



Counter-reform or Revolution: responses to capitalism in crisis

Contrarreformas ou Revolução: respostas a um capitalismo em crise

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*Without revolutionary theory, there is no revolutionary movement.
It will never be too much to insist on this idea at a time
in which the fashionable propaganda of opportunism is accompanied by
of an attraction to the narrower forms of practical activity.
Lenin (What is to be done? Burning questions of our movement [1902])*

Central to all gradualist opportunism is the argument that times have changed and that revolutionary forms and actions no longer fit today's conditions. The mass struggles, the confrontations, in a word, the insurrections, have given way to institutional forms that channel conflicts and allow them to take place on ground that has the dual virtues of allowing the majority to prevail while at the same time neutralising the main instrument of the ruling classes, namely the use of repressive apparatus and violence.

Politics has taken the place of force. This is a very old idea within political philosophy, around since Plato and Aristotle, through the Roman philosophers and into the medieval period, and is founded on the statement that political forms operate when the parties abdicate the use of force to make their interests prevail. Politics between citizens, force to subdue the barbarians. The Roman armies remained outside the city and Caesar stripped off his military garb and put on his toga to talk to his equals in the Senate. It was Machiavelli ([1513] 1996), at the dawn of modern times, who questioned this principle, stating that force is one of the elements that makes up the phenomenon of politics, as it cannot be understood outside the correlation of forces facing each other aiming to impose their own interests (the elite, the men-at-arms and the people). According to him, the use of force cannot be judged by a general moral principle as there is a difference between public and private morality, so one must ask about the correct or incorrect use of all resources necessary for the conquest and maintenance of the state, including and especially force. A common misconception is that Machiavelli defended the use of force in the political sphere as an exclusive resource and that it is a deviation that was moral in character. This is not the case, as he found that force has always been present in history and is usually decisive, while arguing that the effectiveness of those who want to conquer or maintain the State is provided by the correct balance between the force and the legitimacy of its action, between coercion and consensus and not by the mere imposition of an act of force.

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Interestingly, in the consolidation and crisis of bourgeois modernity, Machiavelli's principle must be set aside and in its place the old premodern political argument needs to be revisited in a form that presupposes the non-use of force, as we can see in Hanna Arendt's formulations ([1958] 2000) and Habermas ([1985] 1990).

We believe this aspect fits into a somewhat larger set. Marx ([1866-67], 2013) offers us the following reasoning when dealing with so-called primitive accumulation;

In real history, as we know, the principal role is played by conquest, subjugation, murder, in short, violence. In the bland political economy, the idyll has always prevailed. Law and 'work' have since time immemorial, the only means of enrichment, excepting always, of course, 'this year' (MARX, 2013, p. 786).

Persistent efforts to conceal, veil or obscure aspects of reality, to cover up the larger sense of class domination, are an ideological procedure in the Marxian sense of the term. It is necessary to erase the footsteps that lead us to the appalling realisation that the present order was and is imposed by the brutal domination of the ruling class over those upon whom it falls. This is more necessary and profound as the bourgeoisie loses its old universal character of revolutionary class and assumes its conservative and reactionary features, expressing a historical period that Lukács (2010), following Marx's lead, called ideological decay. The lead can be summarised as follows; from 1820-1830, and more profoundly with the entry onto the scene of the proletariat in 1848, the bourgeoisie consolidated its political power and the class struggle partially shifts from the struggle against the old regime to struggle against the proletariat. The effect of this on the bourgeois consciousness of the time can be seen in the intellectual output of its representatives, who now repeat in their ideal formulations the harsh realisation that, "[...] the weapons used by the bourgeoisie to do away with feudalism are today turned against her" (MARX; ENGELS, [1847-48], 1980, p. 16). According to Marx, this would lead to the realisation that;

It is now no longer a question of whether this or that theorem is true, but whether it is useful or detrimental to capital, comfortable or uncomfortable, contrary to police regulations or not. Instead of selfless research, we have the activity of salaried swordsmen; rather than a biased scientific analysis, bad conscience and apologetic predominance (MARX, apud LUKÁCS, 2010, p. 51).

This form, which scorns historical facts and tends to mystification, is not just a gross manipulation, an eclectic soup prepared in the, "[...] kitchen of the ideological imbecilisation of the masses [...]" (LUKÁCS, 2010, p. 61), but, like all ideology, it is the ideal expression of the relations that constitute the real, a socially necessary illusion, which ideally expresses the transit from one revolutionary epoch of the bourgeoisie to another, that of its decay as a universal class, leading to the materialisation of Marx's maxim that for the bourgeoisie there was history, but nothing more. At the heart of this mystification, this historically necessary illusion, violence is a constitutive part of history that has jumped through revolutions and ruptures, but must now flow into an evolutionary, linear and progressive stream, more to the taste of Comtean positivism.

It is a characteristic of every ideology, which bears within its substance the dominant ideas, or more precisely, the ideal expression of the relations that make a class the ruling class

(MARX; ENGELS [1845-46], 2007, p. 47), to present as universal the particular substance on which it is founded. The effectiveness of ideology is measured by its ability to, while being the ruling class's ideas, serve as the ideal medium through which the dominated establish their worldview. In this sense, it is not surprising that the representatives of the proletariat, at any given moment, begin to share within their own conceptions the ideological decay of their antagonists.

This does not occur by simple manipulation. The fact is that classes share the same materiality as the relations that constitute a particular society, so they share the material basis that underlies their consciousness, just as this consciousness can only be expressed by a set of representations, signs, symbols, judgments, values that are shared by the fighting classes. Social classes, as stated by Bakhtin-Voloshinov (1986, p. 31), use one and the same language, so that, “[...] in every ideological sign confront indexes of contradictory values, making the arena where class struggle develops” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p. 31). It turns out that this arena is not neutral, it is the terrain of bourgeois ideology, leading to the paradox that we try to attack our antagonists with blows of a substance that feeds them.

We believe this is what happens in the disjunction between revolution and gradualism. Just as consolidated bourgeois power indicates the obvious signs of its crisis and that a time of social revolution is emerging on the historical horizon, the understanding prevails that the revolutionary form is an anachronism that has been replaced by civilized dispute within the limits of a specific agreed political order and legal covenant.

Bernstein stated that the ambition of socialists should not be the destruction of society and its replacement by another, but the incessant struggle to, “[...] elevate the worker from the social condition of proletarian [...] to that of a citizen” (BERNSTEIN, [1899] apud HOBBSAWM, 1982, p. 282), generalising the civil system (Burgertum) or the status of citizen (Burgersein). Socialism would thus be the result of evolution rather than rupture. Kautsky, a blunt critic of Bernstein's evolutionary Marxism, presents the substance of the same idea as the one he criticised, but counterpoints the idea of annihilation and burnout, arguing that workers should, “[...] prepare over the long term and only be prepared to wage this battle when he considers that the enemy is sufficiently weakened” (KAUTSKY apud HOBBSAWM, 1982, p. 337).

This is not merely a capitulation by the renegades. These authors, with sincere socialist and anti-capitalist ambitions, have surrendered to the pseudo-concretisation of a historical context in which bourgeois society seems to have imposed the survival of the capital order so that, at the same time as it was being sustained by military and police power, it made the classical revolutionary alternative impossible, as it opened up the possibility of political dispute within a framework of institutions that would have the virtue of allowing long-term accumulations favourable to the working classes.

Engels, who was an expert on military matters, in analysing the results of the class struggle from 1848 to the Paris Commune experience of 1871, claimed that the form of the struggles had changed significantly. He states that rebellion in the old forms, practiced until 1848, the combat of barricades, was over. Several factors would have contributed to this, from the size

of the armies, their ability to move via railways, the efficiency of armament such as the repeating rifle that had replaced muzzle loading, improvements in ammunition, etc. (Engels, [1895], [20--], p. 105), as well as the political context of class struggle, universal suffrage, and the institutionalisation of bourgeois power¹.

This context can be understood in two ways. As solid ground on which the struggle between the antagonistic classes would have to establish their confrontation, as Engels seems to indicate, or as an absolutely new scenario that would necessitate revising class antagonism, leading to the idea of the State as a form that would make possible the conciliation of class interests, which in society presented themselves as irreconcilable. This second path was taken by social democracy as well as the Russian Mensheviks. Kautsky would have taken a middle course, that is, while not disregarding the class character of the bourgeois state, he was betting that the correlation of forces would allow the occupation of the State from the workers' perspective until reformist actions eroded the power of the bourgeoisie. and allowed the building of a workers' power.

The problem is that in so doing working-class consciousness has to accept the premise that revolutionary overthrow is impossible and adhere to the terms of gradualism as the only possible way of developing its revolutionary strategies. It is not by chance that, when more radical forms of confrontation are curtailed, the possibilities of institutional paths to policy formation open up (PRZEWORSKI, 1989).

Little by little, this imposition becomes not a limit, but an opportunity in the eyes of the socialists. Peaceful means of taking power by the will of the majority would have found their *raison d'être* in the electoral form. The workers, being the majority of society, once they aligned their class condition with their electoral behaviour, would become an invincible political force, could form the government and present their proposal for the reorganisation of society by legally constituted means.

Although this scenario was seen as a real possibility, it presented itself along with a paradox. If the use of revolutionary violence could lead to distortion of the democratic character of the movement that used it, then accepting the limits of democratic rules would condemn the revolutionary party to impotence².

In our view this dilemma, that marked the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the dramatic Russian and German experiences at the beginning of the twentieth century, through the whole European social-democratic experiment, the Chilean Revolution and the tragedy of

¹ Despite these considerations, Engels reacted emphatically against the German social democracy that deformed and disfigured his preface to Marx's *Class Struggle in France*, turning him into a peaceful worshiper of legality at all costs and demanding the publication of the text in its entirety.

² Adam Przeworski introduces us to the words of Peter Gay, author of a Bernstein biography, in which he presents this paradox. Says Gay, "Is democratic socialism impossible? Or can it be achieved only if the party is willing to temporarily abandon the democratic method of coming to power by violence, hoping to be able to return to parliamentarism as soon as it takes control? It seems that this second alternative has tragic possibilities: a democratic movement using authoritarian methods to achieve its objectives must not remain democratic for long, yet the first alternative - sticking to democratic procedures in all circumstances - can condemn the party to continued political impotence" (PRZEWORSKI, 1989, p. 29).

recent government experience in Brazil (2003-2016), brings with it a problem in its own formulation.

These are not just alternative ways of overcoming capitalism and starting the construction of socialism, as it seems when we restrict the analysis to the political intentions of its protagonists, but of how political forces act at the moment of the crisis of capitalism and to what extent this political action may or may not go beyond the capitalist order it was intended to deny.

This is not a moral deviation that imposes on the characters involved an acceptance to act within the framework of a bourgeois sociability and a capitalist economic order by the simple acceptance of democratic values and the refusal to use force.

Our hypothesis is based on the premise that the crisis of the capitalist order opens the double possibility of revolutionarily instituting a new materiality on which to build new relationships which socially produce human existence in an emancipated dimension, that is, to initiate a socialist transition in the world in the direction of communism; At the same time, it would allow us, depending on the character of the actions taken, to reinstate a new form of the same economic, social and political content that lies at the foundation of a society of capital³.

In this way we must recover, albeit in a synthetic way, what we understand by the capital crisis and the political forms in which the responses put forward for it are expressed.

Capital as we know it is a social relationship founded on the private ownership of the means of production and the purchase of the labour force for the purpose of extracting more value. To this end, capital requires certain preconditions: the continued expropriation of producers direct from their means of labour and subsistence in order to form a free market for labour force and commodity.

Striving for the constant appreciation of value, as well as the private appropriation of socially produced wealth, leads to the paradoxical development of capital and its inherent contradictions.

The more capital grows, the greater the distance between those who accumulate and those who produce capital, producing a society marked by inequality, or rather, inequalities. Between rich and poor, between capitalists and proletarians, between the central and peripheral countries of the world, among those that make up the capitalist collective (the different segments of capital - industrial, agrarian, banking, commercial, services, etc.), between those that make up the proletariat, divided not only by the branches in which capital operates, but also

³ For a better understanding of these premises we can resort to Sartre (1979) and his understanding of the possibility of revolutionary praxis that emerges from the negation of a certain inert practical field, eventually alienating itself in a strange new institutionality (IASI, 2006); or, in the understanding of Mészáros expressed in his work, "Beyond Capital", where he supposes that the negation of capitalism could be restricted to a juridical-political negation that does not surpass the socio-metabolism of capital.

in the very composition of the class (employees, reserve industrial army, relative overpopulation, latent or stagnant labour force, etc.), as well as functional divisions in the exploitation of labour (social relations by sex, region, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, generation, etc.).

The development of capital describes, not only in its generic history, but in its particular branches, a movement from competition to monopoly, centralisation and concentration of production, which the more it concentrates the accumulation, the more it expands capital as a form that only it can be moved by an influx of everything, connecting regions, countries and peoples in the capitalist world market network. At the height of this development capital becomes imperialism, that is, the export of goods gives way to the export of capital, monopoly capitals produce the fusion of capital in industries and banks, forming financial capital and constantly sharing and resharing the globe. in defining areas of influence that will serve as platforms for the expansion of imperialist capital.

The more imperialism deepens, the more the parasitic character of the capitalist mode of production is accentuated, either by the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, linked to changes in the organic composition of capital (the disproportion between constant and variable capital), or by State-driven counter-measures. Capitalist society is becoming a sociability that sucks up all societal work to accumulate profits that need to carry through the production process an ever-increasing mass of dead capital in proportion to the living labour at the centre of the production and reproduction of value.

The crisis is the result of the accumulation process and its contradictions and presents itself as a crisis of overvaluation and in the movement in which value must flow as a result of the tendency to ever lower profit rates. Overaccumulation, whether expressed in overproduction or underconsumption, requires the burning of capital, the destruction of productive forces and labour, to enable a new cycle of accumulation.

Such a process, which is brilliantly described in Karl Marx's *Capital* in his three books (MARX, 2013; 2014; 2017), leads to cyclical and periodic crises. Since capital is a social relationship, both the crisis and the means of coping with it are cut short by the class struggle and the antagonistic interests that underpin it. In what Marx in book III calls countertendencies we can clearly see this aspect. Capital, attempting to counteract the fall in the rate of profit, needs to intensify the exploitation of the working class, reduce wages, increase relative overpopulation, all with predictable impacts on those who work and the general conditions of reproducing life. At the same time, it requires the elements of constant capital at a low cost (raw materials, storage costs, infrastructure, machinery, etc.), expansion of markets (with it the sharing and resharing of areas of influence) and the escape of money into the banking sphere and the interest-bearing capital orgy.

The problem is that it is not only the countertendencies directly linked to the workers, but also those that address the elements of capital (fixed capital, constant capital, money capital, land income, etc.) that affect the whole of society, plundering public funds, subordinating them to the public debt mechanism and harnessing society's entire effort as a means of saving capital from its crisis and creating the conditions for a new cycle of accumulation.

The moment of crisis is, therefore, the maximum moment of ideology⁴. It is the moment when the interests of capital need to present themselves as the universal interests of society. In the class struggle workers, once dispersed and serialised, coexisting under the same conditions but not constituting themselves as a class, tend to promote actions that result from the reaction to capital attacks and their implications for living conditions, struggles both partial and dispersed, but which tend to be increasingly general and under certain conditions may lead to the fusion and formation of the working class as a class.

It is at this moment of the formation of the class and it becoming conscious that the workers present their demands for better wages and better living conditions or in the struggle against particular oppressions that they suffer either as women, or against racism, or against a myriad injustices that affect them daily as members of the working class. It is natural for this to happen, for it is these forms of oppression that define the exploitation and oppression on which the bourgeois order is founded.

However, these forms in themselves can either be denied or accepted without changing the deepest and most determining conditions of the capitalist order. Higher wages are perfectly possible without questioning the free buying and selling of the labour force and the division between private accumulation and the funding of the workers' consumption. New forms of employment and a universe of social rights and policies are possible without changing the order of private property and capitalist accumulation. So, at the moment of crisis, when capital needs to make changes in order to save the substance of its own order, we can see that part of the demands of labour's agenda appears in the body of bourgeois State policies.

As José Paulo Netto ([1992], 2006) has argued in depth, the move to monopoly capital required a new form of State that needs to go far beyond the mere guarantee of relations of production and property, extending to deal with direct and indirect economic tasks, as well as the spheres of labour force reproduction and the political legitimacy of the State of monopoly capital. Without this, the author argues, such a State would no longer be the executive committee of bourgeois affairs, and its agenda should now include actions connected with reproduction and conditions of existence that partly coincide with working class claims.

However, even though they appear the same, there is an essential difference when expressed on the agenda of struggling workers as compared to when they are incorporated into the agenda of capital. A good example can be found in the late 19th century workers' claims in Brazil, which fought for the monthly wage, the weekly paid rest, the right to vacation, the regulation of women's and children's labour, the guarantee of employment, among other demands, and the so-called Consolidation of Labour Laws, created in 1943 by the Getúlio government.

Not that they cease to deal with the same things, but in the first case they constitute the path by which the class is constituted as a class, it forges a unity and experience that could lead it to an historical role as a actor with an alternative to a society of capital; while in the second it becomes the means by which the bourgeois State establishes political control of the class and

⁴ See this essay *The Capital Crisis: The Age of Deliberate Hypocrisy* (IASI, 2017, p. 59-84).

strips it of its autonomy, adapting it to the demands of new forms and patterns of accumulation.

The mistake of gradualism lies in the partial, even minimal, observation that the incorporation of elements of the working-class agenda would produce a cumulative effect that would produce a leap in quality at some future time, transforming the bourgeois order into proletarian order. The essential question is: While the slow accumulation that will lead to socialism is going on, which order survives as the foundation of existing sociability? It cannot be the proletarian, as this would only result from the full development and accumulation of reforms.

As we have already said, an order is not a moral arrangement of intent. An order is defined by the forms of property, the social relations of production and the forms of accumulation and distribution. It seems clear to us that gradualism presupposes the permanence of determinations of the bourgeois order, recalling Bernstein and Kautsky - it is not a matter of destroying or proletarianising existing society - so gradualism is based on the historical terrain of capitalist society, balanced by a distribution, via the State, on the part of social accumulation (excluding that intended for private accumulation) through the intervention of political values and judgments derived from majority control over the State through the democratisation of the political sphere⁵.

Every ideological construction must start from an earthly base. The materiality of this ideology lies, on the one hand, in the experience of European social democracy and the so-called welfare State, which cannot be made general beyond the confines of the old continent except as an ideology. On the other hand, by the emergence of the Russian Revolution and the 20th century socialist revolutions that posed a practical alternative that needed to be contained and denied as an alternative.

The future of the social democratic experiment was not the universalisation of democracy and an era of rights, but its full development has resulted in a regressive curve toward barbarism. This is not because of the correctness or otherwise of the moral values, the ethical dimension or the political illusions of its protagonists, but rather the persistence of the material basis upon which they rested. Social democracy rested on the ground of capitalist relations of production and capitalist forms of ownership, which, by their very nature, developed capitalist accumulation, monopoly, imperialism and, at the height of its process of private accumulation of social production, generated yet another enormous crisis. of overaccumulation.

Ironically, the proposed confrontation of the crisis could no longer be the social democratic class pact but denying the pact by reaffirming the liberal premises re-dictated by the ideological primer of neoliberalism. It was not possible to universalise social democracy nor the welfare state nor democracy. The most substantial component of these forms is the need for monopolistic and imperialist capital for a socio-metabolism in which the state gains a special predominance. The forms ranged from a *welfare state* democracy in Europe along with a few

⁵ In a way, Caio Prado Jr defends this view in his *The Brazilian Revolution* (PRADO JR, [1966], 1978) when he refers the programme to the ability of most workers to indicate the direction of the economy for the production of wage goods and the conditions of life.

others outside the continent to the North American *New Deal* and to brutal dictatorships in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

We must not, however, confuse the efficiency of the bourgeois order in staying alive despite its crises, with the ability to avoid them. We can see that the alternative political forms are less and less likely to be long-term alternatives. Neoliberalism, heralded as the way to guide the new millennium, turned out to be a short-shot alternative. We are struck by the apparent coincidence that terms are borrowed from past contexts: neoliberalism, neo-development, etc. It seems to us that this is yet another feature of ideological decay, that the minds of the dead continue to torment the living with their names, clothing, banners, and ghosts. Apparently, the terminal character of the capitalist form can only offer as its future a pale echo of a past in which it claimed to be an alternative for humanity.

The failure in the present and the impossibility of reviving the past opens the door for unwanted ghosts to present themselves as alternatives: neo-fascism, neo-Nazism, sultanates and emirates, medieval irrationalism and Pentecostal Salvationism. Perhaps it is a mistake to call it barbarism, it is the triumph of civilization, of a civilization that agonises and in so doing reveals its most essential character without the disguises of political makeup, beautiful clothes and ideological props.

It is times like these that update a hypothesis which has zealously attempted to stay away from the field of possibilities. In 1849 Marx made the following argument that would serve as a guiding line for all his vast work: No society disappears until it develops all the productive forces it can contain, so that new social relations never appear before they develop within this society the material conditions for this; This change only occurs when the full development of the productive forces contradicts the social relations of production, thus opening a time of social revolution (Marx; [1849], 2007).

The confirmation, tragic in some respects, of this hypothesis lies in the fact that, surprisingly, the forms that were supposed to have been surpassed have emerged as significant. The negation of order and the possibility of revolution does not seem to germinate from the well-behaved experiences of institutional accumulation, but from the chaotic signs of popular insurrections, such as the one that, at the time of writing, is shaking Ecuador, interestingly, the most moderate of the so-called popular experiments whose most radical equals are Bolivia and Venezuela.

In our political actions we can choose more, or less, radical forms of action, with a greater or lesser human cost, but apparently this is not the case with history. Apparently history moves to remind us that the end of an era, the death of an order is a violent destructive process in which a new world struggles to be born, trapped in the bowels of an old historical form that wants to drag us with it to its death. In the corner, without much patience, the old midwife waits for us to decide.

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