

# The Civil Society Plague

## The Middle Class and Its Discontents

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That economics and politics go hand in hand is an elementary fact. The logical consequence of this relation is that real politics must be fundamentally economic: the market economy has its corresponding market politics. The forces that direct the world market also exercise *de facto* control over the States, with regard to both foreign and domestic policies, and this same control is also exercised at the local as well as the national level. This is how it is: economic growth is the necessary and sufficient condition for the political stability of capitalism. Within capitalism, the party system evolves in accordance with the pace of development. When development is in high gear, politics tends to take the form of a two-party system. When development falters the political panorama diversifies, as if in compliance with a homeostatic mechanism.

Capital, which is a social relation originally based on the exploitation of labor, has appropriated all human activities and invaded every sphere: culture, science, art, everyday life, leisure, politics.... The fact that every nook and cranny of society has been commodified means that all aspects of life itself function in accordance with mercantile standards, or, which amounts to the same thing, it means that they are ruled by the logic of capitalism. In a market-society with such features there are no classes in the classic meaning of the word (separate worlds in confrontation), but rather an undifferentiated and malleable mass in which the class of capital – the bourgeoisie – is no longer clearly demarcated, while its ideology has become generalized and its values have come to regulate all behavior regardless of class differences. This particular form of blurring the boundaries between the classes does not reflect a diminution of social inequality; quite the contrary, social inequality is much more accentuated, but, paradoxically, it is perceived less distinctly, and, as a result, there is less real combativity. The bourgeois way of life has penetrated the non-bourgeois classes, liquidating the desire for radical change. Wage workers do not want any other lifestyle, or any other kind of society, or, at most, they want a better position within the existing society, i.e., more purchasing power. Violent antagonism is relocated to the margins: the greatest contradiction is now rooted in exclusion more than in exploitation. The main actors in the historical and social drama are no longer those who are exploited on the market, but those who have been expelled, or have chosen to separate themselves, from the market: those who are situated outside of the “system” and who tend to act in ways detrimental to it.

Mass society is a standardized, but tremendously hierarchical, society. Its commanding heights are not staffed by a class of owners or rentiers, but rather by executives who constitute a ver-

itable managerial class. Power therefore derives from one's function, not from one's possessions. Decision-making is concentrated in the highest echelon of the social hierarchy; oppression, mainly in the form of precarious employment and exclusion, wreaks its havoc in the lowest part of the social hierarchy. The intermediate layers neither feel the sting of oppression nor do they concern themselves with it, they just acquiesce. During periods of economic crisis, however, the phenomenon of oppression ascends the social scale towards them, dragging them downwards. These strata, usually called the middle classes, then awaken from their apathetic condition, upon which the party system was based, contaminate the social movements and engage in political initiatives which take the form of new alliances and parties. Their goal is obviously not the emancipation of the proletariat, or a free society of free producers; in a word, their goal is not socialism. Their objective is much more prosaic, because the only thing that they seek to achieve is to save the middle class, that is, to save it from being proletarianized.

The geographic and social expansion of capitalism entails the expansion of sectors of wage workers linked to the rationalization of the production process, the development of the tertiary sector in the economy, the professionalization of public life and statist bureaucratization: government officials, consultants, experts, technicians, white collar managerial staff, journalists, members of the liberal professions, etc. Their status is derived from their academic training, not from their ownership of the means of labor. Classic social democracy perceived these new "middle classes" as a stabilizing factor that made possible a moderate reformist politics, and, of course, their further development allowed the process of globalization to be maximized without too many difficulties. The exponential growth in the number of students was the most eloquent sign of their prosperity; unemployment among college graduates, on the other hand, has marked the devaluation of their training and therefore has served as an indicator of their abrupt proletarianization. Their response, of course, does not adopt anti-capitalist characteristics, which are completely foreign to their nature, but is embodied in a moderate revision of the political scene combined with a fervid attachment to the social democratic reformism of the past.

The middle class finds itself at the heart of modern false consciousness and does not contemplate its own specific condition as such; in its view, its condition is universal. It sees everything through its own particular lens, exacerbated by the crisis. With regard to its mentality, everyone is middle class and must express themselves in the prefabricated language that has been provided to them by their thinkers (Negri, Gramsci, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Baudrillard, Mouffe, etc.). As for its politics, everyone is a citizen, that is, a member of a community of voters, and everyone must enthusiastically participate in elections and in the technical machinery to mobilize voter participation: postmodern ideological cretinism, on the one hand, and technologically-equipped parliamentary cretinism, on the other. Its worldview prevents its supporters from understanding social conflicts as class struggles; for them, such conflicts arise from the incorrect distribution of assets, a problem whose solution lies in the hands of the State, and therefore depends on the political hegemony of the political formations that best represent the middle class. The middle class reconstructs its political identity in opposition, not to capitalism, but to the "caste", that is, to the political oligarchy that has made the State its own patrimony. The other corrupt sectors, bankers, real estate developers and trade union leaders, are relegated to a secondary level. The middle class is the fearful class; it is set in motion by fear; ambition or vanity appear alongside confidence and tranquility. Its class enthusiasm is completely exhausted in parliamentarism; the electoral conflict is the only battle that it thinks of waging, since there is no place in its plans for

a frontal confrontation with the source of its fears, power, and its highest priority is to restore its pre-2008 status.

The concept of “citizenship” offers a substitute identity wherever working class community has been destroyed by capital. Citizenship is the quality of the citizen, a being with the right to vote whose enemies are apparently neither capital nor the State, but the old majority parties, the major obstacles standing in the way of the desperately beleaguered middle class’s march on the institutions of the State. The ideology of civil society, which is the ideology of a middle class that has been mistreated by the global market, is not, however, merely a variation of Stalinoid workerism; it is instead the postmodern version of bourgeois radicalism, and therefore the vanguard of social regression. Not even for the benefit of its public image does it recognize itself in anti-capitalism, which it considers to be obsolete, but instead it embraces a more or less populist kind of social liberalism. This is because the crux of civil society ideology is the decline of the middle classes and their real aspirations, however much it may avail itself of the support of the masses who are at risk of exclusion, but who are too disoriented to act autonomously, and of the social movements which are too weak to impose a reorganization of civil society outside of the economy and the State. In this sense, civil society ideology, which is the successor and heir of the failed neo-Stalinism of the IU, MC, and IC type,<sup>1</sup> perseveres despite its frustrated desires for leadership and its inferiority complexes, although it preserves certain authoritarian eccentricities of its own and uses one or another symbol for purposes of establishing an identity. The civil society program is a program of parvenus: it is extremely flexible. Principles do not matter; its strategy is consciously opportunist, because, despite the fact that it makes use of almost every unemployed political adventurer, its ranks are generally composed of careerists who are new on the political scene and who propose only short-term objectives.

No civil society program will call for the socialization of the means of life, generalized self-management, the suppression of the political specialization, council administration, communal ownership or the balanced distribution of the population on the territory. The civil society parties and alliances simply call for a redistribution of “wealth” that would expand the mesocratic base, that is, they agitate for certain institutional budgetary allocations that would mitigate the precariousness of labor and absorb into the workforce the majority of unemployed college graduates, intentions which by no means threaten to bring about a break with the past. They do not even enter the political arena as enemies; their talk about changing the 1978 constitution is not sincere. They have not yet set foot in the ring and yet they still display realism and moderation in abundance, building bridges to the reviled “caste” and even making deals with some of its parties. They are aware of the fact that, once they are consolidated as organizations and possess enough influence in the media, the next step will be the management of the existing system in a more clear and effective way than it was previously managed. They do not subscribe to any destabilizing measures because the leaders of the civil society movement must show that the economy will develop more smoothly if they are the ones at the helm of the ship of state. They must perforce present themselves as the hope of salvation for the economy, which is why their project identifies progress with productivity, that is, it is developmentalist. They therefore advocate industrial and technological growth that will create jobs, redistribute income and increase exports, whether this is to be achieved by way of reforms of the tax system, or by the inten-

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<sup>1</sup> IU: *Izquierda Unida*—United Left—founded in 1986. MC: *Movimiento Comunista*—Communist Movement—founded in 1971. IC: *Iniciativa per Catalunya*—Initiative for Catalonia—founded in 1987 [Translator’s note].

sive exploitation of territorial resources. The least that can be said of these proposals is that the jobs that they would create will be socially useless and will not respond to real needs. Economic realism is in command and complements their political realism: nothing outside of politics and nothing outside of the market—everything for the market.

The relative upsurge of the civil society movement, including its nationalist variants, is indicative of the relative exacerbation of the economic crisis which, far from deepening the social divide and laying bare the causes of oppression and leading to a conscious and organized protest movement that calls for the destruction of the capitalist regime, has instead resulted in their dissimulation and concealment, allowing for the emergence and development of a false opposition that, far from challenging the system of domination, reinforces and supports it: a crisis that has stopped halfway. Nonetheless, social oppression and alienation are profound, and over the long term they cannot be camouflaged as questions of politics, but will end up arising as social questions. The outburst of the social question will depend on the return of the real social struggle, a struggle which is foreign to the media and politics, a struggle saturated with initiatives born among the most uprooted sectors of the masses, the ones that have little to lose if they decide to cut the bonds that tie them to the cart of the middle class and if they cast aside bourgeois prejudices against nature. Today, however, these potentially anti-system sectors seem to be exhausted and incapable of organizing themselves autonomously, and that is why the civil society movement is running rampant in their ranks, gently knocking on the door of the existing institutions and asking for permission to enter.

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