

The Trauma of Curtailing Economic Growth

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Contents

A society of pulverized classes that exists as the object of capital	3
The main crisis is the crisis of class consciousness	4
No way out	5
The state is the apparatus of mediation between capital as a whole and individual capitals	6
The destruction and reconstruction of the planet form part of the capitalist valorization process	7
Anti-capitalist violence or the destruction of the human species	8

“Frequently, we are overwhelmed by an impression, until we are free to reflect, and this rapid and changeable meditation, in its agility, penetrates the intimate mystery of the unknown.” (Kierkegaard, *The Diary of a Seducer*)

Irrationality rules the world. Individuals relate to one another by way of things that impose their rules from outside them: commodities, money, technology.... In the society to which they belong their labor serves to produce increasing profits for particular individuals, not to satisfy real collective needs, so that they seem to be ruled by a concrete type of economic activity: a market economy whose metastases deplete natural resources, exacerbate social inequalities and destroy the planet. The gulf between the world as it currently exists and the world as it should be is total and the promise of the future deserves nothing but contempt. The rule of reason points backward, to a golden age; thus, previous forms of society and the state are dusted off and hauled out of the attic as less unjust and irrational solutions and become fashionable. Some propose a return to pre-urban stages of civilization (primitivists); others, a return to the nation-state and the capitalist conditions of the postwar era (the civil society movement); finally, others, by way of organic farming, “fair trade” and “ethical banking”, want to return to the earliest stage of capitalism, that in which use value was separate from exchange value, and concrete labor was separate from abstract labor (the back to the land movement).

A society of pulverized classes that exists as the object of capital

The developmentalist or Fordist stage of capitalism produced phenomena of *déclassement* among the workers that were accentuated with the productive restructuring that brought an end to that stage; globalization did the same thing to the middle classes, after throwing them into the pit of credit. The subsequent generation of the proletariat and the mesocracy are horrified by the threat of exclusion, the fate of those whom the economy no longer needs due to its high productivity and its intensive exploitation of the workers in the “emerging” countries. However, the will to reorganize society according to different norms, the desire for a change in the ways of thinking, production and consumption that is today sporadically manifested in the so-called “social movements”, does not have an impact on proletarian action. The working class has lost its memory and along with its memory it has also lost its customs and its existence. The initiative has shifted to the *déclassé* petty bourgeois elements, to the students, office employees, government employees and, in general, the social groups in the process of proletarianization, the losers in the game of globalization. The concealment of the class struggle that is the product of the defeat of the working class, together with the patent evidence of the environmental crisis, allows these elements to present themselves as the representatives of the general interest, manufacturing for the occasion a thought recuperated from critical fragments of the fruits of the real struggles of the past. They concoct an ideology, a stew of ideas that are completely disconnected from any action as well as from their real origins, which reflects the idiosyncratic position of these losers, with one foot in one world and the other in another world, a position characterized by the rejection of class struggle, the rejection of revolutionary methods, faith in the existing institutions and indifference towards history, details which confer a new style on their protest that is diametrically opposed to that of the old class struggle. For these losers capitalism is not a system in which individuals relate to one another by way of things and survive by submitting to labor, enslaved by consumption and indebtedness, a situation that arose

at a particular moment and can disappear at another moment; the system as they understand it is not based on a particular social relation based on private property in the means of production, but is “a creation of the mind”, a mental state whose “imaginary” must be decolonized by means of spiritual exercises. It is therefore necessary to avoid traumatic situations: forget about storming the Bastilles or assaulting the Winter Palaces; we should instead immerse ourselves in “relational” milieus where tranquil and amiable psychological conditions prevail, which some have defined as “feminine”. At the pole opposite from May '68, confrontations with the police no longer stimulate one's desire for making love, nor does one find the beach that lies beneath the paving stones. The barricade does not show the way forward. All of that stuff is for tough guys, a way of being too “masculine”. The “convivial” way does not seek confrontation because it does not recognize enemies; it is based on disrupting people's attitudes—which are not, of course, constructed by history, but are only stuffed full of the “imaginary”—not with the labor of negation, but with the good vibes of the evangelist.

The main crisis is the crisis of class consciousness

According to mesocratic idealism, the world is irrational and unjust because it has not been governed correctly, because humanity has not been provided with a definitive truth, or else because it has not been exposed to a “natural law” such as, for example, that of the anti-growth movement, which is so simply condensed into Latouche's eight “mistakes”. The violent antagonism between the classes appears to have been pacified and semi-dissolved in multiple minor oppositions: consumerism vs. frugality, squandering vs. eco-efficiency, global vs. local, waste vs. recycling, industrial food vs. self-sufficiency, the private car vs. the bicycle, growth vs. anti-growth, yang vs. yin. The passage from the former to the latter must be made with simplicity and without traumas; the new order will be implanted far from the masses, gradually and from the outside, by way of pedagogy and example, thanks to austere marginal experiences and fiscal reforms. The anti-growth movement is for its followers the “truest” truth, which is why it will be sufficient to apply it in small doses and to “articulate it politically” so that its virtue will conquer the world. As an absolute truth it is subject to neither space nor time; it is not seen as a historical product gestating in previous stages of the capitalist crisis, responding to a determinate development of social classes and their conflicts. Memory, however, clarifies for us the meaning of the anti-growth adventure in search of the idealized reign of the declining middle class. To begin with, the anti-growth movement has nothing new to contribute. It is a mixture of bio-economics, indigenous ideology and the civil society movement. From the first it derives its economic principles; from the second, its social principle, “conviviality”; from the third, its political principle. Anti-growth is, of course, an idea open to a wide array of experiences and currents; Enric Duran and the anarchosindicalists are not the same thing as Attac, the post-Stalinists and the NGO crowd. However, precisely due to the fact that it did not arise from a concrete social praxis but rather from a clique of experts and professors—something that is made all the more apparent by its ideological nature—the remedy of curtailing economic growth is an all-purpose panacea. The most perspicacious among its devotees are inspired by the self-organization of the marginal neighborhoods of the conurbations of the Third World such as La Paz, Oaxaca and Niamey, but there are those who point to Cuba as an example of what it means to survive “within the parameters of sustainability”. With a model like that it is not surprising that the anti-growth movement,

by opting for “the world of the communist parties”, a parasitic world par excellence, thus highlights one of its most suspect features, something that pleases Carlos Taibo and Fernández Buey. In a convivial atmosphere, the more convivial we are, the more we will laugh: the anti-growth movement is just as compatible with the eclectic and positivist Marxism of the universities as it is with liberation theology or libertarian municipalism. Anyone can interpret it according to their tastes, putting the accent on some ideas and discarding others, giving it a particular cast or passing it through a filter, without thereby being able to conceal its reactionary function as the false consciousness of the reality of certain classes that have gone to pieces.

No way out

All the supporters of the anti-growth movement speak of leaving the economy, although the way they propose to accomplish this does not pass through the stage of a revolution, not even through an economic disaster. But they still want it to pass for a way out. For them, the destruction of capitalism is not the precondition of change. Capitalism must be “civilized”, it must pass through the door, rather than being dispensed with, with the indispensable aid of automation and the internet, “convivial” tools that “attack the reign of the commodity” (Gorz) and help us to create “convivial and thrifty autonomous spaces” replete with “relational goods”, thanks to whose attractiveness our imagination will be decolonized. It is therefore not a matter of replacing one system with another, much less of doing so by means of violence, but of creating a good system within an evil system, which will coexist with it. When the proponents of the anti-growth movement speak of a way out of capitalism, they are usually referring to a way out of the “capitalist imaginary”. A change of mentality, not a change of system. Furthermore, they think that a change of system, which entails the destruction of bourgeois democracy, the socialization of production, the elimination of the market, the abolition of the wage system and the disappearance of money, would engender “chaos”, which is “unsustainable” and in addition would have the defect of not putting an end to the “ruling imaginary”. We are a long way from taking the road towards what in other times was called socialism or communism. What they seek is simpler: they want to put capitalism on a diet. There cannot be the least doubt that its leaders, encouraged by the success of a “solidarity economy” to which the state transferred sufficient means and, forced by the depletion of resources and the scarcity of cheap energy, will be convinced of the need to enter “into a socio-ecological transition towards reduced use of raw materials and energy” (Martínez Alier). The millions of unemployed persons who will be created by this transition will have to pack up their computers and march off to the countryside, as the designees to participate in an infinite number of “new activities”, a measure that will follow from an “ambitious program of redistribution” including a “basic guaranteed income” (Taibo), which will only be within the capabilities of state institutions. As an attempt to find a way out of capitalism without abolishing it, once it has to discuss action and proposes to enter onto the terrain of deeds, the anti-growth movement converges with the old, abandoned social democratic project of abolishing capitalism without ever actually leaving it behind. If an abrupt end to capitalism is a form of “traumatic curtailment of economic growth” that is inconsistent with a “sustainable curtailment of economic growth” (Cheynet), what would they say about putting an end to politics? Even if there is no other politics besides the one that perpetuates the course followed by the economy and therefore that of economic growth, they cannot conceive of any other way of “implement-

ing” the measures that are necessary to deal with an “egalitarian transition to sustainability” than that of “recovering prominence as political communities” (Mosangini), for example, by way of “a programmatic proposal for the elections” (Jaime Pastor). Thus, the anti-growth movement can question the economic system that they have renounced any intention to destroy, but they can never question its political byproducts, the parties, parliamentarism and the state, convivial and spiritual instruments wherever they exist. Although at home they are always talking about “recovering spaces for self-management”, when they leave home they demand the creation of “participative democracy”, that is, the surveillance and counsel of institutions and corporations with regard to urbanization and infrastructure, in order to exorcise the specter of radical protests in defense of territory.

The state is the apparatus of mediation between capital as a whole and individual capitals

From the civil society movement, the ideology of curtailing economic growth retains intact the panic-stricken fear of conflict, the love for new technologies and support for the “democratic” state. The civil society movement previously followed the statist path in its demands for financial taxes and regulation. In the countries that are called democratic because they conceal their totalitarianism, an alleged subject emerges from the ruins of the proletariat: the “citizenry”. The latter is the disguise used by the lumpenbourgeoisie to present the social question not as a response to the practices of a ruling class that owns the world, but as a problem of taxes and civil rights, effectively obstructed or curtailed by emergency laws necessary for the functioning of the economy, which is gradually becoming a war economy. Citizens’ action would not consist in abolishing class differences, equalizing the pay of officials, questioning the existence of hierarchies, or even less in demanding a generalized expropriation; it would consist simply in “re-politicizing the public sphere and reminding consumers that they are first of all citizens” (Jorge Reichman). To emphatically assert that another capitalism is possible, and to petition the state like good voters for new laws that would guarantee the rights that were violated and a new tax system that would repair the damage done to society and the environment. For the civil society movement, neither politics nor the state has a class character nor is either part of the mechanism of exploitation; they are neutral spaces that can be placed at the service of common interests in such a way that they can be controlled by watchdog agencies and monitoring commissions. Against this fixed conviction, the disturbances and commotions that accompany popular mobilizations are not arguments “that weigh in the scales of debate” and must be condemned in favor of peaceful and festive demonstrations, dialogue with power and elections.

Despite their differences, there is no major contradiction between the civil society ideology and that of the anti-growth movement, but rather a logical continuity. Both are expressions of the mentality of the middle classes in two distinct stages of capitalism. The civil society movement corresponds to a period of expansion, where there was speculation for everyone. The civil society-oriented middle classes did not bite the hand that fed them money; this is why they were optimistic and opposed to attacking an economy that seemed to be working; it was only a question of making it more ethical with institutional regulations and controls that would preferentially be in the hands of the “real left”. They did not want to modify the political system, but only rejuvenate the contents of its political programs; they wanted to put the party of the

state back together again. They refused to form a separate party in order to make these goals more precise; they watered-down their Keynesianism and instead of being “against globalization” they were in favor of “a different kind of globalization”. Meanwhile, the only thing whose rate of growth was in decline was social consciousness. When the horizon darkened, the series of financial, stock market and real estate crises that resulted from the expanding bubble of the economy entailed disastrous consequences for the “citizenry”, deep in debt and with its imagination focused on a second home and vacations in Cancún. For the first time in many years there was a negative growth rate, but one that took the form of an economic recession, rather than that of a liberated imaginary. The fracture precipitated by the crisis did not affect only those who always pay the price of such things but also affected their employers, whose sources of credit also dried up. The markets of the excluded and indebted shot through the roof. The fear of situations like the Argentinian “playpen” became palpable. The return of a strong state that would patch the holes with money and create jobs was offered as a solution. The discourse of climate change put the horrors of nuclear energy in the shade. “Peak” oil set in motion the renewable energy industry. The ruling class itself had to reconsider the Keynesian “alternative” and green industry, the only possible avenues for immediate economic growth. Capitalism took a serious turn towards “sustainable” development, supported by an ecological movement that renounced challenging capitalism, and thus an ecological movement that was ecologically ineffective. A change of such magnitude with regard to the capitalist paradigm, or more precisely, an ecological state of emergency, the first chapter of a war economy, entailed important alterations in production, consumption and lifestyles, changes that affected the losing classes. The moment had arrived for a parting of ways with one particular kind of capitalism and to allow oneself the luxury of declaring one’s opposition to capitalism.

The destruction and reconstruction of the planet form part of the capitalist valorization process

Confronted by a ruined middle class, millions of unemployed and a truly disturbing economic outlook, the civil society project was ridiculously tepid. Capitalism stole its thunder by advocating a green state within a green economy. Ecological catastrophism had found adoptive parents in the highest levels of the state, enriching the language of the latter. Leaders reappeared who were supporters of imposing limits and even, over the long term, of moving towards a capitalism without growth, such as was recommended almost forty years ago by the experts of the Club of Rome. The anti-growth milieu received a flood of supporters who wanted to drive the movement forward: hence the pressure to abandon the debate among experts (in order to “exercise the citizenry”) and individualism (or “curtailment of economic growth in one village”), whether by creating a political party or in its absence a “movement”, or by proposing new institutions and occupations. For the present, the new horizons of the economy and of politics do not converge with “the reformist transition program” of the anti-growth movement, which is still in diapers, but they are undoubtedly beginning to come closer in their positions. The capitalist leaders are aware of the fact that incorporating criteria of sustainability into economic management is the best guarantee for the survival of business. The goals of an employers’ program called “Corporate Social Responsibility” are “to integrate economic, social and environmental features in employers’ activities and to include them in their strategy”. You would think you were read-

ing *Le Monde Diplomatique*. On the other hand, decision making is beginning to migrate back towards the sphere of the state, as the latter is to some extent reassuming the responsibility for defining the general interests, which is injecting more realism into anti-growth hopes for a “democratic control over the economy by politics”. It is possible to reach an understanding with the capitalist order. Employers, politicians, and fans of the anti-growth movement, some staying inside without leaving, others leaving without staying inside, all basically agree to emphasize the metabolism of the economy and taxing damage to the ecosystem “without reducing the well being of the employees”. All therefore agree on the need to reinforce regulations, pay for the “carbon debt”, foster new technologies, increase public investment, recycle wastes, “democratically administer” the territory, and, above all, to accept certain restrictions on consumption, which will have to be based no longer on abundance, but on rationing (energy rationing, for example). From any angle, the solutions take the form of disciplining individuals as consumers, reeducating them in thrift, austerity, recycling and making them pay higher college costs and taxes. As for automobile drivers, they will be offered subsidies for purchasing less polluting cars, but they will be obliged to pay tolls to have access to city centers and parking lots. As for workers, they will be prepared for sharing the work, wage reductions, relocation to rural areas and creative leisure. Finally, the need to maintain entire sectors of those who have been excluded from the labor market will allow for a resurgence of marginal experiences like cooperatives, urban gardens, home schooling, community based entertainment, barter, sustainable transportation, etc.; that is, we will have to find a way to guarantee the existence of a tolerated and even protected marginal economy, a “third sector” that will enjoy, by means of fiscal and administrative measures, some scraps from the benefits of the “real” economy.

Anti-capitalist violence or the destruction of the human species

Many of the ideas set forth in the works of the anti-growth movement are interesting and comprehensible in a context of revolt, and are even more understandable in the works of the authors from whom these ideas were originally taken. They do not comprise a coherent whole, since their social basis is not coherent. Given the “diversity” of persons, groups and sectors of the movement, which have entered into various levels of compromise with domination, mediation by way of practice is replaced by confusion and arbitrariness. All of them share the common feature of fleeing from that essential factor of knowledge known as revolt. All of them fear the trauma of revolt. Anti-growth is an umbrella under which positions that cannot possibly be unified take refuge: some limit themselves to camping out on the fields of pedagogy, others insist on insinuating themselves into politics and trade unionism, and the rest obey the call of the earth. Each position reflects the concrete interests of a particular social group, distinct and even opposed to those of other groups, since the class in which they act is not an authentic class, but a pile of pieces of other classes. History presents enough examples of the only material that can unite fragments of this type: fear. A movement lacking clear interests and whose strategy is undefined, driven by panic, can only function in the service of other interests, which are themselves of course quite visible, and as part of another perfectly defined strategy: in the absence of a real revolutionary movement, it is the interests and the strategy of the ruling class which call the tune.

Many experiments in disconnection, whether or not they call for curtailing economic growth, are laudable, for during dark times they set an example, but only on the condition, that is, that they present themselves for what they are, more bearable ways of survival, a way to enjoy a respite if possible, but they are never panaceas. They are a starting point, however, because today secession is the precondition of freedom. Nonetheless, secession is only of value if it is the fruit of conflict, that is, if it is part of the subversion of dominant social relations. This is to say, if it constitutes a kind of autonomous guerrilla movement. The relation with social struggles and the practice of direct action is what confers an autonomous character on a space, not its existence as such. The peaceful occupation of factories and territories abandoned by capital might on occasion be praiseworthy but it does not found a new society. Isolated spaces of freedom, however meritorious they might seem, are not impediments to servitude. They are not ends in themselves, just as the trade unions were not ends in themselves in other historical periods, and they can hardly be instruments for the reorganization of an emancipated society. During the 1930s this role, at the time attributed to the unitary trade unions, was questioned because it was supposed to be reserved to the collectives and the free municipalities. We should recall this debate, without overlooking the fact that, at the moment of truth, the autonomy of each revolutionary institution, including the trade unions, was assured by militias and defense groups. But today things are different; emancipation will not be engendered by the appropriation of the means of production but by way of their dismantling. Those zones that have attained a relative segregated autonomy exist today precisely because they are fragile, because they do not constitute a threat, not because they are a force to be reckoned with. And above all, because they do not surpass the limits of order: in France, the greatest contribution made by the one million enthusiasts of the back to the land movement has been nothing but “voting for the left”. In the final accounting, they, too, are taxpayers. The self-administered islands are not changing the world. It is the struggle that does that. We are not living in the era of the Phalansteries and Icarias. Direct democracy and self-government must be social responses, the work of a movement born of fracture, of the exacerbation of social antagonisms, not from the voluntary return to country living, and it must not take place on the periphery of society, far from the hustle and bustle of the mainstream, but in its heart. Space will be effectively liberated when a conscious social movement seizes it from the power of the Market and the State, creating solid counter-institutions within it. Finding a way out of capitalism will be the work of a mass offensive or it will not take place. The new just and egalitarian social order will be born from the ruins of the old one, since one cannot change a system without first destroying it.

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