

The Golden Mediocrity

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*You'll live more virtuously, my Murena,
by not setting out to sea, while you're in dread
of the storm, or hugging fatal shores
too closely, either.*

Horace, *Odes*, Book 2

Capitalist society is a society of hierarchically stratified masses. If there is one thing that distinguishes today's masses from classes, it is the fact that masses detest action, and always prefer that others should act in their stead, while they devote themselves to their private affairs. Someone even went so far as to say that masses do not want revolution, but the spectacle of revolution; now, however, even the spectacle of revolution is not to their taste. Onstage, the masses like to show off rather than communicate, but their feeling of insecurity is so great and their fear of losing what they have is so intense, that the director must be very sparing with the play's dramatic development and must emphasize the music instead. Or, to speak plainly: the play must walk on eggshells and give the impression that everything will go swimmingly in a happy world that is shielded from danger, with peace, tranquility and no pay cuts. Outside of the spectacle, struggles can be anything but massive, while the few that violate the rules of the game and sound a violent note will be regularly condemned as provocations harmful to the participative regime, the alleged guarantor of "well being" and "democracy", the two mainstays of the easy-going postmodern condition.

The proletarianization of the world, that is, the renewal of capitalism at all levels after the defeat of the last workers movement—to which we must add its fusion with the State and the media—made possible a considerable degree of economic and administrative growth, creating an environment of bureaucratic-commercial prosperity favorable for the optimal development of an intermediate salaried stratum. The latter was not a real class, a world apart by virtue of its own particular ideology, its own customs and its own values, but an agglomeration of diverse fragments lacking any solid nexus, yet its members were satisfied, politically indifferent and obedient, feeling that they were well-represented by a careerist political class deeply embedded in public affairs. The rationalization of production, the predominance of finance and the expansion of the state apparatus provided the system with a sufficient social base, the market with a considerable number of consumers, and the universities with a numerous contingent of students. Its social

base was composed of civil servants, white collar employees, politicians, professionals, experts and so on, individuals whose status depended on academic training with a price tag on the labor market that was higher than the price of conventional labor power.

This whole “cognitariat” was so closely bound to the established order that it identified its fate with the preservation of that order. In the past, classical German social democracy perceived such emerging sectors, which it called “middle classes”, as a factor of stability; a sort of shield against the blows of the class struggle. In fact, the mentality of this motley sort of bourgeoisie that wore two hats, so to speak, was quite variable, but for the most part it was closer to that of the haute bourgeoisie than it was to that of the proletariat, and, as history was to reveal, in extreme conditions its attachment to the State led it to be more in favor of dictatorship than revolution. A half century after the Second World War, the historical situation had changed significantly and the liberal application of credit seemed to ensure the absolute victory of the economy and of professional politics. It is therefore not at all surprising that social activism ever since the end of the 1980s has taken place in an environment characterized by total passivity, an absence of dissent and an almost total conformism. Society was in the grips of a widespread feeling that confronting power was impossible, because the wage-earning majority had faith in the management of the party *du jour* and believed what the television told it, feeling quite comfortable in a private life colonized by the commodity and replete with gadgets. Revolution was little more than a dream and the partiocracy appeared to be the least evil of all political regimes, and besides, it was always subject to improvement. Few were those who believed that revolution was necessary, and its advent became an article of faith derived from ideological convictions similar to those of religion. The anti-system struggle was sidelined and the scarce conflicts that broke the surface after the capitalist unification of the world always ignored modernized misery and relied on the mediation of institutions and the media spectacle.

The proletarian defeat foreclosed the perspectives for class struggle in the seventies and eighties, and led to a theoretical disarmament of subversion that would prove to be long-lasting. In opposition to the revolutionary social critique, immersed in paralyzing contradictions that we shall not address here, a submissive and weak structure of thought was erected that, with an ostentatious pseudo-critique, condemned all radical change as impossible and, furthermore, as undesirable. For this way of thinking, every revolution conceals a totalitarian project. Thus, for this brand of servile thought, Marx and Bakunin were the founding fathers of revolutionary fundamentalism. The vulgar, pragmatic and Third-Worldist Marxism that the revolutionary critique had denounced, would no longer be used as a toolbox for this reactionary philosophical trend. For the intellectual comfort of the enlightened middle classes, something less sacerdotal and more adapted to the euphoric triumphalism of the dominant powers was needed. Social disintegration, frivolity, consumerist hedonism, ephemeral commitments, identitarianism and short-sighted incrementalism, everyday features typical of the new capitalism, were turned into individual virtues that were to be preserved for the benefit of an alleged “freedom” that was actually trivial, and was to be administered by the State. The idea of Progress, the guiding principle of the ruling classes, could be abandoned without regrets by dissolving it in the exigencies of the eternal present. Postmodern philosophy perfected *cum laude* the task begun by Stalinist Marxism, a cold and lifeless ideology. This mother lode even produced ore for the mills of pseudo-extremism: a tremendously reactionary post-anarchism arose from the marriage of individualism and post-structuralism. The thought of power was academically reinvented with critical fragments scavenged from the class war, beating a dead horse and “thematizing” the new world order by way of a

self-referential jargon particularly adapted to an ambivalent and relativist worldview. Words like “deconstruction”, “episteme”, “drive”, “simulacrum”, “counter-power”, “rhizome”, “schizo”, “meta-relation”, “heterotopia”, “biopolitics”, etc., allowed its proponents to both swim in the current of protest and to use the existing institutions as a changing room, combining disenchantment with the real revolution with the prestige of an apparent break from the norm. Coldly and with stoic resolve, academic reflection rid itself of concepts like “truth”, “ideology”, “class”, “totality”, “subject”, “reason”, “alienation”, “universality”, “memory”, “spectacle”, etc., which were notions that corresponded to what it called “modernity”, and culminated on the terrain of ideas in the social counterrevolution that then led to the current mass society. Henceforth, the dominant ideas were patently the ideas that were useful to domination.

This did not prevent contradictions from arising, however, as they spread from one sphere to another on a planetary scale. As a result, an ersatz class consciousness crystallized around a new abstract political subject, one that would take the world by storm, which the sociologists of postmodernity called the “citizenry”, and which others would later christen as the “multitude”, or simply as the “people”. In the mesocratic conception of the world, the State was ideally separated from Capital by means of a mental operation that drew from its sociological hat the “citizen”, a subject external to the economy, with the right to vote and to be represented by a political class. Likewise, the Present was set up as absolute reality and the most coarse and opportunistic pragmatism was treated as a sign of the greatest political intelligence. Emancipatory ideals, insofar as they derived from old-fashioned grand narratives and insofar as they referred to the future, would no longer serve as guides for action, because the allegedly “libidinal” voting subject was alien to any social problem that could not *ipso facto* be translated into political terms and thus become the responsibility of licensed professionals. The civil society boosters were characterized by their firm belief that economic and social problems are actually political problems and must be addressed by way of elections. This is why they worshipped the State; they comprise the party of the State. And they are therefore opposed to any really autonomous movement: their pacifist, another-world-is-possible, and naively optimistic [*buenrollista*] initiatives, from their beginnings in Seattle and Genoa, were never intended to marginalize the parties or to put an end to capitalism, but to suggest new strategies and to call attention to new perspectives that were more in accordance with the specific interests of the class to which they belonged. “Another” capitalism was possible, just like another politics, and this is why they did not propose to bypass the existing institutions, but to work within them. A capitalism with the middle classes intact.

Finally, however, the bursting of the credit bubble not only brought the long period of continuous economic development to an abrupt end, but also threatened to take various States down with it. Budget cuts proliferated and unemployment, precarious jobs, and exclusion spread like wildfire, but among the most drastically affected layers of the population there was hardly any reaction. Public assistance, trade union and police controls worked effectively. The new damage-control measures implemented in response to the crisis, however, were also seriously deleterious for the salaried middle classes, which were major losers in the budget cuts and were furthermore burdened with significant debt. Unemployment hounded their footsteps, especially among recent college graduates, highlighting their special vulnerability to the wild swings of the economy, while government toleration of corruption and waste, as well as the bank bailout, aroused their indignation. Tired of fruitlessly petitioning the political class, some of them no longer felt that they were represented by that class. On May 15, 2011, the enraged youth poured into the streets and proclaimed their rejection of the big government parties, which they claimed were respon-

sible for the “low quality” of “democracy”. This wave of discontent, manifested by way of social networks, the “civil society movements” and the “occupation” of public squares, persisted, for the most part, in seeking the least risky solution, that is, reform of the electoral process, which its supporters called “real democracy”, rather than the end of parliamentarism. At the same time, the movement for regional independence won majority support in Catalonia for similar reasons. The civil society movement and nationalism were the first political responses of a portion of the population that had previously remained on the sidelines as spectators. The lumpenbourgeoisie reconstituted its political identity along with a kind of class consciousness, but not in opposition to capitalism, but to “the caste”, or, in the case of Catalonia, to “Madrid”, that is, some directed their opposition against the corrupt political oligarchy that had made the State its patrimony, and others directed their opposition directly against the central State itself, which they accused of keeping most of the taxes it collected from Catalonia. The ineffectiveness of exclusively symbolic demonstrations and the fascistic authoritarianism of the government drove the salaried middle classes to proceed beyond strategies limited to putting pressure on their political representatives, convinced that, in order to restore their pre-2008 status, they must oust the corrupt right-wing elements entrenched in the established institutions or even proclaim the “Catalonian Republic”, to install either a new social democracy or a moderate separatism. The middle classes wanted to be bailed out and rescued from proletarianization by a State, but given its present form, and given the collapse of the traditional parties, their salvation could only be brought by other parties and other, more resolute, alliances. The task that had to be accomplished was clearly laid out: to galvanize the students and the young people who were struggling to live on part-time and temporary jobs, along with the wage-earning masses and dissatisfied elements of the bourgeoisie, and align them all behind an electoral slate. As is to be expected in a spectacular society, the communications media facilitated this operation with much greater efficacy than the squalid “social movements”. In the 2014 elections for the European Parliament the new representatives of the salaried lumpenbourgeoisie, almost all of them former college students, occupied center stage on the political scene for the first time. In the regional and municipal elections of May 2015, the political scene was seriously transformed.

Those in the middle claimed to fight on behalf of those below them and those above them. The civil society-oriented middle class seized the initiative, but not as a universal class that was capable of representing the common interests of all the exploited classes. Its ambiguous stance, that was neither fish nor fowl, and was derived from its position in the economic process, allowed it full freedom of maneuver, although this same freedom was not granted to the radicals. This is easy to explain: the goal was to occupy political spaces, not to solve social problems. “The Social Democracy of the 21st Century” and other civil society tendencies were incapable of thinking about any other interests than their own, and therefore they had to limit themselves to seeking to change rulers rather than the rules of the game; nor did they seek to bring an end to oppression, but rather to restore the previous, more buoyant material conditions of the “citizenry”, that is, their own conditions. This peculiar “democratization” of politics had the virtue of exhuming Stalinist cadavers like the IU and the ICV. It did not lead to the institutionalization of the “movements” by way of mechanisms of “citizens’ participation”; it simply explored the terrain, co-opted its leading figures and integrated or prevented protests. There was no better way to clear the streets than an electoral campaign. The popular opposition, too weak and confused to devote itself to an alternative project, succumbed to the conservative reflections of the middle classes and allowed itself to be led by them. It hardly needs to be pointed out that the

autonomy of the oppressed masses was not reinforced by the partial victories of the civil society movement, or that the cause of social justice was not furthered. To the contrary, the presence of this new kind of politician was the decisive factor, alongside other more visible elements, in the stabilization of the participatory caste, and conferred upon the latter an extra dose of legitimacy. The established order, far from having been weakened thanks to the exaltation of a permanent participatory assembly movement, has recovered its strength by arousing in its lost social base the expectations of a shared management of public expenditures and of a moderate change implemented by parliaments and municipal councils. In the meantime, the new politicians expend all their enthusiasm in post-election alliances, attempting to unite wherever possible the interests of the salaried middle classes with the administrative bureaucracy and with the “green sprouts” of the economy—especially in tourism, the new vanguard of the economy—because it is the latter factors that make the greatest contribution to capital formation and, to a lesser degree, to the creation of jobs.

Politics is not a sphere that is separate from economic activity or from the mass media, a sphere from which one can correct social problems thanks to the intervention of a specialized elite of leaders who rely on generalized passivity. Politics is that same spectacular economy camouflaged as social action. It is therefore not a neutral means, an empty form that can be filled with any content, but the specific form that, in capitalist society, imposes market relations on the public. The political liberty guaranteed to the “democratized” institutions in the offices corresponds in the final reckoning to the free market. Its purpose is not to establish direct connections between individuals, but to subject individuals to an external power, that of capital/state. Today’s new and improved participatory has not changed its nature; at most, it has become more theatrical and is trying harder to play up to the crowd. It must preserve the obsolete class remnants of the previous capitalist period without altering the general progress of the world-economy, something that is hard to do without considerable growth, which the end of the cycle of economic development renders highly unlikely. The hypothesized extractive cycle based on the “sustainable” destruction of the territory has not proceeded here at the speed that has characterized its progress in Latin America, and the European situation is still deadlocked, with the civil society masses awaiting the next elections. If the crises and struggles that will ensue as a result do not lead to disruptions that result in a Failed State and, consequently, in the total collapse of the participatory, the movements of the salaried middle class, that is, those associated with the civil society movement and regional nationalism, their political expressions, will block any autonomous manifestation of a revolutionary subject, or, to put it another way, they will prevent the appearance of a truly assembly-based democracy that will fight against capitalism for an egalitarian social transformation of society. Anti-capitalist protests must become more widespread and must become powerful enough to render the institutional path unviable if they really want to abolish classes and collectively construct a self-governing, ecologically balanced, non-patriarchal, just society based on solidarity. The framework of the civil society movement must be shattered.

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