

The Dialectic of Rise and Fall

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Capitalism has reached its peak, it has crossed the threshold on the other side of which all the measures taken to preserve it only hasten its self-destruction. It can no longer present itself as the only alternative to chaos: it is chaos and it will become increasingly more chaotic. During the sixties and seventies of the last century, a handful of non-conformist economists and pioneers of social ecology proclaimed the impossibility of infinite growth in view of the finite resources of the planet, especially its energy resources; that is, they called attention to the external limits of capitalism. Science and technology were capable of extending these limits, but cannot abolish them, and in the process caused new problems faster than they solved the old ones. This observation refutes the key element of state policy in the postwar era, developmentalism, the idea that economic development is sufficient to resolve the social question, but it also refutes the axis upon which socialism revolves, the belief in a just and egalitarian future based on the indefinite development of the productive forces under the direction of the representatives of the proletariat. In addition, development has undesirable side-effects: the destruction of the natural habitat and the soil, the artificialization of the landscape, pollution, global warming, the hole in the ozone layer, the depletion of aquifers, the deterioration of the quality of life in the urban environment and social anomie. The growth of the productive forces accentuated their increasingly more destructive character. Faith in progress sprang a leak; material development sterilized the terrain of freedom and posed a threat to survival. The revelation that a free society will never come from the hands of a ruling class, which by means of a rational utilization of scientific and technical knowledge would expand production and bring about an era of abundance where everyone would be satiated, was nothing but a consequence of the critique of the socially regressive function of science and technology, that is, the questioning of the idea of progress. Belief in progress, however, was not only a bourgeois dogma; it was also the principle characteristic of the proletarian doctrine. The critique of progress therefore implied the end of not only bourgeois ideology but also workerist ideology. The solution for inequality and injustice was therefore not to be found in a belief in a different kind of progress, another type of progress that would be purged of its contradictions. As Jaime Semprun said, when the ship is sinking, we do not need a correct theory of navigation, but the know-how required to build a raft. Learning how to cultivate a garden as Voltaire recommended, or learning how to make bread or construct a mill, as the back-to-the-land movement advises, is more important than understanding Marx, Bakunin or the Situationist International. This means that the problems caused by development cannot be accommodated within the frame-

work of speculative knowledge or ideology because they are more practical than theoretical and, as a result, critique must advance towards practice. In this state of emergency, the question of what life would be like in a non-capitalist regime ceases to be a question for utopian reflection in order to become the most realistic of considerations. If freedom depends on the disappearance of bureaucracies and the state, the dismantling of industrial production, the abolition of wage labor, the re-appropriation of ancient knowledge and the return to traditional agriculture, that is, a radical process of decentralization, de-industrialization and de-urbanization beginning with the re-appropriation of the land, the subject capable of carrying out this immense task cannot be the same one whose interests remain associated with growth, the incessant accumulation of capital, the extension of hierarchy, the expansion of industry and generalized urbanization. A collective existence that would be equal to this mission cannot be constructed on the basis of a dispute over part of the system's surplus value but only through desertion from that system, a desertion which finds in the struggle to separate itself from the system the necessary strength to constitute itself as a collective existence.

At the end of the Fordist era, after the rise in oil prices as a result of declining production of oil in the United States, we know what kind of solution the ruling classes sought to implement in order to preserve economic growth: a developmentalism of a new kind, neo-liberal developmentalism, based first on the end of the nation-state, the privatization of public functions, the abandonment of the gold standard, investment in nuclear energy, the elimination of customs duties, reduction of transport costs, globalized markets, credit expansion and the deregulation of the world of labor. A second, somewhat more Keynesian phase capitalized on the opportunity to make a profit from the accumulated destruction by way of so-called sustainable development, integrating the ecological point of view in a "green" capitalism. The state to some extent re-assumed its former role as the driving force of economic development that it possessed in the previous era of national capitalism by financing this modernization and engaging in a forced re-training of the population to get them to consume certified commodities. We also know about the neo-Keynesian progressive alternatives that, within the framework of the established order, called for an "alternative" globalization in which responsibilities would be more fairly shared, or, which amounts to the same thing, a globalization administered by those governments that respect the interests of the labor bureaucracy and the status of the middle classes. Such proposals were based on the false assumption that the state is a neutral instrument vis-à-vis capitalism, rather than the adequate political expression of its interests. In any event, both policies—the conservative neo-liberal and the social democratic neo-Keynesian—failed as capitalism ran up against its internal limits. The liquidation of local economies plunged whole populations into ruin, populations that are accumulating in the peripheries of the metropolis, giving rise to immense shantytowns. Masses of people immigrated to the "developed" countries, spreading the consequences of the demographic crisis to the privileged zones of turbo-capitalism. This new mutation of capital created a new social divide: those who are integrated into and those who are excluded from the market. The job of containing the excluded populations basically fell to the state, which, by no means a neutral actor, was forced to develop for the occasion repressive policies of immigration control and then extended these policies to all forms of dissidence. On the other hand, the eminently speculative nature of international financial trends and statist patronage policies, after a decade of euphoria, led to the general collapse of 2008, aggravated by the debts that the states had not been able to reimburse, precipitating a return to a much harsher form of neo-liberalism. Draconian measures are necessary to transfer the burden of the crisis

provoked by the banks and the states to the wage earning population, most of whom are poised on the brink of insolvency. The material pauperization of one-third of the population is added to a moral impoverishment that has prevailed for years, but the irremediable inability of the United States and the European Union to maintain enough momentum for growth without the compensation of an emerging center of demand, such as China or India, will impose a critical, long-term framework within which the process of anomie could be reversed. Potentially, and for a very long time, the specter of Greece—the Greek conditions—will haunt the thoughts of the ruling class. Vengeance or the desire for retaliation will prevail during the first moments with the consequent conflict and violence, but in order to engage in constructive activity, a sense of dignity will have to emerge among the tormented masses at the same time as a really subversive consciousness.

Paradoxically, in the current phase of the decomposition of the prevailing system, its internal contradictions conceal its external contradictions. The drama of exclusion, unemployment, precariousness, cutbacks, evictions and the impoverishment of the wage earning middle classes, by casting into high relief their immediate interests that are still linked to the preservation of an urban, artificial and consumerist lifestyle, have momentarily obscured the essential question, the rejection of the creed of progress, and, consequently, the creed of the social and urban model inherent to these social layers. Hence the intensifying “ecological footprint” and the intrinsic unsustainability of survival, whether abundantly or poorly provided for under capitalism, has not been taken into consideration, which is why demands for de-industrialization and de-urbanization seem so out of place. The urban, working class or populist protest refuses to pay the bill for the previous developmentalist policies and is thus content to demand an “alternative” politics, an “alternative” banking system, or an “alternative” trade unionism; in short, an “alternative” capitalism, but it will never seriously propose a policy of ruralization or the disappearance of the metropolis, that is, another way of living together, another kind of society or another kind of planet. Most of the inhabitants of the major urban areas only seek or aspire to experience nature on the weekends, as consumers of recreation or tourism, which is why an anti-developmental critique has serious problems being disseminated outside of narrow circles, since the urban mentality is incapable of accepting it and the deserters from the asphalt are still few and far between. On the other hand, the remaining rural residents suffer from an even worse form of mental deterioration, which is the fruit of their suburbanization, and most of the time they reproduce urban ideological stereotypes. The anti-developmental critique therefore does not attract any support either in the rural environment, which should be its natural home, or in the urban environment, which is much less amenable to its message. This is why the materialization in practice of anti-developmentalism as defense of territory is subject to a multitude of inconsistencies and limitations. The specifically local character of such a variety of defensive struggle already prejudices its effectiveness. An opposition barely crystallizes against some particular harmful phenomenon, when municipalist, green or nationalist activists appear, who try to confine it as a local “NIMBY” movement, politically exploit it and bog it down in a legal and administrative quagmire. Only in those cases where the movement has obtained allies from the urban areas thanks precisely to the irregulars of the post-city, has it been able to formulate a general interest and sustain a large-scale conflict (e.g., against bypasses, the MAT, the TAV, highways, wind farms, etc.). To summarize: defense of territory is far from proving to be the only really anti-capitalist conflict since, as a result of the hostile conditions that it must confront, it cannot successfully constitute a sufficiently conscious and stable community of struggle that

could effectively contribute to increasing the number of renegades from the city. It has not yet managed to transform urban decomposition into a creative rural force, nor has it transformed the opposition to territorial developmentalism into a barrier against total urbanization.

Another turn of the screw of crisis is necessary for the urban question—the problem of dismantling the urban concentrations—to take its place at the center of the social question. For the conurbation is the ideal form of spatial organization for capitalism; a vast concentration of consumers made possible by what was until recently an unlimited abundance of cheap fossil fuels and potable water. We may take it for granted that an increase in the price of fuel will lead to an energy crisis that will endanger industrial agriculture, the system of urban life and the very existence of the conurbations. The same thing would happen if there were to be a prolonged drought that would require the construction of numerous desalination plants that operate on the basis of petroleum fuels. This is the horizon that is outlined in the short term by the great demand of the emerging economies and peak oil: the end of the era of cheap energy. There is no possible remedy because nuclear power and the so-called “renewables” are expensive, require for their operation enormous quantities of increasingly less available fossil fuel, and will never be able produce enough to satisfy the demands of growing consumption. Green capitalism is a fallacy and globalization is entering its terminal phase; technological innovations will not be able to save it. The perspective of a decline in the industrial production of energy paints a dark future for the conurbations, since rising transportation prices will paralyze the supply networks and render them unviable. The high-rise apartment complexes, the skyscrapers, the downtowns, the suburban housing tracts, the specialized commercial zones, the highway networks and all the rest will rapidly deteriorate. Then the sophisticated construction materials, air conditioning, household appliances, computers, central heating, cell-phones and cars will be things of the past. Furthermore, global warming is unstoppable because the consumption of pollution-generating energy resources cannot possibly be reduced and, in a few years, four or five years maybe, climate change will intensify uncontrollably and then the resulting damages will be irreversible. The collapse of industrial agriculture—which is enslaved to petroleum-based fuels and petrochemical fertilizers and herbicides—together with the consequences of global warming—an intensification of the greenhouse effect, deforestation, erosion, salinization and acidification of the soils, desertification, droughts and floods—will unleash a food crisis with very serious consequences. The majority of the urban population will be deprived of its basic necessities and, forced to look elsewhere for food and fuel, will scatter over an exhausted countryside. Whether this process of evacuation of the cities takes place chaotically, accompanied by terrorism, or peacefully, will depend on the integrative capacities of the communities of struggle that arise from this act of desertion and the defense of territory. If these communities are weak they will not be able to deal with the avalanche of starving people and will not be capable of transforming their desperation into a force for the fight for freedom and emancipation. The unraveling of turbo-capitalism would then give way to a mixture of primitive capitalist formations defended by local and regional authoritarian powers. In these circumstances it would be inevitable that society will contract and will become intensely local; but small is not always beautiful. It could be horrible if the necessary process of adaptation to rural existence that will have to confront the consequences of a sudden burst of overpopulation is not addressed via revolutionary paths, that is, if it is limited to a centralized and privileged production of food and energy instead of orienting itself towards the creation of free and autonomous communities capable of resisting

the post-urban depredation. This will definitely be the case, if the de-urbanization process does not breathe that atmosphere of freedom that was in the past attributed to the cities.

In order to avoid falling prey to apocalyptic prophecies and the kind of science fiction that seizes upon futurist analyses by postulating a return to Paleolithic ways or to the barbarism depicted by the movies, we should consider the energy crisis as a general boundary and as a temporal horizon that will increasingly condition social occurrences with the well-known blackmail of “either energy or chaos” without, however, completely determining them. Fictional speculation owes its existence to the contemplative attitude towards catastrophe, one that is typical of religion—or of its secular equivalent, historicist ideology—which views the future as a *fait accompli* and not as one possibility among many others, an outcome in time that is the fruit of multiple variables: the consciousness of the time, awareness of changes underway, the configuration of independent forces, the ability to grasp the emerging contradictions and to take advantage of the opportunities that may arise.... The result does not entirely explain the process, nor does the process entirely explain the result. The peak does not necessarily presage extinction. Between these two, the dialectical game of tactics and strategy intervenes, a game pitting opponents possessed of unequal forces, in the short- and medium-term. The game of social war. The hopes of the sectors that cling to the preservation of state capitalism by way of a gradual, peaceful and voluntary curtailment of economic growth will be quickly dispelled by the brutality of the measures implemented to adapt to scenarios of scarcity and shortages and the violent social dynamic these measures will unleash. If the catastrophic collapse will not take place on a particular, imminent date, the establishment of an eco-fascist regime is not inevitable, either; however, the greater or lesser likelihood of both phenomena taking place in the near future can serve to guide action along consistent courses, thus achieving in the subsequent confrontations a favorable outcome for the faction of the supporters of a radical and libertarian social transformation. Nothing is certain, which is why anything is possible, even utopias and dreams.

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