

# **A change of epoque? Movements strategy and emancipation project**

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**We are experiencing a period of considerable turmoil and great uncertainty. We are probably experiencing a change of epoque, during which old trends try to hold on rigidly, initiating new trends. Antonio Gramsci (the Italian Marxist theorist and politician)'s quote is pertinent: "The old world is dying, the new world appears slowly and in this chiaroscuro emerge monsters". We must both fight against these monsters and construct the new world. There is no inevitability of success nor of failure.**

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## **The global situation seems desperate**

From 2008-15 a new chapter in the long story of the global condition began. Since 2001 massive, almost insurrectionary, movements testify to the exasperation of the people. The popular uprisings are a response to the structural crisis, officially acknowledged since 2008. They confirm that the current phase of capitalist globalisation is coming to an end. Social inequality, unemployment and the casualisation of labour have caused a drop in popular consumption and a crisis of overproduction. The resort to crippling debt has reached its limits. With the extension of the financial derivatives markets, it has contaminated the securities markets. The 'subprime' explosion has marked the passage from household debt to banking industry debt. The rescue of banks by national governments has opened up a public debt crisis. The reduction of deficits through austerity planning is supposed to provide a way out of the crisis, which will safeguard profits and maintain the pre-eminence of the global capitals market and shareholders' privileges.

From 2013 onwards the situation seems to have been turned around. The dominant politics, of austerity and structural adjustment, have been reaffirmed. Neo-liberal arrogance has taken the upper hand. Destabilisation, war, violent crackdowns and the manipulation of terrorism has been imposed everywhere. Reactionary ideological currents and popular far-right movements have become more and more evident. They take specific forms, such as: libertarian neo-conservatism in the United States; the extreme right and diverse forms of national socialism in Europe; armed

jihadist extremism; oil dictators and monarchies; extreme Hinduism; etc. In the medium term, however, the game is not over.

## **The main contradictions remain critical**

The situation is not simply the result of rise of the Right; it is characterised by constant contradictions. What we conveniently call 'the crisis' deepens. The most visible, financial dimension translates into overt food, energy, climatic and monetary crises. The structural crises articulate five major contradictions [1]: economic and social, with social inequality and discrimination; ecological, with the endangering of the planet's eco-system; geopolitical with the end of the hegemony of the United States, the crisis in Japan and Europe and the rise of new powers; ideological, with the appeal of democracy and xenophobic and racist uprising; and political, with the fusion of politics and finance, which feeds mistrust of politics and damages its autonomy.

In the construction of the future there are three competing ideas: the reinforcement of neo-liberalism by the financialising of Nature; a remodelling of capitalism, the Green New Deal, founded on public regulation and social modernisation; and a rupture, opening the way to ecological, social and democratic transition.

The first concept is the financialising of Nature. In this vision the way out of the crisis is through finding the 'unlimited market' necessary for growth. It bases the enlargement of the global market, qualified by the green market, on the financialising of Nature, the commercialisation of living beings and the generalisation of privatisation. It proposes merchandising and privatising services produced by Nature and entrusting them to big multi-national companies. This means limiting access to fundamental rights, which could weaken the pre-eminence of markets and subordinating international law to business law.

The second concept is the Green New Deal, defended by eminent establishment economists, often known as New Keynesians, such as, Joseph Stiglitz, Paul Krugman, Thomas Piketti and Amartya Sen. It starts with the 'green economy', which it masters. It proposes a profound redevelopment of capitalism, starting from public regulation and a redistribution of revenues. It is not particularly vocal currently, as it implies a clash with the dominant logic, that of the global capital markets, which refutes Keynesian references and is not yet ready to accept that any inflation diminishes a rise in profits. One should remember that the New Deal, adopted in 1933, was only successfully applied in 1945, following the end of WW2.

The third concept is that of social movements and citizens, which has been explained in the light of global social networks. They encourage a rupture, that of social, ecological and democratic change. They put forward new ideas, new ways of producing and consuming. For example: communal property and new forms of ownership; the struggle against patriarchy; the control of finance; exit from the system of debt; buen-vivir and prosperity without growth; relocations; climate justice; the refusal of extra-activism; the reinvention of democracy; communal differentiated responsibilities and free public services founded on rights. It is based on the founding principal of access to the same rights for all.

The strategy of movements defines alliances based on these possible outcomes. All those who are dispute the first concept of the financialising of Nature should urgently be reunited. The imposition of the dominant system, despite the exhaustion of neo-liberalism, carries the risk of militant neo-conservatism. In the long term, and if the danger of militant neo-conservatism can be avoided, a positive confrontation would be between the supporters of the new green deal and those of the passing of capitalism. Firm alliances will depend on the national and regional situation.

## **The neo-liberal cultural hegemony has been imposed**

In many societies, and globally, but not everywhere, right-wing conservative, reactionary ideas progress. In each individual society, dominant global ideas can be found; the reality of the economy and of world politics and the world story, relayed by the crushing action of all means of communication as the only possible global story.

This right and extreme-right thrust is the result of a systematic offensive led in several directions. It started with an ideological offence, carried out continually over 40 years, which prepared the neo-liberal turning point. This battle for cultural hegemony rested, first of all, on three issues: against rights, and particularly against equality, inequalities are justified because they are natural; against solidarity, racism and xenophobia; against insecurity, a security-based ideology is the only possible response. The second offensive concerns the military and the police. It takes the form of destabilisation of unstable territories, the multiplication of wars, the use of terrorism. The third offensive has attacked labour, with the calling into question of job security and the general casualisation of labour, through the subordination of science and technology, notably that of digital technology to the logic of financialisation. The fourth offensive has been lead against the social State by financialisation, commodification and the generalised corruption of the political classes. The fifth offensive, which continues on from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, is based on attempts at disqualification from progressive, socialist or communist projects.

## **Counter-trends are still alive and kicking**

The dominant oligarchy's offensive has scored some points, but has not imposed itself. Opinions that advocate emancipation remain strong and there are even new counter-currents. The movements that began in Tunis in 2001 remain alive and renew themselves. The watchwords are clear. They are a refusal of social poverty and inequality, the respect of freedoms, of dignity, the rejection of forms of domination, of the link between ecological and social urgency. From one movement to another there have been refinements on the denunciation of corruption; on the demand for 'real democracy'; on ecological constraints, the monopolising of territory and the control of raw materials.

In several of these movements, the traditional left has been deeply undermined and right-wing currents prevail, sometimes to attract the protests of the dominant order.

The violence of the neo-liberal and reactionary offensive demonstrates the scale of resistance. We sometimes hear talk of societies shifting to the right, but this situation should not be confused with the rise of extreme-right ideology. Societies resist and remain profoundly contradictory. Progressive ideas remain alive and are carried on by the struggle of movements. We can even consider that the violence of reactionary, conservative currents comes from the fact that they feel that societies are escaping them. An example: the biggest and most profound revolution that we are living through is that of women's rights, which is shaking-up age-old relations. The feeling that this essential part of society is escaping from them makes some crazy and translates into unimaginable violence from backward states and sectors. All the new ideas have come from battering at the old world; for example, the rights of women, the furthering of equality, freedom of movement, multiple identities, ecology and Nature...

We also see it with the emergence of radical thoughts, which break with the compromises of the liberal social left and find themselves permitted. Consider the recent example of Bernie Sanders, who hounded Hillary Clinton in the primaries of the Democratic Party in the United States. He presents himself openly as a socialist, targets multi-nationals and refuses their funding. The same

pattern can be seen with Jeremy Corbyn for Labour in Great Britain. However, the rise in power of political organisations that are linked to new movements and, at least partly, come from them, should be noted. For example, Podemos in Spain or the 'party of ordinary people', l'Aam Admi, in New Delhi. They are not completely new forms of political organisation, but they accept that parties must play their part in the reinvention of politics.

### **The new forms of engagement create prospects**

The most important determining factor is the emergence of new forms of engagement for new generations [2]. The change in the relationship between individual and collective is at the heart of this engagement. Since 2011 a new generation has been imposing itself on public arena, through movements which have created global social forums and are capable of self-renewal: the toppling of dictators, the disinherited, occupy movements, the red squares, the taksims, etc.

It cannot really be defined as 'the young' as an age group, more a cultural generation who are taking ownership of a situation and transforming it. This generation is more directly involved on the global stage. It shows up deep social transformations linked to the scholarisation of societies, which is translated into, on one side, a brain drain, and on the other, highly qualified unemployed. Migrations link this generation to the world and to its contradictions, in terms of commodities, cultures and values. They reduce the isolation and exclusion of youth.

The new generation is constructing, through its demands and inventiveness, a new political culture. It enhances the way of linking the determining factors of social structures: the classes and social strata, religions, national and cultural references, ages affiliations, migrations and diasporas and territories. It experiments with new forms of organisation with its mastering of digital networks and social media, a belief in self-organisation and horizontality. It attempts to redefine, in different situations, forms of autonomy between movements and political institutions. It looks for ways of linking the individual to the collective. It is perhaps at this level that the diverse social networks carry new cultures, like the free software collectives, capable of leading and attacking collectively, whilst holding firmly onto the independence of individuals. The re-appropriation of the public arena is a claim to popular sovereignty. Squares renew their agorae. We occupy them and exchange ideas, not to vote - which remains important, but insufficient. It is not a change in the relationship with politics, but a process of redefining politics.

The choice put forward is that of social movements and citizens. It is a way of concretising the different ideas under discussion: the associations, civil societies, the assertion of the non-lucrative and non-governmental, the social economy, supportive and participative. The movements introduce the notions of dynamic evolution, political action and historical continuity. Each movement combines a programmatic statement, social foundations, mobilisation and struggles, an elaboration and suggestions.

Involvement in a movement combines the practical and the theoretical and redefines the collective. The relationships between movements are founded on equality and a respect for diversity.

All involvement requires surpassing. Surpassing one's self and the world. Involvement naturally leads to reflexion on radicalism. Certain movements are carriers of new forms of radicalism, through the ideas they put forward, their watchwords, their forms of struggle and their communication. For example, in the new period, we can cite the Spanish anti-austerity movement (also known as the Indignants Movement), the Occupy movements, climate movements, movements against fracking, the reapers of genetically modified crops, the bank chair thieves, zones to be defended, the monopolising of lands, extra-activism and others. Certain movements make the link between the new

forms of radicalism and the movements which make up social forums. For example; La Via Campesina, No Vox, Migreurop, forums against major works with no utility, movements against the urbanisation of large events and so on.

What all these movements have in common in their concept of radicalism, is the resort to forms of individual and collective disobedience, as well as methods originating in non-violent activism. One of the figures of radical involvement, which links the new relationships between the individual and the collective, is the whistle-blowers. Snowden, for example, who engages radically with a collective perspective. The collective is nourished by individual engagement.

### **A strategic approach anchored to a project of emancipation**

A question is raised: what should be done? The answer implies subscribing to a strategic approach. In this approach the short and the long term should be stated, to respond to urgent situations and to commit to an emergency response in the long term.

The need for resistance is urgent. Resistance to the fatal tenets of xenophobia, discrimination and racism; resistance to social problems and inequalities; resistance to war, terrorism and being instrumental in terrorism and resistance to ecological disaster. But resistance is not enough. Long term perspectives are necessary. They imply rupture, and first of all rupture with an unacceptable world. A wake-up call is needed and a project is vital, a social project, a project of emancipation. Even resistance to an alternative, credible project is necessary.

An emancipation movement targets freedom regarding one or more oppressions: social, democratic, political and ecological, with the aim of abolishing the logics of domination. This is what differentiates it from other anti-systemic movements, especially identity movements, nationalist and/or religious movements. A new emancipation movement prolongs and renews the historic movements that preceded it. It starts with non-answered questions and the new way in which they are being asked.

An emancipation project cannot be prepared in one's bedroom. It is prepared by the movements which carry it. It is the result of the maturation of ideas and a long elaboration which evokes new values. An alternative social project is the result of several different imperatives, dialectically linked. Here are four of them: a programme of measures which define alternative politics; a social dynamic carried by social movements and citizens who make up the social base and who determine alliances; long-term commitment to an ideological battle and immediate commitment to the founding values of a new cultural hegemony; and reflection on the historical lessons of alternative projects.

Paradoxically, the alternative programme is relatively well defined. This programme includes a series of measures, recognised as indispensable, and ripened by global social networks. The control of finance and the socialisation of banks, taxation of financial transactions, the indictment of the free derivatives market and social, fiscal, environmental and monetary dumping, the abolition of tax havens, etc. These measures are mostly recognised, but come up against the veto of the directors of capital finance and their political accomplices. This programme proposes a long-term approach, that of ecological, social, democratic and geopolitical transition. It builds on new concepts (the common good, the buen vivir, prosperity without growth, climate justice, relocation, the radical democratisation of democracy) ... The act of stating this programme, defining it and sharing it is not enough, but it is necessary.

However, this programme does not appear credible to society as a whole, and even to those who should be carrying it forward. The essential question is whether the social dynamic is capable of

carrying and clarifying it. The social base for this project is composed of movements who are committed to a strategic orientation, of rights for all and equal rights. The question of fundamental rights is essential today. It is opposed by those who esteem that the workings of the global market will be limited. We often address the question of duties, forgetting that, as the debate of 1792 underlined, it is rights which create duties, and not vice versa. This question is important in the current discussions on responsibility and collectivity.

The social base of the project is also constructed by the project itself. It groups movements, or those within each movement, those who share a strategic orientation. Today, the widest base is formed by the convergence of all the movements which form the process of global social forums, enlarged to include all new movements [3]. These movements share a new political culture, new forms of engagement and the demand for a new way of engaging in politics.

The question of alliances is being asked in different times and places. They consist of social alliances with those lacking job security and the proletarianised, alliances with experts and technicians shared between those who make the financial system work and those who lack job security, ideological alliances on freedoms, political alliances with, for example, the neo-Keynesians.

What makes the necessity of change obvious? In the long term the emergence of new values makes its mark. However, there are periods of rupture during which the veils are torn away. This battle for cultural hegemony is being fought in culture, art and the media. It enlists alternative practices and hard thinking. At the same time new ideas and new values are carried forward through struggle and resistance. In this battle the question of equality and the refusal of discrimination, combined with the winning of freedoms, is central.

An alternative project will not come out of nowhere. It is not enough to want it, even if the urgency of the situation justifies impatience. A project makes its mark historically, both in the long term and during uprisings, between the long maturing of ideas and the acceleration of revolutionary periods. The French Revolution of 1789 was preceded by the Lumieres, the national European revolutions of 1848 by movements for self-rule by the people, the communist manifesto by the emergence of the proletariat and the fight against exploitation, struggles for independence by the fight against colonisation, the equality of the sexes by equal rights.

It is not always easy to keep one's perspective regarding the force of neoliberalism, shaken, but still dominant. The long history of movements provides the necessary perspective. The workers' movement has existed since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It experienced a period of rapid advance between 1905 and 1970. Despite wars and fascism, revolutions have succeeded in Russia, China and elsewhere. In conjunction with national liberation movements, it has almost completely surrounded colonial and imperialist powers, it has imposed social compromises and a welfare state in countries at the centre of capitalism. Since 1970, a period of defeats and regression has begun in decolonised countries and countries which have experienced revolutions and in industrialised countries. The upheavals and financial crisis could signal the end of this long period of regression, without us being able to precisely define what will follow. The future is open. There will be conflicts [4]. There will possibly, even probably, be further defeats. But, through learning the lessons of these defeats, there will also be resistance, advances and victories.

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\* Article written for *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Brazil. Posted online in English at Intercol. Wednesday 24 August 2016:

<https://intercoll.net/Movements-strategy-and-emancipation-project>

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## Footnotes

[1] Gustave Massiah, in collaboration with Elise Massiah, *Strategy for the alternative globalisation*, Preface by Immanuel Wallerstein, Black Rose Books, Montreal, New York, London, 2011.

[2] Gustave Massiah, IPAM, juillet 2015, ESSF (article 36949), [Six pistes de réflexions sur l'engagement actuel à la solidarité internationale](#) :  
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36949>

[3] Gustave Massiah, Le Forum Social Mondial de Tunis en 2015, éléments de bilan, WSF, avril 2015. Sur ESSF (article 40254), [Après le Forum Social Mondial de Tunis \(mars 2015\) - Éléments de bilan et de réflexion](#):  
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40254>

[4] Gustave Massiah, La bataille de Grèce, un épisode d'une guerre mondiale prolongée, Attac, août 2015