

# Taking Stock: Reflections on the Uncertain Likelihood of a European Revolution

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*“With respect to the past, the most important thing is to be aware of the specificity of our time, taking care, as much as possible, not to project our current way of looking at things onto a past that only would only serve us as a justification.”*

—Jacques Ellul, *Autopsy of a Revolution*

The enormous contradictions accumulated by the capitalist system over the last fifty years have not awakened a will to live in another way in broad sectors of the population that would impel radical transformations in mass society. To the contrary, apathy and fear have predominated, giving rise to passive and resigned support for the status quo, which is viewed as the lesser evil. It would seem that the greatest achievement of global capitalism has been the complete integration of the masses in an artificial and alien world, and that the will to abolish it has yielded to fear of being excluded from it. We are therefore presented with the curious paradox that favorable objective conditions for revolution have produced subjective conditions characterized by the submission of the majority, the disappearance of revolutionary consciousness, and, as a corollary, the absence of a social force with the potential to even attempt to engage in a revolutionary process.

The logic of the commodity and of unbridled economic development has so profoundly penetrated society that it has successfully prevented the appearance of any collective revolutionary subject in Europe, or has at least impeded its development. This phenomenon has a dual aspect: on the one hand, the decline of thought; and on the other hand, the hypostasis of action, which is demoted to an ideological pretext for compliance with the standards established by the spectacle of everyday life. So this society's leaders get what they want: nothing is more convenient for them than a model of thought that requires no effort (weak thought) and an activism that swims with the current. For there is nothing easier than to follow the trends of fashion in circumstances in which it is the ruling elite that in the final analysis is giving the orders; and nothing is more difficult than to think and to act freely in a space without real freedom. For a system that considers itself unquestionable, the social question only exists in literature and any real opposition is inconceivable.

In a situation like the current one, where patriotic mystifications and political clichés are ubiquitous, alongside commercial propaganda, in an everyday world where a stifling conformism frustrates and expels any subversive desire, thinking constitutes the most radical and most daring act, and also the one that arouses the most suspicion and hostility. To construct a critical apparatus that can veraciously explain our epoch is our principal task. The first issue to address is the fact of the disintegration of the working class at a time when wage labor has been generalized, and therefore, the loss of a socialist revolutionary horizon and its replacement by an attachment to the consumption of commodity abundance. For the majority of the workers have preferred the comforts of a life determined by the imperatives of the economy to the ardors of a battle against all forms of oppression and injustice.

The working class is no longer in itself and for itself the negation of the bourgeois order. In our postmodern world, it does not occupy a special position that would lead it to question capitalism regardless of what it might think or want, a position that would transform it into the gravedigger of capitalism. In the phase of globalization, the status of wage labor does not imprint it with a class character, nor does it confer a sense of belonging to a class. Thus, the working class condition has ceased to be the bearer of universal values. It does not imply any historical function, nor does it indicate any redemptive mission. Nor are there any social struggles currently underway that would reveal the ineluctable advance of the proletariat towards the emancipation of humanity. Rather the contrary: extremely prosaic aspirations, and the total absence of any will to change the world. The working class as Marxism conceives it is a historical product whose time has passed. Its most recent European manifestations took place during the 1970s. The proletariat is indeed a social reality, just like the alienation of which it was once conscious, but today, with a capitalism that is very different from the capitalism of the beginnings of the industrial revolution, and a State that is vastly over-developed, this type of class no longer exists.

At first, the mechanization of the productive processes played an important role in this trend. It not only transformed the workers into appendages of machines, but eventually even replaced them with machines. Having been relegated to the margins of production, the proletariat lost the power to paralyze it and use it for its own benefit: the power of sabotage and self-management. Work was turned into a means of survival otherwise devoid of content, and the relative material prosperity and the escalating proliferation of mass entertainment diverted attention towards the world of consumption. Big retail chain stores, radio programs and the cinema provided alienated existence with the meaning that had been evacuated from the workplace. Television, the Internet and smartphones did the rest. Commodity fetishism, the leisure industry and, finally, social networking websites colonized everyday life, separating the public sphere from the private sphere and submerging both in an unreal world, nullifying even the slightest chance that any class consciousness might develop. Things, and even more, their images, have acquired more and more of a life of their own, taking the place of people. The subject of the revolution was transformed into an object of consumption and of the spectacle. The workers, estranged from the products and consequences of their labor, that is, alienated, now behave as spectators of a virtual reality rather than as agents of historical change. Alienation, far from awakening consciousness, has for the most part produced disenchantment and complacency, narcissism and psychopathology.

Capitalism is a social system that imposes its rule by way of technology, the spectacle, fictitious communication and the forces of order of a hypertrophied State. Instrumental and bureaucratic rationality, by mediating every domain of existence, subjects life to the interests of domination. It not only manipulates, but directly manufactures, thoughts and desires. The desire for author-

ity is a good example. The attraction of the electoral game is another. Generally speaking, the state machinery and the technological means at its disposal are not adapted to individuals; it is individuals who adapt and submit to them. This is what is called going along with progress. Capitalism cannot survive without a continuous and constant adaptation to a changing, increasingly more invasive market, or without that market's complement, the total separation of individuals from each other that has been made possible by technology, that is, without the technologically assisted, prolonged self-destruction of individuality. With such fragments of egocentric personality, no community is possible.

The mechanization of the productive process, together with the bureaucratization that demands the appalling growth of the State, of the means of communication and of industrial and financial management, have led to the unprecedented expansion of a non-proletarian sector of salaried workers composed of white collar employees, civil servants, executives, technicians and professionals; this sector has been instilled with a certain dynamism by the most recent crises. In the 1960s, certain sociologists called this sector the "new intermediate salaried stratum", "the new middle class", or even the "new working class", attributing it with historical tasks that formerly corresponded to the proletariat. However, this sector has never manifested even the least revolutionary inclination, nor has it questioned any aspect at all of industrial society or the State. No one bites the hand that feeds him. Neither due to their objective condition, nor by virtue of their mentality, their expectations, or the place they occupy in the system, are these new salaried middle classes destined to be the agents of any kind of radical change, much less a revolution, which does not however mean that they will remain quiescent when faced with a crisis that affects them, as was the case with the various financial crashes that took place since 2008 and the subsequent austerity policies. The mobilization of these classes, and especially of their most threatened younger elements, has not had a significant impact on the economy, but it has led to significant changes in the political scene. The purpose of the civil society organizations formed at the time of the demonstrations of the "*indignados*" is to replace the traditional parties in the management of the old politics.

The major difference between the classic workers movement and the mesocratic civil society movement is rooted precisely in the disinterest of the latter in the economy and in its exclusive devotion to political action. Having emerged from the shadow of the State, it has a blind faith in the State, and is incapable of conceiving any other form of social engagement besides working through its institutions. Its specific interests, although it refers to them as "the interests of the citizens", are nothing but the preservation of the status of its supporters, which it thinks it can guarantee thanks to the State. Its objectives will not be attained with the diminution of the State apparatus, but with its even more pronounced development. The contradiction lies in the fact that the contemporary State is the slave of the markets, or, more accurately, it is a cornerstone of the industrialization and financialization of the world. And it is just this industrialization and this globalization of financial flows that are responsible for the crisis that led to the political upheaval of the salaried middle classes. As a result, the civil society movement, insofar as it is embedded in the structures of the State, is compelled to act in such a way as to augment those structures, that is, to act in opposition to its own "class" interests. This is why its political action, with the few successes to which it can lay claim, takes the form of gestures, symbolic demonstrations and proclamations made in the democratic language of the liberal bourgeoisie of old. In short, the civil society movement has not implied, nor will it imply, any real change, or even a convincing spectacle of change.

As the tiny, self-proclaimed revolutionary groups stagnate and become fossilized, the revolutionary objectives to which they lay claim become empty words, lifeless truths and ritual formulas. The old doctrinaire analyses are left behind by reality and the old interpretive frameworks fall to pieces, devoid of meaning. Their ideologies, for the most part workerist, nationalist, green or feminist, are incapable of rationally explaining the course of development of the world, since the world is changing at a rapid pace and new developments are taking place that these ideologies cannot comprehend. These ideological discourses are plagued by clichés and artificial extremism; the roads they propose to follow lead nowhere; the strident manner in which they are expressed can hardly conceal the absence of any possible alternatives; the strategies that they offer are nothing but ridiculous imitations of the past. For all intents and purposes, these ideologies have grown old and become obsolete, while capitalism, to our regret, only becomes more mature.

It is not our intention to deny the evidence that major conflicts are occurring, although these conflicts do not take the form of subversive movements on any significant scale, nor is it our desire to disparage the existence of focal points of resistance at the margins of politics, or to ignore the spaces that are foreign to the functioning of capital where experiments in non-consumerist ways of life are taking place. The social struggle exists, it is just that struggles are not capable of spreading and their objectives do not exceed certain limits, that is, they do not question everything they should question. Thus, the world of radical protest is not developing as a counter-society within mainstream society. There is too much distrust of the idea of organization, too much short-term commitment, and too much inclination to remain in a kind of ghetto. These tendencies dovetail quite nicely with activism lacking any long-term perspectives, verbal radicalism, fashionable identity politics and vague utopianism. The milieus of radical protest give the impression of being the habitat of the juvenile middle class in its first extremist stage.

A recapitulation of all of the above observations leads us once again to the need for the revolution that will put an end to capitalism and finish off its intolerable way of life, and once again the real problem is posed, that of critical thought. It is not that we have to journey through a trackless desert of theory, for, despite a certain degree of confusion in these fields that has resulted from a certain kind of narrow-mindedness, there are valuable elements such as ecological critique, the anti-development analysis, anthropological studies, and value theory. But there is still a lot to be done if we do not want to see these contributions degenerate into conciliatory ideologies or fuel for sectarianism. We need a rigorous historical vision, but one that is free of deterministic characteristics, a new critique of post-structuralism, and the recycling of antiquated ideologies, a unitary language that would characterize it, an effective demolition of salvationist myths, beginning with the biggest myth of all, the myth of the State, etc. Only an authentic revolutionary thought will be able to name its friends and its enemies by precisely delimiting the terrain of contemporary struggles, clarifying tactics and strategies that will help to overcome the enormous obstacles that stand in our way, and bringing everything together into a single project. When one works for the overthrow of a regime one must be clear about what it is that one wants to put in its place.

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