, to overcome the climate crisis.

A False Approach and A False Premise

Politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez thus argue for a redistribution from the top to the bottom, for a strict taxation of large fortunes and for a curtailment of the informal political power of the super-rich, in order to lead out of its ecological and economic crisis through large investment programs. In the face of this renaissance of leftist class struggle, which has now also taken hold of the German left, a progressive counterweight to the reactionary wave of the New Right seems to be forming.

And yet this approach to explaining the crisis, which remains stuck in the dichotomy of proletariat and bourgeoisie, is a distorted consciousness that is ultimately not radical enough to adequately grasp the crisis process. The crisis is more than the result of escalating class struggle. The inherent premise of old, leftist, class struggle thinking, according to which there is a group of people who consciously control social reproduction, is false.

The reality of the unfolding capitalist crisis is far more frightening than any specter of an all-powerful rule of super-rich villains operating behind the scenes of the political establishment – however repulsive and reprehensible the individual egomaniacal actors in these exclusive circles may be.

Fetishism: The Autonomous Movement of Capital

Despite all the conspiracies that actually exist, there is no one behind the curtain who is ultimately pulling the strings, who is somehow "controlling" the course of events of the capitalist system. Humanity under capital is the object of an independent, contradictory dynamic, which it unconsciously produces by way of market mediation. This process of capital's autonomous movement, called fetishism, is constituted "behind the backs of the producers," as Karl Marx famously remarked.

Generally speaking, capitalism as a fetishistic social formation is thus characterized by the fact that in capitalism, "the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite," as Karl Marx wrote in his main work *Capital*. The fetishistic forms of the valorization of capital, which are independent of the subjects, "appear to the political economists' bourgeois consciousness" as a "self-evident and nature-imposed necessity."

This fetishism pervades all the aggregate states that capital passes through in its autonomous movement, its cycle of valorization, in which more money is created from money through the production of commodities and the exploitation of wage labor (M-C-M'): commodity, money, labor.

In the labor process, for example, the wage-dependent market participant ("proletarian") becomes "variable capital," the only commodity acquired by capital on the labor market, which through its capacity to work can create more value than it is itself worth. Labor is "external" to the worker, he therefore "only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself," as Marx put it in the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*.

This being at the mercy of an external labor process over whose goal and course the worker has no control, in which his divestment is a moment of the fetishistic valorization movement of capital, leads to the formation of the well-known, omnipresent sense of alienation in capitalism. This "forced" labor under capital no longer serves the direct "satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it," Marx continues. Its strangeness emerges "clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification."

The market subjects, isolated from one another by the compulsion of competition, who enter into commodity exchange only through the mediation of the market, appear similarly powerless in the face of commodity fetishism. The social character of their own labor is reflected to the commodity producers in the representational character of the products of their labor, Marx explained in the famous fetish chapter of *Capital*.

The social property of a commodity as a bearer of value (the quantum of socially necessary labor-time expended in its production process), produced within the framework of the valorization process, appears as a natural property of these things. The individual commodity seems to be endowed with the property of being a bearer of value in the same way as it is endowed with its other physical properties. Since the commodity, as a socially constituted "object of value," appears only in the exchange of commodities on the market, it appears to the isolated producers as if it were a matter of a "social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers."

Things thus become "independent" in a market-mediated way from the market subjects, who literally produce them themselves and offer them for sale in commodity form on the market – and this process is animated by the overall social compulsion of capital to valorize. This independence of capital is particularly evident in the financial markets, where fetishism manifests itself in the abstract form of money, and forms the most important driving force for reactionary crisis ideologies, including anti-Semitism.

Especially in times of crisis, when once again a "market quake" or financial crash threaten the stability of the entire economic system – as most recently in 2008 – it becomes clear that even the capitalist class is by no means "in control" of this fetishistic and destructive dynamic of capital, that the crisis-like course of events under capitalism is by no means controlled by a conspiracy.

The fetishistic reality of capitalism is thus actually scarier than the worst conspiracy ideology. The entire real world, human beings as well as nature, are only transitory stages of a blindly unfolding process of the accumulation of abstract wealth, which is ultimately abstract quanta of spent, "dead" human labor. The whole late capitalist horror consists precisely in the fact that there is no one at the wheel of the valorization train that is constantly hurtling towards the abyss.

Society, however, is a necessary appendage of the real-abstract valorization process of capital running amok, since capital can only be valorized through wage labor and the burning of resources in the production of commodities. In the end, only that which is necessary and financially viable within the framework of this blind cycle of capital multiplication has social existence: that is, only that which contributes directly or indirectly to the expansion of capital.

This applies not only to the category of "jobs" in the economy, but also to the state apparatus in its function as an "ideal total capitalist," (Marx) and even to cultural production, which has to contribute to location optimization within the framework of neoliberal marketing strategies – social existence under capital is always subject to its ability to be "financed." On the overall social, global level, capital thus acts as an "automatic subject" of boundless, tautological self-aggrandizement.

The concrete world is thus only the "material" of this independent, real-abstract autonomous movement of capital, which in its boundless growth mania deprives humanity of its social and ecological basis of existence. The global surplus value machine of capital thus burns the world to the ground in order to maintain the irrational end in itself of unlimited capital growth for as long as possible. A growing, economically "superfluous" humanity in the periphery and an escalating ecological crisis are the consequences of this autonomous movement of capital.

In a reversal of the old romanticism of progress, the image of a constantly accelerating train hurtling towards the abyss thus suggests itself, a machine out of control, driven by the autonomous movement of capital, which is produced unconsciously by the market participants, mediated by competition and the market. The transformative act that is necessary for survival is to find and apply the emergency brake, as Walter Benjamin already remarked.

Social structures unconsciously produced by human beings that objectify themselves vis-à-vis individuals; social dynamics that become independent vis-à-vis the subjects that produce them – this absurd form of social reproduction that characterizes the “prehistory of humanity” is illuminated by the concept of fetishism.

Thus the people of “enlightened” bourgeois society are nothing more than sinister fetish servants. Domination in capitalism is thus ultimately subjectless, as the crisis theorist Robert Kurz explained in his text *Domination Without a Subject*; the capital relation rules as a fetishistic abstraction of reality.

The inner essence of the capital relation, according to Kurz, is not captured by the disdainful greed of all the capitalist philanderers who were able to increase their (largely fictitious) wealth to obscene levels during the neoliberal decades:

Their “individual objectives” are not what they seem: in accordance with their form, they are not individual or voluntary objectives, and for this reason their content is also distorted and flows towards self-destruction. The essential point is not that individuals mutually use one another for their individual objectives, but rather, to the extent that they seem to do so, that they themselves execute a totally different, supraindividual and subjectless objective: the autonomous movement (valorization) of capital.

The subjective, “managerial,” exploitative interests of the capitalists thus form the outward appearance that conceals the fetishistic essence of the irrational, subjectless domination of the capital relation at the “macroeconomic” level. In general, capital can only be understood as a social totality; attempts to project the relations of the reproduction of individual capitals (enterprises, corporations) onto the system as a whole ultimately end up as ideology.

The Question of Guilt and Responsibility in Capitalism

As soon as people act as subjects in the valorization circuit of capital, they become character masks (Marx) of their respective position in the accumulation process – whether as assembly line workers, managers, salespeople or service providers is irrelevant in this respect. They are no longer “within themselves,” but act as the personification of their respective economic function (this is the basis of the feelings of alienation mentioned above).

Marx, for example, describes the capitalist in his function as a character mask “as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will,” who functions as the “point of departure and point of return” of the self-purpose of the endless circulation of capital. The “objective content of that circulation – the valorization of value – is his subjective purpose,” according to Marx in *Capital*.

What emerges here is the absurd position of the market subject within the automatism of capital valorization. On the one hand, capital as an automatic subject turns people into objects of its valorization movement, into things, into commodities that are traded on the labor market – and who have to adapt to this mediated form of subjectless domination as if it were a man-made law of nature, with a subliminal feeling of powerlessness.

At the same time, the only chance to still live out a stale imitation of subjectivity is to cooperate, as the aforementioned economic character mask, in the “subjective” perfection of this automatism of boundless capital valorization – and thus, in turn, to degrade “the others” to objects and “make them equal to things.” Within the all-too-real fetishism that the automatic subject perpetuates, the inmates of the capitalist treadmill are always two things at once: the subject of accumulation as well as its powerless object.

All character masks, as personifications of their respective economic function, therefore function as subject-objects of the autonomous movement of valorization that they themselves perpetuate, whereby the concrete relationship between these two poles depends on their specific hierarchical position in the reproduction process of capital. And it is precisely this hierarchical position of the subjects within the automatism of capital valorization that must also be taken into account in the question of the category of guilt, of personal responsibility. For of course the fetishism of capital does not absolve the actors who carry it out.

While some are obsessed with finding scapegoats, at the other end of the spectrum is a powerless systems theory that exculpates the current actors in business and politics. In this view, it seems as if those responsible can no longer be identified due to systemic constraints and objective structural laws. The concrete perpetrators disappear behind the destructive action of the automatic subject of capital’s collapsing dynamic of valorization.

The fact that the fetishism of capitalist society, in which the market-mediated actions of market subjects confront them as an alien, quasi-objective force, by no means leads to an exculpation of the actions of the perpetrators, was already pointed out by the crisis theorist Robert Kurz at the beginning of the 21st century:

Now, when the common form-context of abstract labor, commodity-form, state-citizenship, etc., moves into the field of vision of critique, where is accountability? Can one make a blind structural connection, can one make the automatic subject responsible for anything, even if it is the greatest crime? And vice versa: if capitalist barbarism is ultimately inherent in the mute compulsions of competition, etc., are not the barbaric acts of the ugly managers, the dirty politicians, the bureaucratic crisis administrators, the bloody butchers of the state of emergency somehow excused, because they are always conditioned and are actually caused by the subjectless structural laws of "second nature"?

Such an argument forgets that the concept of the automatic subject is a paradoxical metaphor for a paradoxical social relation. The automatic subject is not a distinct entity squatting out there somewhere by itself, but it is the social spell under which people subject their own actions to the automatism of capitalized money.

But those who act are always the individuals themselves. Competition, an artificially generated struggle for survival, crises, etc. all increase the potential for barbarism, but practically this barbarism must be carried out by the actions of people, and must pass through their consciousness. And that is why individuals are also subjectively responsible for their actions, the ugly manager and the dirty politician just as much as, on the other hand, the racist unemployed person and the anti-Semitic single mother.

The potential dangers of this society, and the immense anxiety that accompanies them, must be dealt with on a daily basis, and every moment individuals make choices in this process that are never completely without alternatives – neither on a small, daily scale nor on a large, socio-historical scale. No one is simply a puppet, without any agency, but everyone has to deal with the hair-raising contradictions, fears and sufferings of this spell.

Therefore, it is not absurd to direct the necessary critique of society to the level of socially overarching structures, to abstract labor and the automatic subject, but nevertheless to hold the acting individuals responsible for their actions, even if their social character mask leads them to a state of insanity.

Robert Kurz, *Marx Lesen*

A Donald Trump or Jeff Bezos, as subjects who carry out the contradictory automatism of capital accumulation on a political and economic level, are fully responsible for their actions. This is also true of a Wolfgang Schäuble, who is fully responsible for everything he has done to Greece and Southern Europe during the euro crisis; but it is also true of the little nasty forum troll, who is responsible for all the agitation he spreads on the net – even if these actions only execute the systemic crisis dynamics on a political or ideological level.

Of course, the historical guilt that an egomaniac like Trump or an austerity sadist like Schäuble has brought upon himself weighs far more heavily than the pitiful word-vomit of a single fringe extremist of the New Right in newspaper forums or social networks.

The great question of guilt in relation to the subjectless domination of capital can now also be specified in relation to the dynamics of the crisis and crisis ideology: the crisis as a historical process is a consequence of the increasing internal contradictions of capital, which confront the subjects as ever more severe "factual constraints."

Specifically, it is the tendency of capital to get rid of its own substance, value-creating wage labor, by automating the production process. This applies not only to the economic crisis, but also to the ecological crisis of capital, which, in its fetishistic compulsion to grow, must burn up the natural foundations of human life at an ever-increasing rate by increasing production.

Therefore, we can simply conclude that absolutely no one is to blame for the crisis of capital. The crisis was certainly not "orchestrated" by any conspirators. The crisis erupted precisely because market subjects are doing more and more efficiently exactly what the system demands of them: exploiting wage labor for the purpose of unlimited capital accumulation. The more effectively wage labor is exploited, the greater the pressure, the tighter the market-mediated noose around the necks of all market subjects.

The first false question, leading to ideological blindness, which imposes itself on the reified consciousness as a matter of course at the outbreak of the crisis, is the question of guilt. But the shoe is on the other foot: personal guilt must be sought in the "everyday life" of capital valorization, in the "normal execution" of the capitalist treadmill, in the concrete economic exploitation, in political oppression and in the production of ideology that keeps the automatism of the system running.

Thus, while no one is "to blame" for the outbreak of the systemic crisis, the dynamics of which unfold quasi "behind the backs of the producers" (Marx), it is precisely the everyday functioning of the system – the market-mediated oppression, exploitation and ideology production – in which all the individuals who consciously execute the systemic constraints as "character masks" of their capitalist functions, are guilty. Even more: in interaction with the dynamics of the crisis, it is precisely the exploitation, the oppression, the production of lies by the system that is taken to the point of absurdity.

If, as in the neoliberal decades, the exploitation of wage dependent workers continues to increase, this points to a systemic process of crisis that is perpetuated on the backs of those same workers. And this is all the more true when a "normal employment

relationship" becomes the exception and, globally speaking, more and more people can actually no longer be exploited by capital because they are superfluous and therefore nothing more than "useless eaters."

Class Struggle as A Struggle for Distribution

The increase in exploitation, impoverishment and precariousness described above, even in the centers of the capitalist world system, must therefore be understood as a systemic reaction to a deep historical process of crisis. This occurred in the 1980s in response to the end of the post-war boom in the 1970s and the crisis period of stagflation. Consequently, neoliberalism prevailed only because Keynesianism was at its wits' end. In this sense, neoliberalism was not a kind of "coup" against a supposedly ideal world of the welfare state, as many on the left like to imply.

It is precisely the seemingly absurd split between rich and poor, between the masses of precarious and impoverished wage-dependents, and the fictitious millions in largely fictitious capital that a few billionaires seem to possess that points to the systemic crisis, which also brings with it a lack of profitable investment opportunities in the real commodity economy, and a corresponding shift to speculative activities in the financial sphere ("financialization of capitalism").

It is precisely these consequences of the crisis that confront all actors as increasing, objectified contradictions or "constraints." The subjects react to this in a system-immanent way with an intensification of competition: politicians and states that enforce social cuts within the framework of the competition for locations, corporations that find ever more brutal forms of exploitation, in the mass media whose opportunism in the production of ideology seems to know no bounds, and wage-earners who increasingly resort to mobbing.

The market-mediated mute compulsion of the ever "tougher" conditions compels the character masks of their respective social functions to execute this compulsion under penalty of their own downfall. The capitalist who is not able to increase the exploitation of his human material in the context of increasing competition on "tighter" markets will perish. The same applies to the capitalist economies as national "locations," which are also in a race to the bottom due to the crisis.

The Hartz reforms, with their intended strategy of increasing precariousness and fixating on exports, have thus been "successful" in that they have so far been able to pass on the consequences of the crisis to other countries through the export of debt. The same applies to public opinion: the tendency towards opportunism in politics and the media is increasing, and oppositional thinking is being marginalized, especially on the "left."

Against the background of what has been written above, a clear assessment of the class struggle now also seems possible. Class struggle is thus a struggle for distribution within the process of capital reduction, the intensity of which is determined by the concrete, historical unfolding of its contradictions. In periods of strong economic expansion, as during the post-war boom until the 1970s, forms of "social partnership" can emerge between the functional elites of capital and the trade unions representing the wage-earners (of "variable capital," as Marx puts it).

As long as markets are expanding strongly, high profits can be agreed upon with wages that turn wage-dependent workers into consumers. This changes relatively quickly in times of crisis, when the main concern of every capitalist is to perpetuate the irrational end in itself of capital accumulation, if necessary at the expense of his own wage-earners.

The class struggle as a struggle for distribution thus has no inherent objective transformative potential. It is a struggle for shares in the real production of value, which is melting away as a result of the crisis, and it does not question this irrational form of social reproduction as such. The class struggle (and this is also historically true of such struggles) thus moves within the forms of capitalist socialization (value, labor, capital, state) and seeks emancipation and recognition within these categories, rather than their abolition.

The intensifying class struggle is therefore a struggle for distribution. The militancy with which this "class war," (Warren Buffet) which is escalating because of the crisis, is propagated, conceals its lack of radicalism, since the causes of the crisis and the above-mentioned fetishistic form of social reproduction in capitalism are not reflected upon by this movement.

The present social conditions also seem to resemble the impoverishment of earlier times because the historical "ascendant phase" of the working class in the 18th and 19th centuries has social parallels with the present descendant phase of capital and the working class. The current widespread misery within the eroding class of wage-earners in the centers of the world system thus mirrors the misery of its historical formation.

To put it vividly: The foundation on which the class actors operate, the expenditure of wage labor in commodity production, is disintegrating. The one-sided rhetoric of class struggle obscures the fact that the classes themselves are in the process of dissolution as a result of the crisis. The proletariat is disintegrating into precisely that economically "superfluous" layer of people who are desperately fleeing to the core regions of the capitalist world system.

What Do We Do?

To be radical is to grasp a problem at its root in order to find a solution adequate to it. This is precisely what Marxist class struggle thinking does not do. It is not the distribution of commodity wealth that is at the heart of the crisis, but the contradictory form in which wealth is produced for the sake of the irrational self-purpose of unbridled capital accumulation – the commodity form itself. The blatant, ever worsening social division of late capitalist societies is, as explained, precisely the consequence of the escalating internal and external contradictions of capital's compulsion to grow.

Consequently, the crisis cannot be resolved by social-democratic redistribution. The radical goal should not be to gain "control" (possibly still under the leadership of a dictatorial state and cadre party) over the machinery of capitalist accumulation, but rather to fundamentally transform it in order to finally liberate the production of consumer goods from its commodity form, from the fetishistic end in itself of the valorization of value.

Even the "democratization" of capitalist enterprises, as is currently being discussed in left-liberal circles in the US as direct worker control, would continue to expose these cooperatives to the constraints of the crisis-induced tightening of the markets, and thus change little. The crisis of capital, which is reaching its internal and external limits, can thus only be overcome by overcoming the fetishistic dynamics of the accumulation process – for it is precisely these dynamics of exploitation, unconsciously generated by the market subjects, that are devastating impotent human societies and the global ecosystem.

Ultimately, it is about simplifying social reproduction by organizing it directly, through an all-encompassing process of society-wide communication, rather than – as is currently the case – degrading society to a mere transitory stage of a blind world-burning process run amok. Post-capitalism thus means, at its core, the conscious shaping of the process of social reproduction by the members of society, as opposed to the current state in which people are subjected to a quasi-objective, fetishistic dynamic.

Karl Marx's seemingly cryptic remark that the overcoming of capitalism would conclude "the prehistory of human society" thus gains clarity. All human history to date has taken place unconsciously, within the framework of fetishistic social systems: from the religious fetishism of early times and the Middle Ages to the secularized religion of capital.

And here is the thing: the crisis is also an irreversible, fetishistic process. It will run its course, and there is no way to stabilize the system in the long run, because the eternal creation of debt will eventually reach its limits, even in the centers. This is not a vision of the future; it is already a reality, especially in the periphery.

The system, choking on its contradictions, is already producing an economically superfluous humanity and collapsing regions known as "failed states," as the refugee crisis has made clear. The same is true of the climate crisis caused by capitalist growth mania and its monstrous consequences.

Whether the collapsing system will be overcome is therefore not a question of the subjective "will" of the members of society. It is a question of the very survival of human civilization, and ultimately of human existence, how the coming transformation process will proceed: as a chaotic disintegration, in the form of the establishment of a brutal, murderous crisis dictatorship, or in a progressive direction that would open up new emancipatory perspectives for humanity, despite all the climate-related distortions to come.

What is more, this transformation process is already underway – and the increasing political, ideological, and military conflicts are precisely the expression of this upheaval that is unconsciously taking place in humanity, as the sociologist and world-systems theorist Immanuel Wallerstein pointed out at the beginning of the 21st century:

We are living in a transition from our existing world-system, the capitalist world-economy, to another world-system or systems. We do not know whether this will be for the better or for the worse. We shall not know until we get there, which may not be for another fifty years now. We do know that the period of transition will be a very difficult one for all who live in it. [...] It will be a period of conflicts and aggravated disorders [...]. Not paradoxically, it will also be a period in which the "free will" factor will be at its maximum, meaning that the individual and collective action can have a greater impact on the future structuring of the world than such action can have in more "normal" times, that is, during the ongoing life of an historical system.

Immanuel Wallerstein, *Utopistics*

Civilization or barbarism – these are the extreme poles in this historical "phase of transition," whereby it is the New Right, with its extremism of the center, which insists on adhering to the forms of society in decay (nation, "creative" capital, state), that is paving the way towards barbarism.

It is precisely the extreme networks and associations of the New Right that are sometimes consciously preparing for the crisis – which they imagine as the result of a conspiracy against Germany – with death lists and coup plans. A dictatorship planned for the next wave of crisis is supposed to serve to finally "cleanse" the left through mass murder. Thus, neo-fascism is a kind of fire accelerator for barbarism in the crisis.

There is a maxim of political practice that left movements, groups or even parties would have to follow in the 21st century if they still want to function as progressive social forces according to their concept in the current epoch of upheaval and crisis. Capitalism

must be consigned to history as quickly as possible, the capital relation as a social totality must be consciously abolished – all practical actions, all tactics, all reform proposals, all broader strategies would have to be oriented towards this categorical imperative.

This is not an expression of leftist “radicalism,” but the formulation of a reasonable bare minimum, that, if not realized, would lead to the end of 21st century civilization in barbarism. Precisely because capital is collapsing, it must be overcome. Progress can only be realized beyond capital, in the transformative struggle to shape a post-capitalist society.

A progressive movement, based on an understanding of the necessity of systemic transformation, would thus fight to create conditions that could steer this transformative dynamic in an emancipatory direction. The maxim of such a post-politics would be, on the one hand, the effort to maintain and further develop the process of civilization, and, on the other hand, the struggle to overcome the inherent destructive dynamics of capitalism.

The goal of a progressive transformation movement would thus be to consciously shape the process of civilization, which is fetishistically carried out by powerless people, within the framework of a process of communication throughout society. The forms in which a self-conscious transformation movement organizes itself in the context of the crisis-related increase in social conflicts would thus possibly become the germinal forms of a post-capitalist society.

Bourgeois politics, the actions of political subjects, are thus “important” again, they have weight. Not because they can solve the crisis, but because they determine the course of the crisis. An example may illustrate this: whether a Schäuble puts Europe on a neoliberal starvation diet (austerity) after the outbreak of the euro crisis, or whether the crisis process unfolds within the framework of a pan-European economic and social policy, is of great importance for the further unfolding of the crisis, as the rise of nationalist and right-wing extremist movements in austerity-ridden “German” Europe shows.

The increasing social struggles against the dismantling of the welfare state, against the dismantling of democracy and police-state tendencies, and for a genuine climate policy should thus be understood as fields in which the social subjects literally fight for the course of the transformation process that is objectively taking place.

And here the class struggle – insofar as it is aware of its role as a means in a struggle for transformation – also has an important role to play. The class struggle is part of the struggle over the concrete course that the transformation process will take.

Which Society Will Undergo Transformation?

For this to happen, the class struggle must look beyond itself and no longer primarily strive for recognition or social satisfaction in a declining capitalism, as the workers’ movement historically did. The historical expansion of capitalism and the wage-labor regime was the precondition for this, which is no longer the case today because of the crisis.

To put it more concretely, understanding the crisis as a maxim of emancipatory praxis means asking in what form late capitalist society will enter the inevitable process of transformation. Will it be an authoritarian, racist, police-state administered oligarchy with absurd social abysses, or a more egalitarian, bourgeois-democratic polity in which there continues to be space for radical critique and praxis?

Superficially, then, an emancipatory left that wants to be progressive in late capitalism resembles an existentialist figure, comparable to Albert Camus’ Sisyphus, who consciously engages in a seemingly absurd practice. The struggle for social improvements against the dismantling of democracy, for the equality of minorities, for the Green New Deal is waged in full awareness of the internal capitalist futility of this struggle – in the face of the escalating economic and ecological systemic crisis.

But this is where the analogy ends. The consciousness and rhetoric with which this “battle for the tea water” is fought is crucial. It is necessary to tell people clearly what is going on, that the old capitalist world is dying, that the new one has not yet been born – and that this is a struggle against social cuts, for redistribution, against racism, climate destruction and warmongering, a struggle for optimal starting conditions for the inevitable system transformation.

Through this openness, which only makes explicit what has long since been unconsciously embedded in society as a dull crisis agenda, coupled with the search for post-capitalist forms of organization within this movement, it would also be possible to overcome the false immediacy that has often led progressive movements to get bogged down in the false whole of late capitalism.

False immediacy is understood here as the tendency of social movements to unconsciously persist in forms of thinking that correspond to the social conditions and contradictions against which they are directed.

A prime example of this is trade union struggles against job cuts, which have to be fought by the actors concerned for the sake of their social survival – but which, without a corresponding awareness of the crisis, reproduce the existing forms of thought – in this case thinking in terms of “jobs” as the only option for individual reproduction – even in times of crisis among the actors.

It is similar with the protests against inflation, a phenomenon which is often reduced to the greed of the capitalists – and which

without radical crisis consciousness must end in impotence. It would be crucial to raise the question of the system offensively in the coming crisis confrontations, precisely because capital is perishing from its own contradictions. The concrete protest must be carried out with open eyes as part of a struggle for the transformation of the system.

Such necessary social struggles would thus have to be coupled with a radical emancipatory critique of the capitalist forms of existence and thought that are in the process of disintegration, as Robert Kurz has already pointed out:

The task, then, is to formulate the emancipatory critique of the objectified, socially overarching forms of existence or thought and to assert it from within the social struggle in order to consciously break through this categorical prison. [...] What matters is to develop a will against the dominant form of the will and to make conscious its fetishistic character.

The text is an updated version of an article that was published in the magazine *Telepolis* in 2019, before it was hijacked by a *Querfront* racket of the Left Party and converted into a *Querfront* organ. The text can be taken unabridged by anyone interested, with credit to the author.

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