

Miguel Amorós interviewed by Rubén Martín for El Informador

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Rubén Martín

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According to Amorós, many of the changes that are supposedly taking place, only seem to be taking place. For this anarchist theoretician, society is confronted by a situation that requires the dismantling of the entire capitalist system in order to create new ways of relating to one another.

Listening to and reading the works of the libertarian thinker Miguel Amorós, allow direct access to the most lucid and radical critical thought; the experience is like being on the receiving end of a hail of hammer blows against beliefs and assumptions that purport to question modern society. Amorós repeatedly dismantles positions that claim to be critical of capitalism: sustainable development, de-growth, the alternative based on the workers movement, not to speak of the “civil society” platforms or the weak thought that arose from postmodernism—none of them, according to him, leads to a way out of the capitalist catastrophe. Modern capitalist society is a machine that produces harmful phenomena from which it is only possible to escape by dismantling the whole system and creating other social relations.

Amorós says that a subversive movement capable of bringing about revolutionary changes must have an anti-development, anti-state, de-industrializing and autonomous orientation. The big cities must undergo de-urbanization; the contemporary metropolis is a territory that produces “accumulations of solitary masses” who want security, but are incapable of winning freedom. The subjects of this possible revolutionary transformation will no longer be the working class masses and their allies, but those who have been marginalized by the State and capital, as well as the traditional peasantry and the indigenous communities of the world.

The critique that Amorós offers is a total critique of capitalist modernity, and this critique has its roots in libertarian thought, in the unorthodox theoreticians of the left, in the contributions of those who are critical of the capitalist technological system, in the Situationist International, and particularly in his own past and his participation in the struggles of the Spanish workers during the late 1970s, as well as in the anti-nuclear and environmentalist movements; the synthesis of these factors took shape in the Encyclopedia of Nuisances collective, in which Amorós participated with Jaime Semprun, among other militant thinkers, during the early 1980s.

The ideas of this Spanish anarchist historian and militant, who was born in Alcoy, Alicante, in 1949, fell like seeds on fertile soil when Amorós visited Guadalajara this past November, under the

*auspices of the Cátedra Jorge Alonso, co-sponsored by the University of Guadalajara and CIESAS [Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social—Center for Advanced Studies and Research in Social Anthropology]. His most recent book, **Contra la nocividad. Anarquismo, antidesarrollismo, revolución** [Against Nuisances. Anarchism, Anti-Development, Revolution], was published by Grietas Editores, affiliated with the Centro Social Ruptura of Guadalajara, on the occasion of his visit.*

Rubén Martín (RM): You have said that we live in a world dominated by the crisis of “industrial-development oriented society”. How is this crisis manifested?

Miguel Amorós (MA): In the latest phase, the crisis is global; it is manifested on every level: it is an economic crisis, an energy crisis, an environmental crisis, a demographic crisis, a crisis of culture, a political crisis.... That is, it is a multifarious crisis. It has various facets. It is generalized.

RM: You have also said that modern capitalist society has become a producer of things that are harmful. Could you elaborate on this?

MA: Look, the alleged benefit conferred by the commodity always has another side, its concealed harmful effect, and harmfulness is always the dark side of the commodity. What happens is that, at a particular moment of capitalist development, the productive forces become destructive forces, or they are more destructive than productive, and this is when the harmfulness becomes manifest. Harmfulness was our translation of an English neologism adapted to French, *nuisance*, which means anything that is harmful, bothersome, irritating. Harmfulness means: the harmful effects on the natural environment, on the human personality, on the way we live together, on cities....

RM: The destruction of social bonds....

MA: Yes, that is a clear instance of harm; so is the bureaucratization of the world, the development of nuclear power, and especially everything that is harmful to our health. But ultimately harmfulness is a broad concept that was used precisely to characterize the principal feature of modern production.

RM: What kinds of harmful conditions are produced by the modern capitalist mega-city?

MA: The world we live in is in the process of becoming 100% urban, that is, the whole population is being concentrated in urban systems, in megalopolises. Like Shanghai. It’s an enormous metropolitan region, no one knows where it ends; or Mexico City, or Tokyo, or Sao Paulo. The cities are constantly growing, they are no longer cities: they are non-cities, instead; the more or less collective kind of life that they once made possible has disappeared. More than ever before, they are gigantic machines that waste energy, squander food, and require an enormous supply network for everything; at the same time, however, they are the perfect places to conduct business. In global capitalism a city that has fewer than 100,000 inhabitants is not viable, economically it is a wreck. Then these small cities become satellites of other, larger, cities. You can no longer speak of a city within 40 kilometers of a metropolis, for example, here, in Guadalajara, let’s take as an example, El Salto; look, it’s a city in which the sociability that once existed, no longer exists, there is no social fabric. There is an accumulation of solitary masses. There is atomization, and along with atomization the typical psychological effects are produced: people get sick, the absence of communication gives rise to psychoses, neuroses, depression. There has been a dramatic increase in the incidence of this kind of illness. And then there is industrial food: now we

know what food additives contain, detergents, the new kinds of gasoline, the new fuels, because we breathe them, we eat them, and then we pay for it with cardiovascular disease and cancer. In the not-so-distant future almost everyone in the “developed” world will die of cancer, of a heart attack or from a stroke, when they don’t die in car accidents or take their own lives. This is the death sentence that has been proclaimed against us.

RM: And, because the cities are privileged spaces for accumulation and private profit, can they also be privileged spaces for emancipation and freedom?

MA: No, the city as it currently exists cannot be a space of freedom. A space of freedom is a space that is capable of self-government, of exercising autonomy; its minimum condition is that the people who live in that space are acquainted with each other and interact with each other. This does not happen in a large city, but it was once true of the neighborhoods of the cities, and that is why the working class cannot be understood as a class unless one also takes into account its life in its various neighborhoods. Today, low-income neighborhoods still preserve a community spirit—even if it is strictly oriented towards survival, and not always. But, in general, the way people behave in a big city is totally anonymous and isolated. What is being produced is a lack of empathy, that is, a total indifference towards other people. If you see someone suffering, it makes no difference to you. You don’t suffer with that other person. This is a new phenomenon. Human beings are characterized by humanity, and empathy was the form this humanity assumed: when you see pain, you feel pity. Today the law of the jungle rules: it’s not a class war, it’s a war of all against all. This is not what happens in communities, quite the contrary, but this is just what is happening in today’s cities. Not a hundred percent, and of course not to the same extent in Latin American cities as in European cities or as in Japan, where it is even worse. Phenomena associated with anomie of this type are becoming more widespread, more intense, and this makes a city that is, from the standpoint of physical and mental health, unviable. This sensation of suffocation, of loneliness, is not experienced in the rural areas, it is experienced in the cities.

RM: Politically, this has an enormous impact, because this absence of empathy and bonds facilitates the work of domination.

MA: That’s right. Look, those who are lonely are afraid. They value security, not freedom. They only know a private, atomized life; they cannot even imagine a public, collective life that is really lived in common and is based on solidarity.

RM: What do you think about the series of progressive governments in Latin America in the early 2000s?

MA: Capitalist development was impossible under the traditional oligarchy; so these populist governments guaranteed the survival and development of capitalism, which they made compatible with a certain amount of investment in the welfare of the popular classes, which have been the beneficiaries, within capitalism, of more government social programs, financial assistance, education, healthcare, etc. The State and its social services were modernized to conform with the prevailing capitalist standards. The oligarchy could not have done this. This new autocratic caste, when it is in power, divides and controls the popular classes by co-opting their representatives, and then it becomes a civil service-technocratic caste, which is the leading caste of these progressive countries, oriented towards capitalist development, and which really lives on exports—like the others, the old oligarchy. But they aren’t exporting coffee or beef: hell, they’re exporting minerals, wood pulp, fuels, soybeans, etc. It is an extractivist caste that is playing the same role that the oligarchic bourgeoisie of the past once played, but, except for Venezuela, with better

results. The political model of the old oligarchy had become obsolete, so this caste opted for this approach. This political caste furthered the modernization of Latin American capitalism.

RM: In response to the failure of liberalism and of the orthodox/vanguardist left, purportedly civil-society oriented political tendencies have emerged. You have criticized them. Why?

MA: The economic development promoted by extractivism (the intensive exploitation of the territory) increased the buying power of certain sectors of the population; it eradicated—or mostly eradicated—hunger; it created, or actually expanded, the middle class. A middle class that, above all, was derived from the bureaucratization of the state, from the civil service, from the public employees of large enterprises and banks, etc. While this middle class accounts for between 30 and 35 percent of the working population in Latin America, in Europe it is 80 percent. Here the middle class is still small, it is still developing, and is on the side of the popular classes. This middle class is populist. It is not conservative, like its counterparts in France and Germany, for example. This middle class is leftist. Of course, its leftism is a lie. The middle class is never really leftist, it does not want any kind of revolution, it does not even want a profound change within the present system. What it wants is to preserve its level of buying power, so that it will not be affected by the current crises as it was by the mortgage crises, the crises of the real estate sector, and the bank crises in Europe. The solution based on neoliberal policies condemned these intermediate sectors to starvation, as in the time of the rise of the Nazis, when the impoverished middle classes formed the base of the fascist party. This is the base of the new social democratic parties, the ones that I call “civil society” parties, because they speak a language that has nothing to do with proletarian language, with classes, with socialism, with expropriation, with self-management: they don’t use that kind of language.

RM: With respect to the case of Podemos, in Spain, you have said that “instead of changing everything, they have reinforced everything”. That is, they have instilled a breath of fresh air of legitimacy into the political system.

MA: Yes, they criticized the system on television, but they have gone on to become part of that system and they are proving it. What Podemos is doing—and this is what Syriza [in Greece] is doing, and what the Portuguese left coalition and Mélenchon in France are doing—is striking poses and demobilizing. The core group of Podemos is Stalinist, but quite a few of its new militants are unemployed professionals who come from the neighborhood movements, the movement against evictions, activism “lite”, moderate environmentalism....

RM: From the movement of May 15, 2011?

MA: No, 15M was students protesting because they were going straight from school to the unemployment line. The protesters in 15M were complaining because the parties did not represent them, they wanted a party that would represent them. Podemos presented itself as their party, the party of the citizens, of those who prefer casting a vote to engaging in struggle, but all it did was to simply entrench itself in the pseudo-parliamentary regime, attracting all the adventurers who were on the rebound from the other parties, including anarchists. Generally, they followed the course of accommodation. Now they have advanced from fighting against the political caste to fighting only against the right-wing party, the People’s Party; now they are themselves part of the political caste.

RM: What is the basis of radical critical thought in these grim times?

MA: There is no shortage of ideas. We have a lot of ideas, not only the classics—Fourier, Mikhail Bakunin, Karl Marx, Peter Kropotkin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Landauer, Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek, Karl Korsch, Georg Lukacs—there is a long list of anarchist, socialist and Marxist

thinkers who have played a role, and I am not saying that all of their work is directly applicable today, but they have formed a part of this emancipatory thought, in a way, so to speak, that connected the working class with reality.

RM: And the contradictions, the social conflict, the class struggle....

MA: Sure, the contradictions and so on. When the social movement was in decline, thought did not disappear. It continued in two directions: one, artistic, by way of expressionism, Dadaism, surrealism, situationism (the last of the great vanguards); and on the side of sociological critique and philosophy, the Frankfurt School, Lewis Mumford and the whole American school of urban planning, Günther Anders and Walter Benjamin, philosophers and thinkers who have appeared, who have been concealed, and who are not classifiable in schools, like Jacques Ellul, who is very important for the analysis of technology and its function. We certainly possess enough theoretical resources to educate ourselves sufficiently. The problem is that these people are thinkers whose work remained isolated from a workers movement that was too weak to appropriate it and use it. A few anthropologists, like Marcel Mauss and Pierre Clastres, carried out major reevaluations of the experiences of the indigenous peoples. But what is lacking is a unitary view. These ideas evolved in isolated institutions, they were disconnected from the social movements. The social movements have been colonized by the obsolete ideas of a previous era: by doctrinaire anarchism, by Leninism, by Stalinism, by nationalism, ideologies that are dead but that force, that make the movements more pragmatic and also more sectarian when the time comes to define themselves.

RM: A contemporary revolutionary project should no longer posit the working class as the central subject. "Today the worker is the basis of capital, not of its negation": these are your own words. What would a revolution look like? If such a thing is possible.

MA: Look, I think that there are subversive elements; I won't say revolutionary elements, because there is no revolution without consciousness, and it will take a long time for the masses to arrive at a way of thinking that is presently far removed from them. What is lacking is the mediating organizations, debates, publications, speakers, journalists, writers; we still need educational thought, and, above all, we need readers and organizers who won't let themselves be bought. But it is clear that there are two factors that must be taken into account for the creation of a revolutionary subject that would take shape in a separate world within this world: those who have been excluded from the labor market, or the self-marginalized; those who, although they have not been excluded, abandon the labor market and choose to live on the margins; and the non-industrialized peasant classes. The traditional peasant classes, not just indigenous peoples, but also homesteaders or settlers, those who till land in common, or simply farmers, the landless, or those with land, with only a little land ... they are the fulcrum of the defense of the territory, the class struggle of the 21st century.

RM: They are your revolutionary subjects, but what contents will a radical revolutionary project have at the present time?

MA: I would use the word orientation, rather than contents. A revolutionary, anti-development movement must have a decolonizing orientation, it will have to be directed towards the locality, it will have to have an anti-statist, de-industrializing and autonomous orientation. That is, it must reinforce, during this phase, a horizontal, integral society in the sense that all activities will form part of a whole (politics, economics, education, culture...). Therefore horizontal, autonomous, integrated, fraternal, balanced, egalitarian, anti-patriarchal and decentralized.

RM: Are you optimistic with respect to the possibilities of achieving these goals, despite the barbarism within which we are now immersed?

MA: There are people who are optimistic. I am inclined to think that there are collectives that are susceptible to moving in this direction. Of course, when you talk about resettlement, de-industrializing, ruralizing or de-urbanizing in an abstract sense, it's hard to make yourself understood. And I don't say that the change will take place overnight, but simply point towards an orientation: we should move in the direction of reestablishing an equilibrium between the cities and the countryside, dismantling the urban agglomerations, industries, extensive distribution networks—this would imply alternative types of production and supply—means of mass communication, repressive and judicial apparatuses, administrative bodies.... These are processes that are contrary to the prevailing dynamic, and they will take place during a period of transition, because capitalism has destroyed so much, that rebuilding an equitable society in freedom, without a Market and without a State, will be a very costly endeavor.

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