

NEGOTIATED CONTRADICTIONS

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One of the great achievements of Marxist thinking lies in identifying the class struggle as the principal contradiction of the capitalist system, which the dominant forces who benefit from it are the first to want to hide. It was not the mere existence of class struggle, which was hardly new to capitalism, but rather the nature of the class struggle within capitalism, its potential to not only be its 'grave-digger', but the midwife of a classless social order, that Marx insisted was significant.¹ But the significance of class struggle for Marx was not, in fact, limited to its transformative potential alone. Indeed, when Marx identified as contradictions the imbalances, incoherencies and inconsistencies between means and mediations in the capitalist system, he identified them in terms of their being expressed in and through class struggles — including struggles that took place within, as well as between, classes. Contradictions seem more humane when they are considered as struggles, since when they are only seen as imbalances, incoherencies or inconsistencies, they almost always evoke natural or technical determinations. Protagonists, and social actors generally, stand out more clearly in the perspective of struggles, whereas to speak of contradictions without this is to suggest reified forces, whether expressed as currents and flows, or as factors and variables. But it is also very important to be able to distinguish between those struggles/contradictions that are system transforming and those that are not. Especially given the proven capacity of capitalism, from Marx's time to ours, to reproduce itself with a greater degree of viability than is recognized by any voluntarist or determinist theory of change, we need to retain the notion of contradiction to understand, not only the crises, but also the dynamics of capitalist reproduction and extension (including through crises), and the way these are expressed in class struggles that do not necessarily entail the end of the system, much less its desirable transition into a classless society, as a probable or imminent event.²

Among the flaws that traditionally beset a good deal of Marxist thinking was an idealization of the workers without taking into consideration that historically, politically and ethically, the workers are a class not only in permanent conflict but also in permanent negotiation with those who pay them wages, and that within that permanent conflict and negotiation, their awareness, their organization, their morality and their politics are often such as to be unable to take them beyond the system. Within this system, the most powerful negotiators, who are the entrepreneurs, are going to do everything they can to weaken the negotiating power of the workers. They are also going to seek or construct social spaces, organizations and technologies in which the owners are stronger and the workers are weaker. This means that in the capitalist system the workers are negotiators, and that the dominant forces in the system make them negotiate from a position of weakness, or remove them from the market and only let them in if they accept the conditions set by them for the negotiation. This reaches the extreme, during times of crisis, of excluding many workers who want to be employed even under the worst of conditions. In order to increase their negotiating and accumulative powers, the employers use migrant workers and home-workers as well as calling on the national and global 'reserve army' of those previously excluded from the labour market.³

Within much 'critical thought' in general, the idealization of the workers, or at least the people, as a liberating category, takes them out of their condition as negotiators. The idealistic preconception of workers sees them only as liberating victims, and does not consider, much less say, that within capitalism they are also negotiators; they are also the merchants of their own labour power. This idealization seriously affects our ability to know what needs to be done in terms of constructing a world that is less unjust, because it does not see that exploitation and liberation necessarily involve negotiation. One of the main problems regarding the contradictions of capitalism lies in understanding that the exploited and oppressed, even in their rebelliousness, may still be negotiating their status as the merchants of their labour power. This is a restricted form of *negotiated contradiction* quite different from that of daring to say no to the current terms of negotiation and trying to impose new terms of negotiations in which workers can secure sufficient autonomy to realize their potential to usher in a new classless society.

The history of capitalism, and the history of the struggle for socialism, involves, in other words, not just a history of class conflict and repression, but a history of *negotiated contradictions*. The strength from which classes negotiate, and the terms of what is negotiable and what is not negotiable (over which there is also necessarily a struggle between class factions amongst themselves), determines the variation of outcomes. Both the negotiated contradictions between class enemies and those arising within each class alter the history of class structuring and the nature of conflict and accommodation within and between classes. The structures, or internal and external relationships, of classical capitalism are not the same as those of today's neoliberal globalization. But while this fact is obvious, what is

less obvious is that the ability to predict and explain the changes in question continues to be very poor when the 'workers' are treated as mere victims or idealized as inherently revolutionary, rather than as negotiators who have been embroiled in the class contradictions that generate change within capitalism.

Within the capitalist system, negotiation tends to encompass everything and everyone. Although negotiations were already present in the precapitalist world, they did not enjoy the prestige they do now: 'I am a gentleman, I do not negotiate', said a Mexican entrepreneur of late feudalism in a semi-colonial country that was yet to undertake its national bourgeois revolution. Neither was negotiation valued in those societies that saw repression alone as the surest way to preserve slavery and servitude. But, since the onset of classical capitalism, the masters and entrepreneurs, as the merchants who purchase a labour force, have been studying how to improve their own strength through negotiation. They seek the best prices here and now, or go to other parts of the country or the world, or build politico-military-cultural-technological systems that favour them in the areas in which they live or the places they haunt.

Since the emergence of capitalism, the purchaser of labour has found that he can negotiate the price of labour with the worker who is selling it. Day in and day out, he experiences in his factory the same thing other proprietors experience in theirs. From the generalization and common usage they make from this, he and his kind deduce policies of domination that strengthen them in the face of those peddling their labour. They promote an increase of their own strengths and the weakening of the workers'. They apply the old policy of 'divide and conquer' to those selling labour. Between violence and negotiation, they make repeated concessions to some workers or groups of workers of various types.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, concessions have created new social blocs within the working class. These were given new impetus by Bismarck in Germany — the first 'state socialism' led by the bourgeoisie — and became generalized in Europe by the end of the nineteenth century. This redefined the working class and the socialist forces. Bernstein, and reformism generally, expressly manifested this change, virtually confirming that the working classes' primary mode of action is negotiation. The problem immediately revealed was that working class negotiations contained intrinsic contradictions, and these could be seen even at those moments when the class appeared combative, defiant and even fearless, as well as when it was willing to make sacrifices. Even so, it was already also clear that socialist and revolutionary expressions of the working class would not necessarily be predominant in history, as opposed to the reformist and even opportunist ones Rosa Luxemburg confronted in the Second International.

But the really great negotiations between workers and proprietors in the twentieth century began with the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, and lasted until the end of the Cold War. Negotiated concessions reached their highest expression with the Keynesian welfare state as a response to the possible spread of communism amidst the crisis of the thirties and the war, and the threat to the dominant classes this constituted. They were forced to diminish the danger through collective nego-

tiations and concessions that many workers accepted. At the same time, the outcomes of these negotiations increasingly opened up new contradictions within the working class itself, including restructuring the internal contradictions within the 'labour aristocracy' and establishing a sizeable group of organized workers with standards of living more or less equal to those of the middle class, and much above those of unorganized or marginalized workers.

On an international level, the policy of differentiation through negotiation was also used in the development of colonialism and technological development. The meaning of *uneven development*, for the underdeveloped regions and their workers, salaried or not, was manifested in the colonialism that partly began with the movement of dominated ethnic groups within the European nations themselves, and then implicated the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Colonialism showed the clearest facets of violence as terror, but also of negotiation as corruption. (It would, however, be difficult to affirm that terror as repression, and negotiation as corruption, had any less dramatic features within North America and Europe, as evidenced by the genocide of the native nations, by the locus of fascism and Nazism, and even by the more contemporary organized gangsterism in the United States and Russia.) In any case, the main point is that in both the internal and international history of colonialism we find phenomena of negotiation, and not only repression. Negotiation with the colonies took on the nature of a new worldwide policy with the independence movements of the new states in the Americas during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the buying-selling and concessionary aspects became even more pronounced with the decolonization policy of the postwar period in the twentieth century. It was in this context, in which the 'developmental' model arose, that capitalism was sometimes forced to negotiate with, and even show some respect for the policies of, revolutionary nationalism, as part and parcel of the cooption of the forces that advanced it. The differentiation and disarticulation of the workers' forces through negotiation as well as repression thus includes the history of workers in the colonialist countries (and their social democratic movements) *and* those of the workers of the colonized nations (and their revolutionary nationalist and 'socialist oriented' movements).

Negotiated contradictions also are involved in the differentiation among workers brought about by technological development. The appearance of white collar or office workers, and the no less important growing distinction between qualified and unqualified workers, and between those achieving specialized knowledge and highly valued 'symbolic' labour as compared to those with medium or low levels of specialization — all this aggravated the old differentiation between organized and unorganized, metropolitan and peripheral workers. Multiform differentiations altered and restructured the terms of class struggle in its aspects of repression and negotiation. Stratification in terms of direct and indirect income and horizontal and vertical social mobility both functioned as escape valves for the system and as the basis for new forms of mediation and influence, distribution and participation, marginalization and exclusion. The redefinitions of the exploiter and

exploited classes did not only come about through confrontation, but also through negotiation. The logic of confrontation is insufficient to explain the contradictions of modern capitalism and of the complex, adaptive and self-regulated system to which it has today given rise in the form of neoliberal globalization; nor can it explain the way in which the military-industrial complex of the Group of Seven under the shared hegemony of the United States, which dominates the world, thinks and acts.

Negotiated contradictions are also the basis for understanding the foundation of the capitalist mega-organizations of our time and the role they have played in the construction of contexts that contributed to transforming 'closed' systems into 'open' systems,⁴ which thereby try to prolong their existence by drawing on the strength and energy of global capital. This reduces or nullifies the entropic tendencies of the capitalist system, at least for a future period that is difficult to estimate, and which can be understood not so much by means of projections or extrapolations, as by means of uncertainty theory, open to the possible construction of ever new adaptive organizations and complexes.⁵

The new systems theory, which accepts the challenge of being a paradigm or scientific theory based on dominant power, has among its antecedents Hobbes' rich concept of the contradictions of paradise lost, as well as William James' notion of pragmatic adaptability to achieve goals, which Piaget took to a higher level as one of the main precursors of constructivism. The new theory comes from the so-called 'new sciences' or 'techno-sciences', in which a great scientific revolution was brought about based on cybernetics and mathematical modeling, communications sciences and the science of organization, bringing an end to the paradigm dominant since Newton, Bacon and Descartes.⁶ The new sciences developed after World War II included within their revolution the dynamic systems of a historical cosmology,⁷ but the irreversible changes in physics this brought about was nothing in comparison to the techno-scientific advances in the construction of adaptive and complex self-regulated systems. These are able to achieve their goals under conditions of uncertainty and able to stop the natural tendency of systems to age, weaken and become extinct, as they would if they remained closed systems, thanks to entropy.⁸

Science and technology have been systematically combined in order to develop a negentropic⁹ mega-policy for the capitalist system, allowing it to create subsystems in which the conditions of domination and negotiation are improved. Biological struggles may be taken as metaphors. AIDS, a parasite in the cells defending the organisms it wishes to attack and dominate and at whose expense it lives and develops, mimics the mechanisms for the natural protection of the invaded organisms and undermines the categories available to science for making it possible to identify it. In the same way we may say that through techno-science the dominant forces renew their skill in remaining undetected by terms such as 'imperialism' or 'capitalism', thereby forcing those who used such terms to abandon their icons, symbols and moralities, their organizations and their policies — and even making them recant their philosophies and their pedagogical or

scientific ideals, such as occurs today with Marxism-Leninism, revolutionary nationalism, and radical democracy, all amid direct and subliminal pressures stimulating the use of 'politically correct' language.

Just as biology discovers that there are aerobic animals that, under adverse conditions, become anaerobic, the new science of business discovers how to transform managers into politicians who are looking for 'partners', soldiers into terrorists who perform charitable acts, and bankers into apostles who 'seek to re-establish the kingdom of God on earth' (in the words of Camdessus before his Holiness the Pope). Just as the new physics replaces the old determinism of mechanical systems, or the probabilistic determinism of quantum physics, with an analysis of multiple possible paths, so the new forms of capitalist repression-negotiation use these metaphors to design alternative scenarios. They try to follow those most functional for their ends, and to establish policies for dialogue and negotiation, as well as repression and stimuli, in which the workers appear to freely decide what the bosses want them to decide. This is a system of 'human' performance that is studied in depth by the philosophy of 'rational choice', where what is rational is to think and do what the dominant forces want one to choose, think and do. 'Technical progress', wrote Marcuse, 'occurs as political progress in domination; thus it is progress in the suppression of the alternatives'.¹⁰

The implication of thinking about negotiated contradictions in this context is that it helps us appreciate that the old determinist concepts prevalent in many pages of Marxism are useless for understanding the neoliberal globalization of capitalism, its origins and meaning. Today's negotiated class struggle, breaking with previous negotiations and pacts, involves the construction of subsystems for a worldwide negotiation in which the positions of the dominant corporate capital and the military industrial complexes that lead it are enhanced, and in which those of workers, nations, peoples and most citizens are further weakened. These and other features of neoliberal globalization are not only incomprehensible, but also unpredictable and invulnerable if one is unaware of how they have been restructured and have, in turn, restructured the world thanks to their strengthening through the techno-sciences. Not only the ideological, but the technological nature of the 'new sciences' ensures the maximization of utilities, the accumulation of property and the increase in the power of corporate capital and its 'partners', be they large or small.

After the defeat of social democracy, of revolutionary nationalism and communism, the new neoliberal expansion of capitalism came about under conditions which were far from given. In such circumstances, one cannot think in a linear fashion of the development of the empire, nor of the crisis of the empire, much less of the progressive development of democracy, of the struggle against poverty and extreme poverty, or the struggle for peace. Corporate capital gave up the idea of changing the world. It retains nothing Faustian, humanitarian, or religious, nothing about creating a society in which mankind is the measure of all things. Its civilizing project and its conception of progress are replaced by an ideology of negotiating those 'differences' that will maintain the inequalities

and contribute to its increasing domination. It renounces universalizing 'Western values' in favour of respecting differences — as long as they also increase inequities. 'Human rights' are reduced to subsystems in which they are systematically violated, and in which they are defended casuistically.¹¹

This predatory and mercantile philosophy invades politics, ethics, society, culture, as much as it can. It demands the privatization of conscience and rationalizes negotiation with moral values. It implements a culture and a policy of *negotiated plunder* of public, social and national property. It organizes the complicity of its 'partners' in the negotiated global pillage. With them, it carries out an exchange of matter and energy in which financial flows and foreign debt are the 'cement of a global power'. Associated armies and police and individuals belonging to the dominant military-industrial complex watch over the proper functioning of the process and use at will violence, bombings and invasions which are justified on 'humanitarian' grounds (and accompanied by the use of radioactive material that include calculated 'miscalculations'). The 'elites' of each country engage in a mockery of democracy with the *democracy of minorities*, which they and their abysmally cynical publicists present as admirable, amid the ailing conformism of citizen abstention, which they welcome. The dominant system controls its politicians by corrupting them, or denounces them if they disobey its orders or when they are no longer useful as mediators and controllers of the people. It implements state terrorism, corruption and drug trafficking, on a scale that goes beyond even the ability of a Chomsky to document fully. It spreads cooption through stimuli mixed with repression, and it combines this with the exclusion of scientists who are humanists, and moralists who would be revolutionaries, as well as delinquents and the poor.¹²

Everything this capitalism touches becomes merchandise, but it constantly generates new contradictions because it increasingly marginalizes more and more of humanity.¹³ Those who are marginalized not only include the four-fifths who only receive one-fifth of the income, but also a growing number of people who are dissatisfied and leaning toward the attractions of an alternative of democracy tempered with socialism. But the contradictions converge in unpredictable fashion, non-linearly. If we lived in a closed historical system, the end of capitalism would be nigh, and the alternative 'socialism or barbarism', or at least 'reform or revolution', would remain valid. But we do not live in such a system. The only alternative in the general interest, and that of the survival of humanity, appears to lie in the development of democratic forces capable of uniting while respecting a pluralism of ideas, and able to gain strength through organizations structured for struggle. This struggle will still involve negotiation, but of a kind in which militants would lose the fear of conflict, learn how to bring about and articulate unity without erasing diversity, and develop negotiating strategies that will cumulatively strengthen the position of the working classes. This will involve, above all, making market values secondary to the values of citizens and peoples. In this sense, even those still employing a historical materialist theory, must recall, dialectically, that the highest expression of the material lies in ethical

ideas, and that the incorporation of these into organizations of the exploited and oppressed is the necessary and historical creative link between ideal and material impulses.

The history of the class struggle is the history of both class repressions and negotiations. In capitalism, even struggle is negotiated, and, if the workers, the citizens and the peoples think like merchants who buy labour power, they *will morally or materially lose a struggle in which the casualties are not only physical*. It is not a matter of individual ethics, nor even of the ethics of a group, but of classes, citizens and peoples rebelling, negotiating and making a new politics in which negotiated conflict forces new concessions. In this struggle, revolutionaries will have to be more than 'good generals and bad economists'. They cannot be good generals if they are bad negotiators; and they cannot be good economists for the workers, citizens and peoples if they negotiate for their own — or their own specific groups' — profit and against the general interest (which unfortunately remains merely a 'catchphrase' even among progressive forces today). 'Man is the only little animal that will die for a symbol', said a great Caribbean leader, but that symbol must more than ever today truly represent the prediction-construction of a democratic, socialist and liberating future.

The road to the future forks into three main paths. One leads to the exhaustion of options, an entropy delayed only by techno-scientific 'fixes'. Another leads to the Mode of Production of Androids, or the World Animal Farm. But there is a third one which leads, through a negotiated liberation, to 'islands of growing negentropy'.¹⁴ It takes us in the direction of universal democracy, constituted in terms of a true pluralism of power, a truly representative and participatory democracy. This would be the only kind of democracy capable of achieving the predominance of a socialist mode of production in which budgets for the use of the surplus will be decided by democratic discussion and determination by the workers, the citizens and the peoples.¹⁵

Awareness of the importance of negotiations among contradictions, and of the contradictions in the negotiations, is a necessary starting point for the prediction-construction of another form of negotiation in a future social order that is classless, democratic and socialist. This is the challenge which critical techno-scientific thought and critical postmodern thought, as well as Marxism, must face today.

NOTES

- 1 Karl Marx, 'Letter to J. Wedermeyer', (March 5, 1952) in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Volume One, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969, p. 528.
- 2 István Mészáros, *L'alternativa alla società del capitale. Dal 'secolo americano' al bivio socialismo o barbarie*, Milano: Punto Rosso, 2000.
- 3 Samir Amin and Pablo González Casanova, eds., *Mondialisation et Accumulation*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993. See also Pablo González Casanova and John Saxe Fernández, eds., *The World Today*, in *Social Justice*, Vol. 23 (Spring/Summer), 1996.

- 4 Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings. Cybernetics and Society*, Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton, 1950.
- 5 Uri Merry, *Coping with Uncertainty. Insights from the New Sciences of Chaos, Self-Organization, and Complexity*, Westport: Praeger, 1995.
- 6 Jean Piaget, ed., *Logique de la connaissance scientifique. Encyclopédie de la Pléiade*, Vol. XXII, Paris: Gallimard, 1967; Immanuel Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of XIXth Century Paradigms*, New York: The New Press, 1991; Pablo González Casanova, 'Restructuring the Social Sciences: Toward a New Paradigm', in Roberto Briseño and Heinz R. Sonntag, eds., *Social Knowledge: Heritage, Challenges, Perspectives*, Sociology in Latin America, 1998, chapter 11. See also Göran Therborn ed., *Globalizations and Modernities. Experiences and Perspectives of Europe and Latin America*, Uppsala: Suecia, 1999, pp. 52-72.
- 7 Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *La Nouvelle Alliance. Métamorphose de la Science*, Paris: Gallimard, 1986; Ilya Prigogine, G. Nicolis and A. Babloyantz, 'Thermodynamics of Evolutions', *Physics Today*, 25 (11), 25 (12), 1972; Ilya Prigogine, *Etude Thermodynamique des phénomènes irréversibles*, Liege: Desoer, 1947.
- 8 Raymond A. Eve et al., eds., *Chaos, Complexity and Sociology. Myths, Models and Theories*, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997.
- 9 Negentropic processes are associated with greater organization, information and complexity. They reduce a positive measure of disorder called 'entropy' through 'self regulated systems'. Vid, Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, See also: Daniel F. Brooks and E. O. Wiley, *Evolution as Entropy Toward a Unified Theory of Biology*, Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- 10 Herbert Marcuse, 'Socialist Humanism' in Erich Fromm, ed., *Socialist Humanism*, New York: Garden City, 1965.
- 11 Ralph Miliband, *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.
- 12 Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1992. See also Noam Chomsky, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*, Boston: South End Press, 1993.
- 13 Michel Chossudovsky, *The Globalization of Poverty*, Penang: Third World Network, 1997; Pablo González Casanova, 'La Explotación Global', in M. Monereo and Pedro Chávez, eds., *Diversidad y Desigualdad*, Madrid: El Viejo Topo, 2000.
- 14 Cf. Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, p. 25.
- 15 Pablo González Casanova. 'The Third World and the Socialist Project Today' in William K. Tabb, ed., *The Future of Socialism. Perspectives From the Left*, New York: Monthly Review, 1990. See also Pablo González Casanova, 'Theory of the Rain Forest Against Neoliberalism and for Humanity', *Thesis Eleven*, 53, May 1998.