

The Period of Decline

An assessment of the capitalist crisis based on the works of Jaime Semprun

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“Whoever looks at the world rationally will find that it in turn assumes a rational aspect; the two exist in a reciprocal relationship.”

Hegel, “Reason in History”

During an era like the sixties and seventies of the past century that was open to every possibility for radical change, the greatest concern of its supporters revolved around the forms of its total realization. In many countries the time had come for revolutionary action and it was necessary to overcome, with subversive actions, the contradictions that were driving the old class society towards its doom. Here are some typical titles that issued from Jaime Semprun’s pen during those years: *The Social War in Portugal*; *Manuscript Found in Vitoria*; and *Considerations on the Current Situation in Poland*. It was a time of struggle, of the intelligent movement of the deployed social forces and therefore of tactics and strategy. The movement passed from theory to action; from the arms of critique to the critique of arms. The writings that most accurately reflect that period are those whose purpose was agitation and panoramic analysis, those that examined the developmental trends of the moment and assessed their potential. The truth, which had for so long been trapped in the carcass of the old world, fought towards the light and displayed all its amplitude and splendor, objectively and subjectively. It was implicitly accepted that the truth exists and that it was revolutionary. Everything was rapidly simplified and clarified. Opposites were dialectically reconciled, while the fragmentation and individualism typical of a dying epoch yielded before the unification and the universality of a period of iconoclasm. But what happened in the eighties, when the forces unleashed by the social crisis were incapable of overcoming the profound disarray occasioned by those unresolved contradictions?

Either the revolutionary subject was not strong enough and was defeated, or else it vacillated and retreated when faced with the immensity of its tasks until it finally disappeared. There was no new dawn to welcome. The revolution was no longer on the agenda. It was even accused of being the bearer of totalitarianism, and therefore undesirable on that account alone. The unifying impulse of the revolutionary cycle disappeared and the terms of the contradiction became independent of each other. On the one side, the economy, the State, civilization, the countryside, the ruling class; on the other, society, the individual, nature, the metropolis, the ruled masses. The connections between them were severed. Subjectivity and objectivity, being and nothingness,

body and soul, means and ends, affirmation and negation, were abruptly separated. It was the end of the happy totality of revolt and of the collective harmony of its protagonists. Recuperation, working on behalf of the memory industry, made the commodification of its fragments possible. This had repercussions in philosophy, art, culture, social critique, literature and politics, giving rise to an endless succession of substitutes for these domains. *The Handbook of Recuperation* [*Précis de récupération*] is a text whose purpose was to fight against this tendency. Utopias, ideals, and, finally, the very solidity of the modern world all came to an end. Mass individualism and a fully-furnished imprisonment in private life emerged victorious. Freedom became the freedom to consume and submission to the imperatives of consumption became habitual, repeated on a daily basis. The project of a universal community gave way to a juxtaposition of dehumanized atoms. Popular culture was drastically reduced to a purely utilitarian dimension. Language was impoverished and populated with technological and post-structuralist neologisms. Reality then became unintelligible and was enveloped in a fog of representations, all of which were incomplete and arbitrary, and therefore chimerical and false. The phantasmagoria that subsequently replaced reality have since then done nothing but cloud people's minds and render real life alien to human beings, since they cannot understand its rationality, because their gaze does not penetrate the surface of things, it goes no further than the contingent and remains fixed on external appearances, on the spectacle.

The transformation of the world in accordance with libertarian patterns was finally aborted in the eighties, forcing revolutionaries to retreat within themselves, a fate which only the most eminent figures of the movement tried to avoid by way of critical reflection. The owl of Minerva takes wing at dusk. Theoretical elaboration was therefore born from the recognition of failure, the failure of the social revolution, a failure which could not, however, be considered to be final. The prospect for revolutionary change was undermined, but the victory of domination resolved none of the essential contradictions; instead, it exacerbated them. Crises were therefore inevitable. The anti-nuclear movement, the youth of Tienanmen Square, the people of Soweto, the "Solidarnosc" of the Polish workers and the fall of the Berlin Wall, for example, were signs of a healthy future. Critical thought only attempted to build bridges between the revolts of the past and those of the future. Its task was fleeting: it tried to elaborate an up-to-date expression of the universal condemnation of the current state of affairs in order to escape from a labyrinth whose twists and turns were becoming far too prolonged. Theory was the tool with which these critics not only tried to explain the epoch for the purpose of surviving the moral poverty and the vapidity that characterized it, but with which they also aspired to once again reunite the latent forces of negation, the ones that stoked the fires of their cause with the fuel of dissatisfaction. This was the purpose, for example, of books like *The Nuclearization of the World* and the journal, *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*. Thus, theory by no means meant passivity or withdrawal: the door was always open to action regardless of its scale. Theory and practice were not opposed but were intended to be united in a reconstructed totality, but this unity was not attained, and to this very day it is far from being realized. It was not that those who made this attempt were on the wrong track, but rather that they yielded to optimism, put too much faith in the dissolving power of the truth and overestimated the negativity of the conflicts they witnessed: on the one hand, truth was relativized and ceased to have any effect on a world ruled by falsehood; on the other hand, negation was incapable of giving rise to a creative passion. The crisis also affected the workers movement and its ideals of emancipation. Capitalist society survived and was capable of effectively defending itself from the impact of scandals and revolutions by rendering a part of

the working population, the main productive force, superfluous, thanks to new technologies. It was not that more and more workers were refusing to enter the labor market; rather, the labor market was rejecting more and more workers. The pressure of unemployment and the fear of exclusion inflicted as much harm as consumerist propaganda, which is why neither a universal consciousness nor, much less, a popular will, could take shape, or, to put it another way, the revolutionary subject, the forces of negation and affirmation, and the new combatant community of individuals who desired to freely organize their lives, were incapable of forming. The rules of the commodity and the ideology of progress still determined social relations both in everyday life, which was becoming increasingly more colonized, as well as in public life, which was becoming increasingly more professionalized. By way of the globalization of capitalism and the expansion of the new communications technologies, the spectacle penetrated so deeply into the social imaginary that it ended up completely replacing reality. As a result, irrationality contaminates all reasoning. And without rational thought, there is no real subject.

The human being can only achieve self-realization in a free society, but in contemporary society freedom is offered exclusively as spectacle, the no-where of the fictitious resolution of social contradictions. And as the spectacle of politics, social life, culture and revolution, too, if the opportunity arises. And as the spectacle of self-realization, which is becoming less and less credible, insofar as the degree of frustration is now too high to be controlled with simulacra. In the interests of resolving the latter problem, “leftist” pseudo-happenings are quite effectively utilized by the system. Leftist ideologies are to the spectacle what critical thought is to revolt. They comprise the first step to spectacular submission. They perform the consolatory function that was in other times entrusted first to the Church and then to consumption: to make personal misery and the sensation of defeat bearable. Contemporary leftism is trying to indoctrinate various uprooted sectors, mainly the youth, to mobilize them in the name of abstractions, such as, for example, the working class, the people or the citizenry. It is not doing this in order to bring about a free society, without either Market or State, but to refurbish the neoliberal economy in such a way as to improve the deteriorated social status of these sectors. They call this the “transition to post-capitalism”. Despite the destruction of the working class milieu, the proliferation of civil servants and white collar employees, and the automation of industry, a vanguard minority still assigned a redemptive role to the industrial proletariat. Its analyses hardly took any account of the disintegration of class identity [*declasamiento*] and alienation, tendencies that are easily verified in the generalization among wage earners of a mentality that is identical to that of the middle class. In a world without meaning, the more absurd a theory is, the greater its impact. Most leftists, however, have in fact adapted their strategies to the stabilizing presence of this mass of philistine wage earners, which they call the “citizenry”. The “citizenry” arose as the imaginary subject of modern political change, occupying on the institutional terrain the central position that the working class left vacant when it lost its identity and its being. It affirms its existence by the act of voting, not by thinking and acting. The guiding principle of its existence is the right to vote, not the right to revolt. As a new universal class, its existence is not based on the scandal of inequality, alienation and oppression; it is instead founded on its capabilities with respect to elections and State power. It acts more like a lobby than like a class. It engages with reality by way of votes rather than demonstrations.

It is not customary to grant much importance to the key novelty of postmodern industrial civilization, i.e., the expulsion to the margins of society, without adequate material means, of an enormous number of people abandoned to psychological decline and misery. Right now, more

than a billion poor people live in the peripheral slums of the major cities of the world. At this time, only the direct victims of the economy—peasants expelled from their land, people excluded from the labor market, temporary and part time workers, the unemployed and the marginalized, debtors and the desperate, the undocumented and the homeless, refugees and displaced people, etc.—display any tendency to react violently against their inhuman material and spiritual situation, but they are in no condition to invent free activities that would lead them towards the revolutionary abolition of their situation. The ruling class is fully aware of this, for, although it is not at all afraid in the least of any prospect of this sub-proletariat being converted someday into the “reserve army” of a non-existent revolution that almost no one wants, it nonetheless makes use of its violence to legitimize the transformation from the “welfare” State to a penal “State”, thanks to longer sentencing guidelines, restrictive legislation and a police force with extensive powers and a high degree of impunity. It is definitely the case that the most profoundly harmed layers of the population have ceased to perform any function at all in the salvationist ideologies of postmodernism. The idea of conceding some kind of “basic income” to these layers of society, or of enlisting them in “cooperative” projects subsidized by the State for the purpose of reintegrating them into the world of consumption, is of neo-liberal inspiration. Leftists have for a long time now devoted all their attention to the new middle classes threatened by pauperization, classes whose conduct is more predictable and politically more profitable. The civil society movement represents the ideology of the end of the proletarian class as the doctrinal reference point. But what next for those who have been uprooted by globalization, the inhabitants of zones abandoned by the economy, strangers in a hostile, decomposing world, with neither hope nor future?

The result of the general process of deracination, a phenomenon that takes place in parallel with total proletarianization, is a disoriented, ignorant person, with neither norms nor values, indifferent to knowledge and understanding, frustrated and resentful, the enemy of everything and everybody. We are no longer dealing with a war of class against class, but a kind of war of all against all. At first glance this might not be so evident, but judging by the frenzy and hysteria that lie just beneath the surface of everyday reality, individuals seem like machines that are on the verge of exploding. Only fear holds them back, but not entirely. Class values—respect, loyalty, compassion, generosity, and above all, solidarity—are no longer practiced, so that riots of desperation have replaced general strikes, but without any cumulative effect at all. On the outskirts of the major cities, uprisings have continued to take place since 1981, the year of the Brixton Riots (and ever since August of 1965, if we include the race riots of Watts). The disturbances in the slum areas of the cities are purely destructive, given over to vandalism; they make no demands nor are they coordinated, they disseminate no slogans nor do they have spokespersons, they are depoliticized, disorganized, without objectives. A spark of indignation sets them on fire and exhaustion or boredom puts them out. Such revolts lack consciousness, but possess more than enough motivation, which the State can make use of and even provoke if it needs a justification to augment its authoritarian machinery. Jaime was the first person to speak of this very real possibility of such a staged provocation in *The Abyss Repopulates Itself*. There would be no shortage of people who would view these movements—from afar, of course—as the return of the real proletariat, and there would even be people who would consider their monstrous defects in a positive light, but this is due to the fascination exercised by nothingness, re-christened as the permanent desire for insurrection, among the intellectualized urban youth, insubordinate but incapable of real rebellion. These new ideologues are not at all disturbed by ignorance and

irrationality, they praise egoism, they make a clean slate of culture, they are ignorant of history and estheticize violence, the typical features not only of the uprooted individual of the slums, but also of the postmodern, solipsistic, normally integrated individual. They glorify confrontation with the forces of order and arson as the highest state of revolt. Of course, it is not exactly revolt, but the spectacle of chaos, total “deconstruction”. Reading such diatribes, one gets the impression that they are trying to obscure the crisis instead of explain it. Sophisticated and apocalyptic rhetoric, often seasoned with off-the-shelf timeless truths, selected quotations and historical allusions in the style of the “Invisible Committee”, do not change the obscure nature of their alarmist visions. By abolishing, with various degrees of skill, the past, memory, objective truth and thought itself, they abolish contradiction, the tension between antagonistic positions, the content of real life and the meaning of the struggle. Everything takes place in the framework of a rigid linear perspective that tries to give meaning to the proliferation of disconnected, and artificially unleashed, acts of violence. Nothingness, like death, is liberating in its own way. If truth does not exist, reality does not exist, either: all speculations are permitted, and the more catastrophist, the better. As Nietzsche said: “it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations.” This kind of reasoning is so perfectly suited to domination that it is entirely legitimate to ask whether it was not actually the product of domination. The discourse of power, which has its own lexicon, is not essentially different. Therefore, the discourse of revolt must not put all its eggs in the basket of absolute negativity; this is a lesson learned from the past. The happy days of the revolution will never return unless a considerable mass of the population decides to live in a different way and situates itself negatively and positively—and therefore dialectically—outside of the status quo. Is this what is happening, however?

Capitalism, in the late stage of globalization, has abolished all communitarian bonds, autonomous cultures, sociability, collective practices, group identities, etc., stripping individuals of any direct and profound relation with their kind and their environment, and instead setting them at odds. Postmodern man, privileged or marginalized, is a psychological pauper, an unfeeling narcissist with an absolute lack of empathy; when you strip away the appearances and his function is terminated, when face to face with himself he really has nothing but loneliness and emptiness. The most widely-verified social experience in the technological world colonized by the commodity is that of absence and nothingness. This is what alienation is like during the period of decline. Most people try to escape, whether by demanding more security in order to plunge even deeper into a wretched private life, largely virtual and based on a flashy and affected pseudo-individualism [*friki*—derived from the English word, “freak”], or else by resorting to carefully constructed, and therefore fictitious, identities, seeking refuge, as people did in the past, in ideologies or religions. The times are favorable for both militant escapism and schizophrenia (the two were already connected by Gabel), for both false consciousness as well as for psychopathological reactions against a society that is viewed as a foreign and hostile environment. The doors are equally open to both the opportunity to enclose ourselves in an air-conditioned shell and the opportunity to throw ourselves off a cliff. The WHO calculates that 3% of the world’s population suffers from mental illness (Reich would call it the emotional plague), that is, 160 million people. Surely the percentage is higher, twice that or even more. Frustration has made such inroads that a considerable number of people refuse to accommodate themselves to a degrading and predictable life and throw themselves head-first towards death, attacking the first people who cross their paths, the unwilling cast of extras in their outbursts. Panic disorders, anxiety and depression foster unconditional submission, cocooning and the

solitary suicide, but rage and resentment lead to psychosis, criminal violence and fantasies of mass extermination. And these pathologies are not exclusively restricted to one specific class or sub-class: the attraction of the abyss is almost the only aspect of this declining civilization that can be considered to be universal. The frequent cases of armed young people from wealthy families who upload their pathological ruminations on various social networking websites and even record videos of the murders they perpetrate on their smart phones minutes before committing suicide or being gunned down by the police, constitute a good example of just how far the revenge fantasies and existential anxieties of unbalanced nihilists can go when they depart from their bubbles of privacy. This observation is quite banal, yet very pertinent. Under the current psychopathological conditions, it is even natural. The social fabric is being unraveled, modern times have reached their consummation and the “abyss” is being repopulated, as Jaime Semprun said, but with people from every class. Suicidal extremism is presently associated with Islam, but we must not deceive ourselves, it is not the Koran that inspires the jihadists of the European ghettos, but anomie, delusional thinking, the feeling of power and the fetishism of weapons. These factors have been at play for quite some time now. The same contempt for life and the same cult of death lie behind the conduct of the co-pilot of Germanwings Flight 9525 and the Norwegian ultra-rightist responsible for the massacre on the island of Utøya, the perpetrators of the Columbine shootings (which have been imitated on more than sixty occasions) and Latin American gangsters and hit-men.

The population under global capitalism has lost its way and does not possess any clear guides for conduct by which it could orient itself: the models provided by the middle class are proving to be less satisfying in this regard with each passing day. The prevailing conditions are psychopathological, albeit in a tolerable way for their subjects: under the sway of the Narcissus complex, the enemy is always other people. The lumpen volunteers of the Islamic State are thus not an extreme case of a lethal fundamentalism that blames all the “infidels” for the oppression of an alleged Moslem people (another abstraction), but merely one more among so many other instances of this very secular aberration of globalized capitalism: nihilism. Islam has nothing to do with it; the Internet, however, does. Its role is far too important to ignore and we can now refer to comprehensive studies of its impact—in the works of Olivier Roy, for example. The crisis of culture is the result of the complete elimination of subjectivity (of the Freudian ego), values, direct communication and the inner life (referred to by Derrida as “metaphysics”), the consequence of the absolute rule of the economy and of the unilateral appropriation of scientific and technical knowledge by its executives. Paradoxically, the progressivism of the leaders of this society and the scientism of its experts have plunged humanity into the pit of irrationalism, an achievement that is celebrated as a philosophical victory by all postmodern thinkers. But the irrational is not real, instrumental knowledge is not culture and science is not the only way to apprehend reality. Moreover, material progress ultimately entails profound ethical regression. Techno-scientific objectivism and economic rationality do not lead to a human way of life, but only to mechanized survival. When knowledge has been displaced from real life, that is, from culture properly speaking—when the universal human being has been liquidated and replaced by the isolated, robotic and intersectionalized individual—then nothing has any value and nothing matters. Nihilism permeates the inhuman lifestyle of these new times. Others will point to irrationality or barbarism. We are not only immersed in a global social crisis, but in a crisis of civilization, both in its Western and Eastern forms. There is no clash between cultures, there is a generalized dissolution of all of them. At the culminating point of globalization, so

many alterations have taken place in everyday life, and so much disorder has been fostered in people's minds, that the regulatory and moderating ethics of social behavior have disappeared everywhere, from North to South and from East to West, transforming global society into a planetary factory producing mentally ill individuals, many of whom are out of control and in positions of power. We should recall with respect to this last observation that, since the rise to power of the military in Argentina and Chile and the eruption of drug trafficking on a vast scale, torture, assassination and disappearance have become routine forms of governance.

Capitalist globalization is its own worst enemy. It fears neither conflicts nor crises, which are always inevitable insofar as their causes are constantly proliferating, but only the uncontrollable character of the evil that it has itself fostered (including wars), because it provokes divisions within its own ranks and undermines its own foundations; this is why its propaganda features so much catastrophism. Disaster management is based on the search for arguments with which the bad outcomes of its own operations can be explained and its disastrous decisions can be justified. And wherever you look, by cloaking a portion of the prevailing nihilism under the Islamic veil, the latter provides the ideal pretext for the creation of a global security State, the instrument with which this absurd world's leaders will attempt to prevent its collapse, even at the price of literally sacrificing a large number of their subjects. The security services are now in the front ranks of the columns of demonstrators protesting against terrorism. Generalized social control and the domestic application of wartime laws regarding enemy combatants are so much more easily justified by the proliferation of spontaneous and solitary jihadists—"terrorists"—than by the alarmist propaganda concerning social decomposition, based until recently on crime, drug trafficking, illegal immigration and the activities of anti-system idealists. "Enemies" are fundamental for the stability of a globalized society that is so easily susceptible to unforeseeable catastrophes. We must repeat, however, that the real enemies of humanity, the nihilists of an irresponsible and demented elite, now occupy the most crucial positions of power. Unfortunately, the insurrection still lies in the distant future; anti-capitalist skirmishes are too weak, and too restricted to small minorities, they possess scant resources and are largely rejected by a population that is for the most part conformist and frightened. Furthermore, they are burdened by the dead weight of civil society reformism and illusory convivial formulas such as "responsible" consumer networks, "time" banks and "social" currencies. Just as we must be unyielding with respect to the prevailing chaos, we must also be cruel towards these excessively optimistic assessments, which respond to nothing but self-deception, activist bluff and the demagoguery of an improvised civil society leadership. Most of the people who get involved in such projects feel a sense of panic in the face of the evils towards which the collapse of the social structure is dragging them, or towards the repression that might be unleashed by actions that are too radical, which is why they prefer to close their eyes to the obvious: the fact that no significant territory can function outside of capitalist norms and compete with the "system" without the latter noticing it. Nonetheless, despite all the partial victories that the system can claim to its credit, and no matter how much dread the prospect of its downfall inspires in the mass of citizens, capitalism harbors colossal contradictions that irremediably condemn it to death. The frantic race of economic growth has irreversibly dislocated society, globalized corruption, unleashed wars and given rise to dictatorships, and will undoubtedly end up ravaging the planet.

The revolutionaries of the sixties and seventies underestimated the capacity for survival of the capitalist regime, but they were not mistaken in their diagnosis. The fact that the critical minorities of that era were incapable of transmitting their views to a broader public, does not obviate the

circumstance that the degree of dissatisfaction is increasing and that lucid protest can reappear and spread if an idea of another way of life—a crystallization of historical consciousness—can take root in a large enough part of the population where those who have been left behind are well-represented. Shortages and hunger can contribute to this development, but they are not the determining factors. Naturally, survival is the highest priority, but the impossibility of satisfying even the most minimal moral necessities that inform the community spirit is the principal element of revolt. This was true of the proletarian revolutions of the past and this is what can once again characterize the struggles in defense of territory, the only struggles that are currently replete with vital content and a capacity for idealism. The reconstruction of community bonds and the return of reason is still on the horizon of possibilities, but without any guarantees, since sufficient means of self-defense are lacking. Resignation is presently predominant, and careerists, predators and the mentally ill are numerous, but there cannot be the slightest doubt that the statist-market society is destined for the scrap yard. This is the only prediction that can really be made without any risk of being disproven. Of course, this does not imply the automatic triumph of the libertarian cause, for it might in fact signify the contrary—the State might emerge victorious, or nihilist barbarism might prevail—but we cannot entirely rule out the victory of freedom. There is still a lot of thread on the spool. History never stops and a period of darkness can be followed by an era of light.

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