

From the damage of « productivism » to eco-socialist self managed planning

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Some people think that denouncing “productivism” can pinpoint the common ailment in a diversity of systems. But the fact of “producing too much” remains only a quantitative assessment which does not show the content of the growth in terms of use values, neither does it show the socio-economic mechanisms guiding investments – and this is essential in the analysis of the environmental crisis. The necessity of an eco-socialist planning must be demonstrated by going to the roots of “productivism” – in the capitalist relations of production in the first place (this will be our starting point). But the experience proves that questioning capitalism is not enough and the tree of Stalinism must not hide the wood of the possible wrongdoings of socialist projects (point 2). An eco-socialist planning (point 3) must consciously incorporate those two balance sheets and this in relation to the contributions both of political ecology and of all emancipatory movements.

1. From the anatomy of capitalism to the World-System: social as well as ecological disastrous market relations

We cannot explain capitalist accumulation by calling it “productivist”, we need to analyse the anatomy of the system, its motor: the maximising of profit which imposes its logic, its “values” et its “rights” on societies dominated by capital. Looking into this anatomy of course impoverishes reality, the resistance against the dominant logic in different contexts and relationships of forces. My description of this anatomy aims at pointing to the essence of the system, camouflaged by ideology, but verifiable every day – as a base for our anticapitalist position in the fight for eco-socialism.

Some anatomy

Capitalism did not introduce the market, and therefore money which facilitated the exchange between different use values, into pre-capitalist societies. It has achieved the generalisation of the markets and the rule of market relations. All economic categories of capitalism (price, supply and demand, costs, productivity, ...) hide a social content and, dominant ideology at the same time, “naturalises” the supposedly “efficient” economy: the “invisible hand of the market” ensures the convergence of individual egoist motives and the general motives. That is why the European Commission is supposed to represent this general interest by defending “the rights of competition” (in the Treaties) and by imposing respect for “free and undistorted” competition. The neo-classic doctrines (after the recognition of classes and of class conflicts by Smith and Ricardo) have objectivised the work force, land and capital as specific commodities called “factors of production or inputs” which must be “combined in the least costly way”. To analyse the anatomy of the system

means to explain the criteria and the mechanisms camouflaged by the prices.

Money is not simply an intermediary for exchanges under capitalism. It has become “money-capital”: an amount of money M is invested to “make money” (a monetary profit). What Marx has called the “cycle of capital” $M-C-M'$, is the synthesis of its deep logic: money-capital M represents the initial investment, M' is the money-capital realised at the end of the cycle (if there is no slump or overproduction); and C can be any commodity: capitalism is indifferent to what C is, in social and/or ecological terms as long as it allows to obtain M' larger than M . Merchant capitalism has appropriated the commodities M from the colonies. Industrial and financial capitalism has increased tenfold its capacity of monetary accumulation and of annual growth measured by GDP (gross domestic product), an indicator which says nothing about the social and ecological conditions of production, neither about the use values produced and even less about their distribution :you can have “growth” combined with unemployment, an increase of inequality and environmental destruction.

There have been multiple and renewed means for increasing capitalist accumulation in each phase, depending on the relationships of forces and on the context. Industrial capitalism “liberated” the work force from all pre-capitalist protections while prohibiting at the beginning (and each time this is possible) all trade union rights. Because this made the work force inoperable as a “disposable” commodity capable of producing more surplus value than its own cost: there precisely lies the productive source of surplus value which can be transformed into monetary profit. The “costs” of salaries is compressed, using the pressures of unemployment. Capitalism has also privatised common land (see the enclosures necessary for capitalist agriculture in England) – this dispossession is analogous to the one who takes away their resources from indigenous people. Globally, it aims at privatising and commodifying all goods and services who still escape the rule of profit.

At the same time, since the 19th century, financial innovations try to secure and increase the speed and the volume of the cycle of capital, thus creating very specific “ C ” commodities – financial securities, one of which is international money (currencies). Their price depends on supply and demand on the financial markets, often linked to financial bubbles (speculating for example on housing markets, raw materials or new technologies) and creating fictive “values” – but real damage.

In the cycle $M-C-M'$, M can be any kind of privatised service or polluting energy, GMO's, non reproducible seeds, knowledge, human beings or parts of the human body or purely fictitious financial values – all transformed into “commodities”.

The economic concepts associated with this anatomy cover the characteristics and the criteria of the ruling class: capitalist market prices , supposed to direct investments efficiently, incorporate purely monetary composite short term indices (only the costs and needs expressed in money count): behind the market price of raw materials, there are different globalised conditions of production and demand, from China to Africa and to rest of the world and on top of this financial markets speculating on raw materials.

Similarly, the supposed “increases in productivity” (produce more in the same laps of time) guarantee a good “competitiveness” in globalised exchanges, incorporating non explicit capitalist criteria which have to be exposed and criticised : the increase of the work rhythm, the use of polluting technologies and the disastrous exploitation of natural resources, starting with fossil fuels, fertile land and water... For this kind of system, lowering “costs” is efficient even if this means higher unemployment, precarious jobs, or the use of shale gas: the social and ecological “external effects” of “good governance” by companies are not evaluated by the market. The hopes that the market could produce a “good green capitalism” are an illusion because of the strength of this

anatomy.

Poverty is a product of 21st century capitalism – with its rising numbers of “working poor”, employees, precarious workers (youth, women, immigrants) and peasants who are deprived of their fertile land, food crops and water – by the “structural adjustment policies” promoted by the global financial institutions. And the poor are also the first victims of ecological catastrophes, as we all well know.

A capitalist World-System characterized by crisis and relations of domination

The anatomy of the system gives us an understanding of the history and the diversity of the capitalist World-System, its relations of domination between imperialist “centres” and colonial peripheries or, politically less direct, semi-peripheries (dependent although not as colonies). This internationalisation was a response to the profit crises (or “crises of supply”) and the overproduction of commodities (or “crisis of outlet”) in the countries of the centre: to continue the M-C-M’ cycle, C has to be sold in order to obtain M’ with an acceptable profit. But during growth, prices fluctuate in terms of the social relations of forces and the depletion of natural resources. There is no guaranty for obtaining the required M’.

The imperialist powers, reacted to this problem by a new colonial expansion, justifying this ideologically by referring the Enlightenment and a racist pseudo “civilising mission”. They have taken advantage of the material superiority of the weapons industry and naval force, to impose the so called “free trade” during the 19th century as well as during the 1980’s new neoliberal offensive. The dominant countries hide their own protectionism as powerful countries and try to impose the suppression of those protections on the countries of the periphery – today social and environmental protection.

The organisation of space through transport systems, has been organised to fulfil the needs of the “international division of labour” obeying the criteria of the powers in the centre, rivals or allies in dividing the world and its resources. At the start of the 20th century, multinational companies in the United States imposed a worldwide distribution prize for oil to the oil producing and exporting countries, which has structured the conditions of production and of consumption of this energy during the post-war boom ... New wars of civilisation cover with difficulty the issue of oil. The unlimited search for profits and for new markets is expressed by the International or European Financial Institutions (IFI) as “the rights of competition” being as of “paramount value”. The unemployed are guilty and resistance is being criminalised or avoided by more and more opaque methods – from privatisations without capital in Eastern Europe to secret free-trade agreement negotiations. Privatisations – direct or as Public Private Partnerships (PPP), that pretend to be ecological are promoted by the French big water management companies – are at the core of this device.

In their analysis of the rationality of management behaviour in line with “property rights”, neoliberal thinkers pretend to “prove” the superiority of “private property” as an answer to what they analysed as the “Tragedy of the Commons” and forms of collective property or of bureaucracy in socially protecting States: a forced and generalised privatisations program was their answer (as a universal characteristic pretending to bring economic efficiency and freedom) to the contradictions of regulated capitalism in States inspired by Keynesian policies confronted with the crisis of profits and “stagflation” during the 70’s, with the crisis of “real existing socialism” after the 1989 turn. The difficulties for the resistance become worse because of the opacity and the confusion of concepts and labels.

2. Which “real existing socialism”?

The social and ecological damage caused by “real existing socialism” are not identical to those caused by capitalism. This assertion does not aim at minimising what they were (not mentioning the ideological damage). We know what the Goulag was, the dictatorship of a single party and the badly are not satisfied needs – even more because the basic needs were fulfilled and the expectations were higher. Concerning the environment we know also about the willingly changing of the course of rivers resulting in the ecological catastrophe of the Aral Sea. The joke about “the four ailments of soviet agriculture: spring, summer, autumn and winter ...” is a synthesis, in its own way of this disastrous result.

We must point out that these are “our” problems – concerning a socialist project which has to be envisaged with the danger of bureaucracy as an “organic” issue for the workers movement, for any organisation and project struggling against exploitation and oppression: from this point of view, it is not an external or only “bourgeois” problem. And the fact of being a Marxist does not result in rocket science. To ignore the experience of “real existing socialism” by assimilating it as a variant of capitalism, without a link with the problems and the difficulties of socialism, is counter productive. Capitalism and “real existing socialism” are not identical despite the similarities between Stalinist and fascist totalitarianism and even if there were profound interactions in their confrontation.

But the concept of “productivism” which at first sight could explain material growth “at all costs” (but in reality unconcerned with prices...) in real existing socialism as well as in capitalism, does not explain the reasons for those damages.

They fall under different types of causes.

- The widely shared ignorance, in both systems, about the effects of the non respect of ecological equilibriums. This ignorance is partly caused by the lack of experimental research allowing a scientific analysis of the political consequences of the intensive exploitation of natural resources or the diversion of rivers for instance.
- We should also note, as comrades have already mentioned, and avoiding any anachronistic approach, the paradoxical and negative role of anti-capitalism inside the Marxist current we belonged to at a certain epoch : there was not only a sectarian contempt towards the ecological currents who opened up these discussions, but we should also be aware of the fact that Marxism could represent a voluntarism in the irrigation projects and in unsustainable planning, made possible by the social appropriation of land and resources and by freeing itself from any commercial profit criterion as well as from short termism.
- The caricature of this voluntarism fell into the aberration of Lyssenkoism (even if certain Lamarckist hypotheses seem to valid) which postulated that a progressive environment could liberate itself from any natural determinism. With the subordination of all fields of society to the party dictatorship in the Stalinist era, this was combined with the relativist affirmation of a “proletarian science” distinct and superior to “bourgeois science”, and capable of decoupling agricultural production by mutations. The approach has been criticised by antistalinist Marxists, defending “science” as such.
- Finally, Stalinist repression and oppressive bureaucratic relations have de-responsabilised all kinds of workers – which, in the case of agriculture meant missing out on essential farmers’ knowledge, worsening the harm done by the mistrust of the bolshevist Marxists against peasants.

But it is interesting to underline that, partly during but certainly after the Stalinist phase, research

and science have been protected against bureaucratism thanks to important resources – especially in education. In 1956, Khrushchev expected to overtake capitalism in all fields by 1980, in the scientific, sports, arts competition with capitalism.

But the absence of individual and collective freedom in the relations of production remained and strengthened bureaucratic conservatism. Therein lies the fundamental cause – and not in the logic of profits – for the absolute obstacle to move from a (very rapid) extensive growth towards a phase of production which uses human and natural resources sparingly: the gap with capitalism had narrowed until the 1970's, but it became much larger during the 1980's, when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan started their social attacks, the Soviet Union came under the pressure of the ultimate arms race and several East-European countries were confronted with a large external debt.

The differences in the anatomy of those societies reveal themselves most clearly when confronted with their crisis. As the Polish economist W. Brus said, “real Socialism” money did not function “in an active way”, companies were not submitted to “the hard constraints of the budget” as the Hungarian economist Kornai said; prices were being “administrated” according to the objectives of needs to be fulfilled, even if they were set by the party/State in a non democratic way. Those prices did not reflect neither costs (badly or even not evaluated) nor demand; this is what the market reforms of the 1960's partly attempted to correct in the sector of consumer goods – producing social protests.

The property relations (legal and real) were not based on “state property”, contrary to what is often said: the State, the members of the apparatus were not shareholders, they did not have the “right” to sell those companies or to make them bankrupt – and certainly not to transmit them. This is why the conditions of existence of a real commodification and of commodity relationships (the absence of any real social link) mentioned by Marx, were simply not realised, even if there existed partial market economic categories (prices, certain markets) and a partial use of money – but without the purchasing power for the means of production and without the possibility for money to function as capital that can be accumulated.

Social assessments and protection in kind were dominant and combined with an extreme social protection and stability and with dominant bureaucratic relations.

In the course of different phases and experiences, we can bring out those social relations, the conflicts, the contradictions and the crises caused by them and also their method of managing them – in the name of socialism and of the workers. This was a “political economy” with its own constraints in the framework of what Michael Lebowicz calls a “social contract” – alienated and imposed by the party: it implied a radical stability of employment and a constitutional access to basic goods. The conflicts of “real existing socialism” expressed the dissatisfaction concerning the production of use values, of social relations and of specific dominations, at the national level as well as the relations between “brother countries”: the explosions of the workers councils in Poland and Hungary in 1956 and those of Czechoslovakia in the shadow of the Prague Spring in 1968; and also the fight against the “red bourgeoisie” in 1968 in Yugoslavia, in favour of “self-management from the grassroots up” in June 1968 – also the programme for a “self managed republic at all levels in Poland.

As long as this “social contract” (the legitimate basis of power) was maintained, the crises never were crises of overproduction of commodities or of profit. They were socio-political. In the reforms, legal ownership (by the workers) was preserved and it conditioned the rights of the State/party for managing in the name of the workers (and thus their “real property” as liberal theoreticians justly noticed) : they had the privileges of power and of consumption, but not of capitalist accumulation.

That is why there was a large gap between those aspirations and the restoration of capitalism realised in complete opacity during the “mass privatisations” of the 1990’s, without capital (because without money accumulated as capital): in Russia, it was explained to the workers that by distributing free vouchers giving them parts in “their” company, they were giving them their just due.

But the social resistance to capitalist restoration was trapped in two ways : on the one hand, social rights – including the fact that redundancies were not possible – were linked in practice to the company. After blocking partial market reforms (without privatisations) in the 1970’s, the ultimate phase of “real existing socialism” was characterised by the maximum level of protections and of “social income”, outside the monetary salary – either based on a self managed company or distributed by unions, as was the case in the Soviet Union. Housing, healthcare, holidays, sometimes even the distribution of goods that were not available in the shops, it was all linked to employment stabilising in this way “corporatist” behaviour of the companies.

It is this reality who made it more difficult for the workers to express alternative choices and to defend their interests at a global level – in the absence of unions, of parties and/or any form of self-organisation giving credibility to a political alternative at this level. The difficulty of a resistance must not be seen as proof that the people concerned rejected the rights and the values of those systems. On the contrary, today, we can see a strong nostalgia for those values and rights (of course, no one regrets the gulag and censorship) : the struggles of the workers councils expressed the aspiration for democracy in daily life and at work, the hope for improvements in social benefits – and not mass unemployment and growing inequality with the destruction of social rights during twenty years of capitalist restoration. People were in favour of the falling down of the Berlin wall – but not in favour of new walls created by the rule of money.

3. For ecosocialist self managed planning

An ecosocialist planning must rely on the people’s aspirations expressed at a planetary scale – and on the highest level of knowledge accumulated by experience and the sciences. The ecological challenges and the fulfilment of needs considered as rights to be satisfied for all, (different from those which can be chosen in a decentralised way with money as purchasing power) impose the rule of direct judgements, starting first of all from use values and rights – making it possible to reformulate the constraints of costs. Mistakes are possible but we should at least escape the obscurantism of capitalist market relations and of bureaucratic dictatorship. The financing of what has been considered as the goals to be fulfilled, must be public and transparent – controllable in the framework of a new radical democracy, the management of “the commons”. We can reject power and the bureaucracy of parties, of the State, of the experts and of the market – but we cannot do without institutions (governments, associations, observatories of experts and counter expertise, parties, ...) at the service of direct choices. They must be informed by confrontations and plural debates, at the level of “efficient” management (principle of subsidiarity) according to the needs which must be fulfilled. Collective management of the “Commons” does not inevitably lead to “tragedy” or to false statist or private alternatives – but determining proper rules accepted by the collectives who are directly concerned, is part of the democratic challenge for an ecosocialist self managed society.

Which horizon of rights, management - and of struggles?

How can we manage the reconversion of polluting factories, of useless or non sustainable productions whilst at the same time guaranteeing the social rights and first of all the right to work,

essential in the socialist project? Which stimuli and mechanisms can ensure the convergence or at least the compatibility of conflicting interests – once the rule of capital has been challenged?

Currently, a lot of thinking in/against capitalism show us some potential answers linked to the major dead ends of “Real Socialism”: this concerns the limited horizon of the enterprises which leaves the big macro-economic choices and the long term decisions in the hands of the parti/State or in the hands of the criteria ruling in the capitalist markets.

In the “big debate” between Che Guevara, Charles Bettelheim and Ernest Mandel at the end of the 1960’s, Che and Mandel were opposed to market reforms because of their disintegrating effects. Mandel overcame the false dilemma between centralised planning and “market socialism”. He was inspired by the debates amongst the Yugoslav Marxist left of that time. He proposed incentives which could be “material” but adequate with the socialist aims: pushing towards association, towards the reduction of market relations and of inequality, towards a sharing of improvements in the organisation of the work and not in favour of market competition.

The *Praxis* intellectuals proposed measures which we can take on again : the demanded “self managed planning”; the introduction of Chambres of Self Management (in addition to the parliaments and chambers representing the nations) at different territorial levels (municipal, republican, national – today we could add European...) in order to prepare and control what had been planned; putting in place “a community of interest in self management”, by associating workers, users and representatives of the authorities for instance for the management of public services – and there again at different territorial levels (education, health, transportation, ...) – and also local possibilities for “direct exchange of work”, without money.

This concept of “social ownership” was neither statist nor corporatist (concerning only the company); the statute of the worker was abolished by the statute of the self-managed person associated with social rights at different levels and in accordance of different sides of the individual (producer, user, different types of elected persons) in the framework of self managed planning.

But it is impossible to “plan everything” in advance. The main point is that the rights of those associated with the self management statute are being applied to every job without being attached to it. Employment can be interrupted, either because of individual choices or linked to necessary reconversions justified according to specific procedures and criteria. Those rights must be linked to a statute whatever the current job or activity : the workers/citizens who are performing whatever self management are responsible for the organisation and the aims of their particular or temporary employment; but also for their participation in the big options of planning (at different levels). Prohibition of dismissals means the obligation of collective procedures and the acceptance of the proposed reconversions, including the possibility of periods of training and of other activities, taking also into account and sharing domestic tasks (the care for children, for the elderly can being taken on in the family or in a collective framework), the right of retirement and of leisure... The question of a guaranteed basic income associated with the statute of self management, its rights and duties, is an essential part of the necessary debates.

Self management as a statute is not only applicable in small companies and in cooperatives, but also in big enterprises where efficient modes of functioning are being put in place (workshops and different kinds of collectives). Self managed public services can be linked to investment funds at different territorial levels (in accordance with planned priorities and financing) and managed by the corresponding “community of interest” (workers/users of all kinds and representatives of the authorities). Self management must be able to associate all forms of ownership (individual, cooperative, self managed public) at different territorial levels and in different branches. The criteria of payment for hard jobs or for qualified jobs, must be decided collectively and with an acceptable

range.

The idea that this type of rights can only be realised after a radical change of power is at the same time right and wrong :

- Right. Those rights are in contradiction with capitalism Any illusion or underestimation of the resistance by the dominant classes against the questioning of their privileges and institutional powers, would be suicidal. The risks of sinking of the self managed cooperatives and of other forms of resistance against capitalism, are substantial if there is no extension and questioning of the capitalist environment; and so are the islands of “solidary economy” leaving the ravages of the capitalist ocean untouched.
- False. Waiting for the Grand Evening is also suicidal: “training for communism” inside/against the system is necessary for the consolidation of tomorrow’s victories – besides the fact that the credibility of a mobilising socialist alternative implies that it has been partly put in practice. Highlighting alternative criteria and rights in opposition to those of capitalism and the partially experimentation of those alternatives are essential to change the relationship of forces, to form an alternative hegemonic bloc preparing for the radical break with the system.
- But because of the reality of the environmental crisis, we must not delay “until after the revolution” the awareness concerning those challenges and those struggles by all means, at all levels possible, against planetary ecological destruction.
- An updated “transitional program” must build a bridge between reforms and demands contesting the system in order to consolidate and to expand the conquests. We must develop projects seen as urgent and legitimate at the social and ecological level, potentially in contradiction with the existing legal order, combining self organisation, parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggles. The global Manifestoes or local actions who mobilise the people directly concerned, in defence of the “commons”, such as water (against the multinationals like Véolia) combine the social and the ecological dimension.

In those struggle, it is not “private ownership” which has to be questioned but the exploitative relation and the rule of money of capitalist ownership: private property by a small producer or an individual entrepreneur, is not exploiting anybody. The global importance of indigenous and farmers networks in Via Campesina, the ecological, social, anti-imperialist and religious dimensions of the resistance against the appropriation of natural resources by the big agro-exporting companies, has become clear. Neither can we anymore ignore the ancestral traditions of the link between farmers and their land as a “commons” or of collective voluntary forms of cooperative work . Amongst often under-proletarian “independent entrepreneurs” there are also social differentiations. Capitalist exploitation is direct (wage relations) but also more and more indirect: the relationships of domination undergone by small farmers, craftsmen, independent, precarious and often female workers, subcontractors without any protection ... Anti-capitalist struggles should try to associate in solidarity , those precarious populations and those having a job as a foreshadowing the projects for self managed panning linked to the great collective choices. The globalisation of the capitalist and the ecologic crisis brings the need for articulating local and planetary resistance, in a common and anti-xenophobic vision. The continental level – for us, Europeans – will bring coherence, ecological and social credibility to national struggles. We must also fight for a new structure of universal rights and of universal institutions of the United Nations at a planetary level in order to protect our heritage – natural or produced by humanity – from the predators.

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P.S.

* Translated from the French by Marijke Colle.