

Institutional Control of Social Struggles

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Except in situations of imminent danger to the system of domination, when all the rules of the game are suspended and only class violence is decisive—a kind of generalized zero-tolerance—institutions have sought to integrate protest movements rather than repress them, staking out a space within which they can operate and providing them with channels for communication.

Under normal conditions of capitalist rule, opposition and protest possessed a legal status and their own means of exerting pressure and negotiating, since the organizations classified under the heading of representative organizations were not only an important component of the mechanism of social control, but its necessary complement thanks to which the particular interests of the ruling class can be presented to society as the general interest. Capitalism never stands still for very long, however, and as it advances, it penetrates every nook and cranny of life and captures territories where the forces of life are on the wane, subverting the socio-political structures that it had itself established in the preceding stage, forcing them to adapt or perish.

The traditional mechanisms of integration and control—parties, trade unions and public interest groups and, along with them, parliaments, labor negotiations and forums for public consultation—were therefore modernized during the seventies, and ceased to function in the eighties. From then on they represented nothing but a fictitious, implausible, false and spectacular protest. To the extent that general interests were expressed, they were expressed outside the institutions, in a purely negative, uncontrolled, spontaneous manner.

The reasons for the collapse of institutionalized opposition are not hard to discern: first, the decomposition of its social base, the middle class and the working class; second, the discredit it earned due to its own ineffectiveness, the product of its professionalization and corruption. The pathetic attempts to revive it, whether by means of self-proclaimed social movements, or by means of civic platforms, that is, by means of juvenilism and citizenism, led nowhere, since, by remaining within the system, their interests correspond with those of domination. Their historical moment has passed; they are over the hill. For real protest, the institutionalized opposition is the problem, the enemy and the main threat.

There is an even better reason to reject institutionalized opposition that we have not yet mentioned, and this reason can be deduced from the absolute incompatibility of capitalism in its current stage with democratic bourgeois forms, due to the impossibility of formulating within the latter any interests of an allegedly general nature that differ from the private interests of the major corporations and the banks. This is why spontaneous protests are not constructed on

the basis of truly general interests, but as open rejections of the private interests represented by the institutions. This is clearly visible with regard to territorial conflicts and struggles against development. In these cases, the protests arise in the name of particular interests that have been harmed, but if they are successful in stimulating public debate, if they manage to build counter-institutions that make that debate possible, then this private interest can be reformulated as the general interest, outside and against the mechanisms of institutional integration and control.

Capitalist society has always been a disciplinary society and this aspect has not changed with globalization and the new green trend. But it is no longer a matter of disciplining the individual as producer, father of the family (that is, as agent of reproduction), believer, patriot or resident. That is why the classical sites of confinement and domestication, the family, the school, the army, the church and the factory, are in a state of crisis. The bankruptcy of the mechanisms of political integration and control is part of this same crisis, since the individual in his role as militant or voter is no longer a prime target for discipline, either. In the new capitalism the individual only has to be indoctrinated as a consumer and as a tourist, for which purpose he does not have to go from one place of confinement to another, from his home to work or to school, from work to the trade union center, etc. Now, all of society, thanks to the total urbanization of the territory, has become one vast confinement center, with no rules besides those of consumption and the spectacle. This entails other requirements, as well: a new distribution of space, a new ordering of time and therefore new mechanisms of social control, and new methods of integration. Control must confront the relaxation of what were formerly very impermeable barriers. In the world of business there is talk of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); in the city halls of the big cities, of the de-concentration of immigrant ghettos; in those institutions responsible for the administration and management of territory, of participatory democracy, interactive government or transverse participation. These three strategies form part of the same reality that includes the penal codes of “democracy”, the recently enacted municipal ordinances, video-surveillance, the FIES system [*Ficheros de Internos de Especial Seguimiento*: a U.S.-style detention regime, involving isolation and psychological torture, imposed on certain categories of inmates in Spanish prisons—translator’s note], internment camps for undocumented immigrants, shopping malls, genetic engineering and self-proclaimed “sustainable economics”. For CSR, the break-up of ethnic urban neighborhoods and “participatory democracy” do not arise in a traditional bourgeois democratic environment, but are immersed in a diffuse state of emergency, dissimulated and sanctioned by the law.

Corporate Social Responsibility is an employer’s philosophy that is reminiscent of Fordism and the post-war German co-determination, but without the hegemonic pretensions of the latter. It was born as a reaction of a sector of employers to the wave of Enron-type scandals and the current financial and real estate crisis. This crisis has resulted in a modification of the developmentalist economic model, and transferred to the state and high-tech industries the function that was previously performed by monetary or stock market speculation, the traffic in indebtedness and urbanization, consolidating the division of the working class into two completely distinct halves with separate interests. On the one side, the “privileged” workers, that is, those with steady jobs, with trade union contracts, and mortgages that are not in default; on the other side, the precarious workers, with short-term contracts or working off-the-books, up to their necks in debt, largely immigrants or young people with no prospects of being incorporated into the labor market. The privileged are linked to emerging economic sectors, to strongholds of the trade union bureaucracy, or to the state (civil servants); the others, to the lowest-paid sector of the

economy: tourism, construction, retail trade, distribution, janitorial work or home health care aides for the elderly. For the latter category of workers, the stick without the carrot: long hours, minimum wage, residence permits and the threat of exclusion. For the former, stability, promotion, continuous training, profit sharing, wholesome working conditions, family counseling and psychiatric services. The one sector is controlled by social workers, teachers in low-income school districts, and the police; the other, by trade union bureaucrats, psychopharmaceuticals and CSR. We need not mention that CSR enjoys the full support of the trade unions and the government ministries, which are the real agents of its promotion. It is just one more divisive factor added to the world of labor, consisting in the revival of an old employer's maxim against the class struggle: "a happy worker is a loyal worker". This time it takes the form of a by-product of "sustainable" development, with no other purpose than to prevent an autonomous movement from arising from the momentum of an adversarial situation at the workplace.

The real estate-financial crisis is an internal and structural crisis that has led to macro-economic changes in the capitalist model, but these changes do not call into question the external limits of that model, limits which developmentalism (economic growth) is obliged to transgress, with the consequent endless series of ecological and social catastrophes. The real crisis is the one that derives from the radical incompatibility of capitalism with life on Earth. Every advance made by the system implies not just a greater artificialization of life, a more complete condition of social anomie and material and moral uprooting, but also the creation of increasingly more extreme conditions of survival, which spreads the possibility of conflicts everywhere. The modern social question can only arise in the internal crises as a spectacle, since within the system the mechanisms of integration are still working. A very clear example of this was provided by the anti-globalization movements, which deliberately attempted to restore the legitimacy of politics. The social question emerges where capitalist growth exceeds its limits and not as pure negation, in the style of the French or English ghettos, but as the defense of a different way of life, of a life outside of capitalism. The social question surfaces, even against the will of its protagonists, in the defense of the rural world, in the struggle against nuclear power plants and highway construction, in the resistance to urbanization, in the sabotage of GMO agriculture, in the fight against gigantic infrastructure construction projects, from the High-Speed Train to High-Voltage Power Lines, urban redevelopment schemes, and airports.

The world's leaders know that the most important latent conflict is not represented by the student mobilizations against the Bologna Plan or the attempts to import the Greek revolt, but by the "culture of refusal" expressed by acts of territorial defense. Only in conflicts of the latter type have incipient forms of direct democracy made an appearance (e.g., the Anti-TAV Assembly and to a lesser extent in the Platform in Defense of the Ebro) and non-capitalist alternative models to development been presented. Those leaders most closely linked to green capitalism and to the state believe that in the new developmentalist stage, one that will be much more destructive than the previous stages despite the avowals of respect for the environment, conflict cannot be prevented, which is why it will have to be recognized and re-channeled. In addition, the collaboration of the population in the whole process of green reconversion is more necessary than it was in previous stages, since the population must be disciplined to accept ecological standards of consumption and conservation in apparent contradiction with the preceding regime of waste. Thus the moment for "participatory democracy" arrives, the time for the search for auxiliary interlocutors for the conflicts between civil society and corporate-government interests. Since the traditional forms of integration cannot be directly utilized, intermediaries are required

that will be capable of defending and enforcing particular agreements in exchange for tolerating territorial aggression. Local governments, neighborhood groups and civil society platforms are this missing link for post-bourgeois pseudo-democracy, and their job is to de-activate spontaneous, autonomous protests and their anti-capitalist ways. So-called participatory democracy is actually not democracy at all. It is not established to defend a general interest on the basis of a concrete instance of aggression, but to negotiate between particular interests that are in conflict, those of the groups of the affected populations and those of the corporate-government nexus. It does not arise from anti-developmental struggles, but from efforts to contain them. It does not intervene to prevent the destruction of territory, but to raise the price of that destruction, incorporating its social cost in accordance with its market value. Participatory democracy merely sets some new institutional limits, beyond which the public power assumes responsibility. Thus, it plays the hardly honorable role of blocking the resurgence of real democracy, or territorial self-management, which has no other foundation than the appropriation of the territory by its inhabitants, its deliverance from the market.

In conclusion, any struggle that does not challenge the model of capitalist society is condemned to reinforce it. No one can be unaware of the fact that the dominant economic interests are radically opposed to those of the inhabitants. Nor can anyone be unaware of the fact that the political system in which these conflicts occur is not bourgeois democratic, but totalitarian. Therefore, the forms of institutional representation are in the direct service of capital and are incompatible with the horizontal democracy of the assemblies, which is the only real democracy for the oppressed. Struggles in defense of territory that do not take this into account are not real struggles, but simulacra, and their agents are working for the enemy.

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