




CRISIS TO INSURRECTION

NOTES ON THE ONGOING COLLAPSE

MESSIAH BOL T RASHUSSEH

March 2007



The crisis is deep. The economies of the US and Europe are in deep crisis, and developing economies are also beginning to feel its effects. Everywhere it is workers who are paying the price. The crisis is being socialized and austerity is the order of the day. The crisis is used as a pretext for further savings and cuts. Capital has in other words intensified the class war – but the proletariat has started moving. The revolts in North Africa and the Middle East have challenged the neoliberal world order, and the 'movement of the squares' in southern Europe and Occupy in the US have picked up the baton and joined the new protest cycle. Even though dictators have been toppled in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the protests continue. This is also the case in Greece, Spain and Portugal where people reject the austerity programs. There are uprisings in Bulgaria and Bosnia. In Syria the civil war is raging. In China the number of strikes continue to rise. In Turkey the youth reject neoliberal 'success' and urban restructuring and in Brazil 'the dangerous classes' have taken to the streets. There are a variety of protests going on – the ones in the West are defensive, the ones in the rest of the world are offensive and reformist – but together they are knocking a hole in the neoliberal world order.

The old mole is back.

MIKKEL BOLT RASMUSSEN IS AN ART HISTORIAN AND
WRITER. HE TEACHES AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ARTS AND
CULTURAL STUDIES, COPENHAGEN UNIVERSITY.
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Notes on the ongoing collapse

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen

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Crisis to Insurrection: Notes on the ongoing collapse

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen

ISBN 978-1-57027-305-6

Cover image derived from Gustav Klutsis, "Electrification of the whole country" (1920)

Cover design by Haduhi Szukis

Interior design by Margaret Killjoy

Proofread by James Day

Released by Minor Compositions 2015

Wivenhoe / New York / Port Watson

Minor Compositions is a series of interventions & provocations drawing from autonomous politics, avant-garde aesthetics, and the revolutions of everyday life.

Minor Compositions is an imprint of Autonomedia

www.minorcompositions.info | minorcompositions@gmail.com

Distributed by Autonomedia

PO Box 568 Williamsburgh Station

Brooklyn, NY 11211

WWW.AUTONOMEDIA.ORG

INFO@AUTONOMEDIA.ORG

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INTRODUCTION

IN ROY ANDERSON'S FILM FROM 2000, *SÅNGER FRÅN ANDRA VÅNINGEN* (Songs from the Second floor) there's a scene with a group of economists seated in a meeting room around a long table below a crystal chandelier with leather bund books lining the walls. The economists have been summoned to a meeting in order to thrash out a financial strategy and come up with solutions to the economic crisis for the government. Wages are too high and the country is not competitive enough. The chairman of the Council of Economic Experts is unable to find the papers detailing the strategy in his briefcase for now though. When asked he explains that he is actually not sure that any long-term plans exist, but that he should have the short-term plans with him. "I'm sure I had them this morning", he says. The representative of the government is displeased: "This isn't at all good. We'll have to skip strategy and focus on tactics instead. I know this is difficult. We have been discussing this for more than eight hours now." Nobody is willing to take to the floor with suggestions however, let alone put forwards a plan. Nobody seems to have a plan or much of a clue as to what might be done about the crisis. No one is even capable of summarising the discussion so far. As one of the economists, professor Frank, says when asked why he doesn't say anything: "I agree with what the others have said. The only thing we can do is to hope." Suddenly one of the economists gets up and points out of the window to the left of the shot saying: "The building across from us is moving." Tumult breaks out and everybody rushes to the windows before

running for the door that, however, will not open. Only a fortune teller dressed in a gown and headscarf remains seated at the table. The representative from the government tries to calm the economists shouting: "It is very important to not lose composure, very important." Then the scene ends. During the meeting a crystal ball has been passed around among the economists who all stare into it intensely, even though it remains transparent. There's nothing to see. The economists can predict nothing and have no idea whatsoever.

This book is an analysis of the crisis and the proletariat's response to it. Talking about the crisis in the singular can be a problem because it gives the impression of something temporary and exceptional, of the crisis as a derogation from the norm. It suggests that the crisis is something we can soon put behind us, 'now the worst is over', 'we will soon be able to see an end to the crisis', 'there's light at the end of the tunnel'. Implicit in all such sayings there's an idea that we're confronted with a parenthesis of sorts, that everything was fine before the crisis, and that we just have to adjust some minor details in order to get back on track. Soon everything will be as it was before. The conservative implications are of course obvious and it gets even better when we are told that we nonetheless have to tighten our belts, that nevertheless it's necessary to cut public spending and privatise a bit more. We are constantly exposed to this crisis lingo, which at one and the same time threatens us with imminent disaster and promises that we will soon 'come home': Hell is let loose but if we act responsibly we will exit the crisis in good shape. But this is not just a minor bump on the road to more of the same. The crisis is in reality a number of crises that are connected. We are confronted with a financial crisis, an economic crisis, a political crisis, an energy crisis and a climate crisis among others. In this sense it is better to talk about crises in plural. But on the other hand these crises are not just connected but all have to do with fundamental contradictions in the capitalist economy. And it is the crisis as a continuous complex that needs to be analysed.

Nothing indicates that the crisis is over. In January 2014 there's yet again panic on the markets, this time in the form of a currency crisis in the so-called developing economies that were supposed to save us from the crisis in the first place. Reuters writes about "an economic blood bath" as the Argentinian peso, the Indian rupee, the Turkish lira and the South African rand have all dropped significantly in a matter of a few days. The crisis is far from over. And it is not just a question

of an economic slowdown and a fall in turnover or a temporary lack of interest in politics, the crisis is an expression of basic contradictions inherent to capitalism. The ongoing and accelerated destruction of the earth's climate is the most obvious example of this, exposing once and for all the unsustainability of capitalist modernisation. Therefore it does not make sense imagining the crisis as something we can exit from easily, as a parenthesis, a brief interval before we get back to the normal running of things. The scope of climate change shows that it is the course itself that is the problem. We are steering directly toward a biospheric meltdown. That's the situation. The crisis is not a temporary thing. There's no turning back. Climate change shows beyond any doubt the unsustainability of the present course and the dangers of an unbending faith in the master logic of this world, accumulation and growth. The crisis is here.

And no matter which aspect of the crisis we focus on it is immediately apparent that the situation is much worse than we think. This is especially true of the economic crisis. Unlike the different representations of the crisis circulating in the media – the financial markets are to blame for the crisis, the Greeks are to blame, etc. – the economic crisis is not just a brief *intermezzo* after which we can continue with our business as usual. The economic crisis is a symptom of basic contradictions in the capitalist mode of production. Contradictions that are becoming more and more apparent. The present crisis has its roots in the 1970s, where capitalism responded to a crisis of over-accumulation and to widespread protest movements by replacing the post-war Keynesian wage productivity deal – the Fordist compromise – in which workers were paid more in order to be more 'productive' and consume more, with a new model where capital systematically has tried to cut expenses. In the last few years of the 1960s the accumulation of capital in the 'advanced' part of the capitalist world reached a limit – the shift was marked symbolically by the oil crisis in 1973 – and it became necessary to transform the relations of production. One aspect of this transformation was the dismantling of large industry in the West, through which its rebellious workers were dispersed and production moved to Asia or to other places where wages were much lower. In this way deindustrialization in the West and the industrialization of countries in Southeast Asia, parts of Africa and Latin America went hand in hand. Outsourcing and new technologies made a significant expansion of world trade possible – the Danish shipping company Maersk's gigantic container ships carrying

thousands of containers is a defining image of this development – where locally produced commodities are distributed globally. Cheap goods made in China were bought by Western consumers, who could not actually afford their new commodities, but borrowed the money to pay for them with loans guaranteed by China. Credit became a key ingredient in the new regime of accumulation. This was also necessary, as the restructuring did not create a new market equal to the size of the value produced. For many companies the costs of investment exceeded profit. For years a gigantic amount of credit masked this development.

But the world economy has been in trouble since the early 1970s. The Western working class has experienced a drop in real wages and since the 1980s capital has been forced increasingly to save on social reproduction in the US and Europe. The retrospective analysis of the period from the 1970s onwards will have to account for the period as one long slow shake out where de-valuation never really takes place. The destruction of machinery, buildings and workers necessary for the next phase of capitalist expansion occurs in a kind of stuttering manner in which society and nature are gradually worn away. In this way neoliberalism shows itself to be one long crisis regime in which capital saves on the maintenance of the means of production, including the daily recreation of the labour force, and society is impoverished: capital is basically not paying for the destruction it is causing. From this point of view the crisis is nothing new. It did not happen in 2007-2008 but is part of a longer process of restructuring. And the neoliberal shock treatment that Southern European countries are put through now has been tested continuously outside the centre of accumulation. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s one country after the other in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa became the object of such policies. The new thing in the present situation is that it is now populations in the EU who are subjected to massive cuts that radically pull their societies apart. But austerity has been part of the neoliberal program for a long time. And all along it has of course been the workers who paid the price.

The economic crisis is thus related to the restructuring of the economy that started in the 1970s in which the industrial factory was decentralised though networks of outsourced production peopled by millions of precarious and temporary workers. The ideological legitimisation for this structural transformation of capitalism was what we call neoliberalism, and it was tested in Chile, Argentine and Uruguay

in the 1970s and has since been implemented throughout most of the world as a way of supporting the massive credit bubble with a sufficient amount of surplus value. One consequence of the restructuring has been the continuous exclusion of workers. It is almost as if capitalism in its neoliberal form tries to liberate itself from the working class and its labour power. A dream that cannot come true. As Marx writes, capital is a self-processing contradiction: “Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth.”¹ Neoliberal capitalism has tried to limit the number of wage labourers, thereby disempowering workers as much as possible. And the working class has indeed been pushed back, and the idea of revolution almost disappeared in the West. Thanks to globalization, outsourcing, new technology and new forms of employment the capitalist class has forced more and more people out of wage labour during the last decades, making them superfluous for the production of surplus value. Today this mass of people no longer even function as an industrial reserve army, they are just outside. We are thus confronted with the law of capitalist accumulation according to which “the labouring population” not only “produces [...] the accumulation of capital” but also “the means by which it itself is made relatively superfluous.”² This development has manifested itself in rampant unemployment and an enormous growth in informal labour globally. This amounts to a proletarianisation of large parts of the world population. This is in effect the socio-economic background to the present protest cycle running from Greece to Portugal, Egypt, Turkey, South Africa, Bangladesh, China, Chile, Bolivia, Brazil and onwards.

But capitalism has not destroyed enough yet. Three decades of destruction is apparently not enough to launch a new phase of capitalist expansion. Closing of factories, bankruptcies and mass layoffs have been a steady feature in the US and in Western Europe since the late 1970s, but they did not keep pace with the explosive growth of finance capital, which made it possible to seek refuge in finance capital. Productive capital was thus re-doubled by finance capital, making the neoliberal shake down incomplete and necessitating a continuous ‘lowering’ of the value of labour power. The future will hold more

1 Karl Marx: *The Grundrisse: Notebook VII*, 1857, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/MARX/WORKS/1857/GRUNDRISSE/CH14.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch14.htm)

2 Karl Marx: *Capital: Volume One. Chapter Twenty-Five*, 1867, [HTTPS://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/MARX/WORKS/1867-C1/CH25.HTM#S3](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch25.htm#S3)

of the same, more neoliberal fragmentation and more exclusion. The process of destruction has to be intensified. Capital's productive capacity is still too large and much more needs to go before new expansion is possible. Austerity and destruction. A crisis is always the time when capitalism destroys capital in order to recreate capital.

The menu is thus set for further exclusion and much more ruination. We might be standing before the 'Thirty Years' War of the 21st century, a period not unlike the beginning of the 20th century either with its two world wars and massive destruction of workers and industry. It took two large-scale wars and a depression before a new hegemon, the US, was ready to replace Great Britain as the world's leading power and centre of accumulation. In other words we're going to see great changes one way or the other as US hegemony starts to fall apart and be challenged by rival powers. The US will gradually become too weak to impose its will, the events in the North Africa and the Middle East since 2011 all testify to that development. So far nobody is able to take up the baton: Europe is too divided and is now beginning to fall apart itself and China is still too dependent on its export to become the new world power. The result may very well be chaos à la 1930s, where small regional powers will try to puff themselves up, build up nationalist resentment and acquire nuclear weapons, which they might be forced into using during regional conflicts.

IDEOLOGICAL BREAKDOWN

Roy Andersson's film shows us economists who have no idea whatsoever about the crisis, and are unable to foresee anything in their crystal ball. There is without doubt something of the same panic and bewilderment among so-called experts and politicians today. The crisis has resulted in ideological confusion. The debt-based nature of neoliberal globalisation has been exposed for everybody to see, but so far there seem to be no alternative policies out there. The austerity programs testify to the continued hegemony of neoliberalism. The situation is deeply uncertain. The institutional framework of neoliberal globalisation has been severely shaken and the risk of an outright collapse is hovering on the horizon. A return to protectionism, trade wars and restrictive money policies is a real possibility. Nationalist feelings are already making themselves felt at capitalism's high table. Some experts have abandoned the previous period's hegemonic neoliberal mantras

– the market is the solution, we have to liberalize more – and are moving hesitantly towards increased public spending. Some kind of return to Keynesianism is tempting as the crisis continues. Even the IMF is warning the EU against too much austerity, a remarkable situation considering the track record of the IMF. If only the state could step up to the plate and persuade capital to reach a new agreement with the workers, suspending the intensified class war for the benefit of both sides. That's their argument. It is not what's happening though. Instead the last five years have made clear just how much the state is itself entangled in the mess. Most states have been forced to borrow huge amounts themselves during the last three decades in order to keep the economy running and are therefore too weak to perform the 'Keynesian task' that they are asked to do by reformist experts. The state is always already tied down to the contradictions of capitalist accumulation. It is part of the problem right now. The economy has been weak for three decades. That's why the state has already taken out huge loans. Our circumstances are then very unlike those that the Keynesians describe, as we are not confronted with two separate entities – the state and capital – but by their intimate interconnection, and this is why the state cannot save us from (finance) capital and get us out of the crisis. The state is subjected to the structural limitations of capitalism, and does not regulate capitalism, but is on the contrary one of its primary agents, guaranteeing trust in the future creation of wealth, in the final instance with all its military might. We are confronted with an impossible situation. States have both to limit public expenditure and cannot take on new loans – risking that the crisis will continue through lack of stimulus – and increase public expenditure in order to get the economy moving, risking bankruptcy because most states already have huge debt.

The crisis has however also set in motion a new cycle of protests that have spread from North Africa to Southern Europe, the US, Latin America and onwards. It took a few years before the protests got started but in 2011 they really took off, spreading quickly: in Tunisia and Egypt local Western-backed dictators were forced to flee or resign and throughout the Middle East people protested against corrupt regimes enriching themselves at the expense of their populations. The protests spread to Europe and the US in a matter of weeks and months. Everywhere people suddenly refused to pay for the financial crisis.

The protests show that a crisis is also always a 'subjective' historical

process in which the 'normal' economic and political framework falls apart and opens for alternative perspectives and subjective agency. A crisis is in other words a possibility too, in the sense that a break occurs and former stable institutions and modes of thinking become porous and can be rejected or changed. This was the case in 1848, in 1917 and to some extent in 1968, where the streets all of a sudden became laboratories for radical ideas about a new organisation of society. Unlike in 1917 though we do not have any idealized image of a better tomorrow, we do not have a program. The point of departure for the creation of another world is today both more hesitant and more desperate. But it might not, however, be a drawback that the political forms of the Western working class are in ruins. We need to move elsewhere anyway. The 20th century is a testament to that.

The development of the uprisings and insurrections in North Africa and the Middle East has been explosive. In just a few weeks protesters in Tunisia and Egypt forced the Tunisian president Ben Ali and the Egyptian ditto Mubarak to step down in January 2011. Hundreds of thousands participated in the protests. While Ben Ali and Mubarak stepped down surprisingly quickly it took a lot more in Libya, where Gaddafi was in power. But after a civil war and Western intervention yet another change of regime in the region was a reality. In Yemen Saleh stepped down after widespread, violent protests and an attempt on his life. In Syria the conflict escalated and the country has been riven by civil war for more than four years now, where Bashar al-Asad's government fights different opposition groups, several of them financed by Arab money from the Gulf states. In a number of countries in the region the protests did not reach the same pitch, or were met with massive repression right away, but the so-called 'Arab Spring' started a revolutionary process that challenges the post-war postcolonial world order with its poor 'coloured' lumpen dictatorships and wealthy 'white' Western national democracies.

Even though protests against austerity did take place in Europe before 2011, especially in Southern Europe, there has been a significant expansion of these protests after the outbreak of the Arab Spring. In Spain and Greece a large protest movement did not merely reject austerity but took to the streets to critique parliamentary democracy in its present form. The movements in Southern Europe took on the practice of occupying squares from Egypt and turned them into spaces for social experiments, where the movements tested alternative

decision making processes and different ways of organising public space. In countries like Portugal, Italy, Romania and Bulgaria people also rejected the draconian austerity measures that their national governments had been forced into implementing by the EU and Germany. In more or less all European countries there have been large protests against austerity using slogans like “We don’t wanna pay for your crisis” and “The crisis is a scam”, with the understanding that the capitalist class uses the crisis in order to cut welfare and privatize further. The contrast between the willingness of governments to pay for the banks’ debt and their unwillingness to secure welfare has been striking, and the result has been a huge gap between the people and their political institutions, which look intent on satisfying a finance capitalist elite. Across party lines the response to the protests and the justification of austerity has been ‘that’s just the way things are’.

Following on from the revolutions in North Africa and the protests in Europe, the US became the scene of the largest protest movement in forty years when hundreds of thousands mobilised across the country and occupied squares, protesting against the bailout of the banks. “Down with the tyranny of finance capital” was a common slogan for the protests. The bailout was just the latest attempt to socialize the costs of finance capital’s bust. “We are the 99%” people shouted in the streets. Occupy Wall Street thus quickly became a nationwide movement addressing the massive inequality in wealth which has been the consequence of thirty years of neoliberalisation. Today the richest 0.5 % own 35.6 % of all wealth in the world, while the poorest 68.4 % own 4.2 %. The thousand richest people in the world own more than the 1.5 billion poorest. Occupy came out of the blue after more than three decades of continuous weakening of the American labour movement. There had been no significant social protests since the early 1970s and all of a sudden in late 2011 more than hundred cities had their own local Occupy movement.

The Occupy movement made explicit references to the protests in the Middle East and Europe and tried to create connections between these protests, uniting them in virtual lines of flight drawn from North Africa to the Middle East to Europe to the US and back again. Everywhere people refused to comply with yet another round of austerity and protests took place all over the world against the attempt to prolong neoliberal globalisation. The conclusion seems to be that the old mole, Robin Goodfellow, is back. Three decades of one-sided class

war is over. No matter what happens in the future the capitalist class will no longer be able to restructure and dismantle freely. Not that there has occurred a decisive break, there hasn't yet. Even in Tunisia and Egypt the institutions that maintain and reproduce the system are still intact, though they have been challenged and have to adjust their *modus operandi* all the time. The revolutionaries have been able to get rid of the local Père Ubu but the old power system is still running. In Egypt the army and the Muslim Brotherhood made an alliance that was meant to continue neoliberal policy after Mubarak's fall, preventing a further acceleration of the discontent on the streets and in the factories. This plan quickly fell to pieces and in less than a year the military had to end their collaboration with the Muslim Brotherhood, who rapidly lost their popularity by monopolising political power, continuing Mubarak's neoliberal program and giving the police a free hand to attack protesters. In a new attempt to stop the revolutionary dynamic the army chose to part ways with the Brotherhood. The army was forced into reacting, and is now fighting the mosque for the small amount of surplus value that is available in the country. Both want to prevent the revolution from continuing and both tries to tame the militant energy that has been produced in the streets of Cairo, Mahalla and other Egyptian cities after January 2011. The question is whether they can harness this energy to religion or nationalism, or whether there will occur a genuine opening of the local postcolonial solution, whether the revolutionary movement can continue and steer the dissolution in a different direction. As long as the underlying socio-economic background remains unresolved, as long as capitalism pushes more and more people into unemployment and poverty, the local elites will be standing on a mine ready to explode any minute. The continued protests show just that. The alliance between the military and the mosque was not strong enough. The expendables are growing in number and the workers have gotten a taste for rebellion.

While the protests in Europe and the US are primarily defensive – avoiding cuts, keeping a job even if it means accepting a wage-cut – the protests in other parts of the world are offensive. In Southeast Asia and China there has been a massive increase in the number of strikes and other related incidents in the last few years. The enormous army of workers that produces a large part of the goods circulating globally has begun to fight for a bigger paycheck and better working conditions. The rebellious masses in the North Africa and the Middle East

also demands something more than the continuation of the present misery, they reject decades of political despotism and nepotism, but they also reject – and this is important – the postcolonial world order, which has continued to benefit the West and which it has needed to uphold the myth of the ‘Third World’s’ inability to break with authority. This is why the Arab revolts carry a revolutionary perspective that goes beyond the rejection of local despots. And it’s because of this that Western powers are so keen on containing the revolutions, or derail them and turn them into civil war and sectarian violence. It is now alpha and omega to prevent the collapse of the postcolonial construction, to avoid that the Arab masses gets into contact with masses elsewhere. It is therefore that the ruling class in the West is in such a hurry to interpret and translate the events in North Africa and the Middle East as ‘local protests against corrupt tyrants’. Any kind of analysis shows that this is not the case and that the protests are much more dangerous for the ruling world order. The dominant (non)-analysis of the protests in North Africa and the Middle East is that they just want what we already have, some kind of parliamentary democracy. Even when the Egyptian masses burn down hundreds of police stations we are told these are ‘peaceful protests’ in favour of ‘our democratic way of life’. The poor Arabs have apparently finally become tired of their local dictators and want to join modernity. The next wrong turn in the Orientalist representation of the revolts is of course the question of whether the Arab masses are ready for democracy at all, meaning whether or not they will elect Islamist politicians and thereby confirm what to Western eyes would be their ‘backwardness’ once again. There really seems to be no end to Orientalism.

One of the most pressing problems today is how to connect the different local protest movements. We can see the importance of cross-fertilisation in a kind of negative image of the ruling order’s attempts at ideological derailment. The revolts in North Africa and the Middle East, the crisis in Europe and the strikes in China are connected. We are not confronted with a number of local crises, weak national economies, bad management or corruption, we are confronted with a global crisis that is a symptom of the basic contradictions of the capitalist mode of production.

But the protests are not yet connected, there is a lot of bad timing in the present breakup. This gives the counter-revolutionary forces the upper hand. It makes it possible for them to restructure and

shut the revolutionaries inside temporary, local solutions. The story in North Africa is an example of this, as the lack of international solidarity forces the Arab masses into betting on local institutions like the mosques. Not because they are religious but because they are left on their own, lacking the support of an international network of resistance. As in previous historical situations the counter-revolution makes use of tactics of containment and exhaustion. The important thing is to prevent the revolution from spreading. To make sure that the youth of Europe remain passive. Just as the workers movement in Great Britain, France, Northern Europe and the US remained passive in the last hour of the First World War, when workers rose up in Germany and Russia. Just as Western powers intervened in Russia, in Poland and in the Caucasus trying to block the revolutionary wave in 1917, so today the West tries to contain the revolts. The West has been active in the Middle East for quite some time now, in Gaza, in Lebanon, in Iraq and in Libya, working to prevent communication between the rebellious populations. The important thing for them is not to create solutions but preventing the revolt from taking place at all, or avoiding it from spreading.

FROM CRISIS TO REVOLT

This book is a description and an analysis of the financial crisis and the new cycle of protests that broke out in 2011. It contains a lot of questions and very few answers. One of the most important questions in the following is of course whether or not the crisis will be the end of neoliberalism. Another has to do with the old mole, has he really come back? The crisis has already resulted in new anticapitalist activity all over the place. What will happen as a result of all this activity? Will it be able to fuse and create a real alternative to the present order of things? *Crisis to Insurrection* is my attempt to pursue this perspective with a retrospective analysis of neoliberal capitalism in mind. The following notes have been written with the intention of creating debate and discussion; in this sense it is a polemic. It tries to give the discussion of the crisis a ground, to describe its backdrop and its possible overcoming in revolution. The book is an attempt to read the totality of ongoing events with the tools that an involvement in political contemporary art and research in the avant-garde has equipped me with. I'm an art historian trying to analyse the present historical

conjuncture. The paradoxes may well be obvious. I'm trying to analyse global, social process, Adorno's "gesellschaftlichen Gesamtprozess".³ After thirty years of postmodernism and academic specialisation this might seem laughable, and to make things worse I don't just try to draw a world picture, but advance a globalizing critique. Marxism is of course the model here, with its ability to analyse concrete situations. The book is an attempt to produce a concrete analysis of the concrete situation, not like Lenin did in 1920, but like Lyotard did in the late 1950s in his analysis of the development in Algeria in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.⁴ This is less theoretical reflection and more description and analysis of the ongoing historical development, with focus on the relationship between capital and labour. Not because theoretical discussions are less important – they are not, especially not now at the beginning of a new protest cycle – but because it is necessary to connect them to the critique of everyday life. The communist critique has for some time been moving towards theoretical sophistication, which at its worst is downright abstract. This, of course, has to do with the strength of ruling ideas, under the power of which communism has been forced to flee into theoretical escapism. The idea of revolution and class war largely disappeared and often only survived in small milieus, which were often without any connection to the struggles that nonetheless took place in everyday life. But with the new protest cycle this separation of theory and practice will hopefully be overcome. This was the avant-garde project of old and it still holds water. A communist critique will still have to involve the abolition of theoretical and practical critique as two separate spheres. It is necessary to keep up the pressure of theory on practice, but also to embed theory in the critique of everyday life. In other words, we're back with the "Theses on Feuerbach", and to theoretical analysis with a view to a possible practice.⁵

3 Adorno uses the phrase first in a letter to Benjamin dated November 1st, 1938 and later uses it in several texts among them *Negative Dialectics*.

4 In a review of the journal *Kommunismus* from 1920 Lenin writes that the concrete analysis of a concrete situation is "the living soul of Marxism". In the same article from *Die kommunistische Internationale* Lenin unfortunately also outline the nationalisation that Stalin followed through with the notion of "socialism in one country" and advocates participating in national elections mocking abstentionism. Then and now abstentionism is a good starting point.

5 "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." Karl Marx: "Theses on Feuerbach", 1845, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/MARX/WORKS/1845/THESES/THESES.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm)

The first chapter of the book starts with an analysis of the financial crisis and the way in which it has been represented. Lehman Brother's bankruptcy and the subsequent bursting of the housing bubble set off a remarkable course of events. The financial crisis turned out to be an economic crisis, but more radical analyses have been few and far between. The crisis quickly replaced or supplemented 'the threat of Islamist terrorism' as a key ingredient in the state of exception that has come to characterize politics during the last decade. The crisis was thus turned to legitimize further surveillance as well as drastic cuts to already ailing welfare systems in Western Europe. Against this development I attempt to account for the historical causes of the present crisis. Building on Robert Brenner's analysis of the slowing-down of the booming post-war economy I analyse neoliberal capitalism as one long, slow crash landing. The crisis thus starts in 1973 and not in 2008, it was merely intensified when a large part of the debt pyramid exploded in 2006-2008. In retrospect neoliberalism appears as one long crisis regime and in the first chapter I outline some of the fundamental changes that have taken place during the last four decades. The introduction of debt, the expansion and generalisation of wage labour (to parts of the world like Asia and Latin America) and the exclusion of more and more people from wage labour are some of the most important aspects of the restructuring that took place during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Together they make up the neoliberal crisis-regime. I end the first chapter by analysing the biospheric limitations on expanded accumulation. There is a contradiction between the survival of the planet and profit, and the ongoing ecological meltdown is a material limit to capitalist modernity. The crisis is in other words systemic.

The second chapter is an analysis of the transformation that has occurred in the imagining of revolution during the last three decades, during which revolution has gone from being a radical transformation of society and mankind to being a demand addressed to the individual, forcing her to be prepared to adapt to the changing demands of the market. I begin with Fredric Jameson's now classic account of

As Guy Debord phrased it approximately 80 years later: "To study everyday life would be a completely absurd undertaking, unable even to grasp anything of its object, if this study was not expressly for the purpose of transforming everyday life." Guy Debord: "Conscious Changes in Everyday Life", 1961, [HTTP://WWW.BOPSECRETS.ORG/SI/6.EVERYDAY.HTM](http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/6.EVERYDAY.HTM)

postmodernism and read it together with Francis Fukuyama's equally famous text about the end of history. In 1984 Jameson defined postmodernism as preoccupied with endings, including the end of Leninism. A few years later it would have been almost impossible to include Leninism in a list of endings. By then, Leninism was so far from the contemporary imagination that it would have been contradictory even to talk about its end. It is interesting to return to Jameson's analysis at a time when the need for a more encompassing or global (read totalizing) analysis makes itself felt. Looking back it is now obvious how important it is to be able to analyse larger structural transformations, something that the dominant theories of the 1980s and 1990s gave up on too easily. I analyse this transformation and connect it to a longer historical development, in which the established Western working class movement put its revolutionary pretensions aside after the Second World War in favour of access to the new commodities and greater sexual and religious freedom.

In the third chapter I look at the worldwide protests that took place in 2011 and which point beyond the present crisis-regime. I argue that these constitute a new cycle of protests which are connected by their expression of resistance to the intensification of the capitalist crisis. The revolts in North Africa and the Middle East are not just protests against local despots but are tied to a long impoverishment of the region that has intensified during the last couple of decades in the form of neoliberal adjustment programs. I start then with the so-called 'Arab Spring' and analyse the historical and structural causes of the revolt, the economic development of the region and the despotism of the local regimes. From the 'successful' revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, where protesters managed to get rid of feared dictators surprisingly quickly, to the more 'muddy' rebellions in Libya and Syria, which quickly became scenes of inter-imperialist rivalry, the West has tried to contain the revolutionary dynamic from spreading by allying itself with the Islamic fractions of the ruling elites, or through military intervention, or by letting civil wars escalate.

The protests quickly spread to Southern Europe and in particular to Spain and Greece, where people protested against the draconian austerity measures implemented by their governments following the advice of the European Central Bank. The often bloody destruction of Western European welfare societies has been further intensified since 2008, and in countries like Spain and Greece it is not only the

economy but the whole fabric of society that is affected. The protests in Southern Europe are primarily directed against government, the political system, the EU and finance capital, but there is also a more direct anticapitalist perspective there too. In general though the protests on both sides of the Mediterranean have been defensive, with people fighting against austerity and exclusion. This is also the case in the US where the Occupy movement took to the streets – or more precisely squares – in the last months of 2011 all around the country. After decades in which the American working class has experienced defeat after defeat, Occupy was a real surprise, one which managed both to highlight the escalation of inequality effected by neoliberal policy and present an anti-systemic critique.

While all the protests in the centre are primarily defensive, workers in the margins of capitalist accumulation are launching a more powerful critique. This is particularly visible in China and other countries in Southeast Asia where the number of strikes and other forms of protests have exploded in the last decade. The 200 million strong group of factory and construction workers along the coast of China have become unruly. At a time where the whole world is looking to China as the saviour of capitalism it is important to highlight the heightened militancy of its working class.

The last chapter is an attempt to raise the question of the organisation of anticapitalist resistance through a critical reading of three important contemporary readings of the present situation. I start though with a discussion of Lenin's democratic centralism, according to which the plan is to create an vanguard party that can lead the workers out of capitalism. The problem with Lenin's model is that it reduces the workers' actual involvement in the revolution. According to Lenin the workers lack revolutionary consciousness and thus have to be led by professional revolutionaries. On the basis of Lenin's idea of a revolutionary organization I look at three contemporary contributions to thinking the relationship between organisation and spontaneity. I begin with a critique of Slavoj Žižek's attempt to update Lenin's model. Žižek argues that the Left needs a Left Master that can make the crucial decisions, a Left Thatcher as he phrases it. Regrettably Žižek only manages thus to highlight the authoritarian dimension of Lenin's avant-garde model and pulls it in an even more leader focused direction that risks short circuiting the critical analysis of the development of capitalist society by focusing only on ideology and

politics and not engaging in a critique of political economy. After this I turn to Stuart Hall's last project, *The Kilburn Manifesto*. Hall, Stuart Massey and Michael Rustin put forwards a Gramsci-inspired analysis of neoliberalism that unfortunately cannot account for the relations underlying the present capitalist conjuncture, but reduces the question of neoliberalism and the crisis to a question of bad politics. Hall and the others are basically advocating a return to the post-war welfare project or a kind of democratic state-capitalism, thus avoiding more radical questions about capitalism and its modes of domination which would require an abolition of the money and the wage-form. But Hall never gets this far. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri are more in tune with the ongoing protest wave and are able to read them as a response to the neoliberal offensive. But Hardt and Negri sweep across the forty year long destruction of the Left, painting a picture of the imminent creation of communism and does not account for the destructive character of the restructuring that has been going on since the 1970s. They thus end up with a one-sided picture of the present situation. I return instead to the communist action programme that Marx and Engels presented in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* arguing for a reinvigoration of a more negative communist project, which would consist of the joint abolition of the nation state and money.

RED CROSSES EVERYWHERE

The Crisis runs deep. No matter what happens the coming period is going to be rough. The economies of the US and Europe are in profound crisis and the developing economies are also beginning to feel its effects. Everywhere it is workers who are paying the price. The crisis is being socialized and austerity is the order of the day. The crisis is used as a pretext for further savings and cuts. In other words, capital has intensified the class war. But the proletariat has started moving. The revolts in North Africa and the Middle East have challenged the neoliberal world order and its division of the world, and the take the square movement in Southern Europe and Occupy in the US have picked up the baton and joined the new protest cycle. Even though dictators have been toppled in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the protests continue. This is also the case in Greece, Spain and Portugal where people reject austerity. There are protests in Bulgaria and Bosnia. In Syria the civil war is raging. In China the number of strikes continue

to rise. In Turkey the youth reject Erdogan's neoliberal 'success' and urban restructuring and in Brazil 'the dangerous classes' have taken to the streets. There are a variety of protests going on – the ones in the West are defensive, the ones in the rest of the World are offensive and reformist – but together they are knocking a hole in the neoliberal world order. Class war is no longer a one-sided affair. The old mole is back, the Vehmgericht is in order and on more and more houses we can see a red cross.⁶

May 2014

6 "In the signs that bewilder the middle class, the aristocracy and the poor prophets of regression, we do recognise our brave friend, Robin Goodfellow, the old mole that can work in the earth so fast, that worthy pioneer — the Revolution. [...] To revenge the misdeeds of the ruling class, there existed in the middle ages, in Germany, a secret tribunal, called the 'Vehmgericht.' If a red cross was seen marked on a house, people knew that its owner was doomed by the 'Vehm'. All the houses of Europe are now marked with the mysterious red cross. History is the judge — its executioner, the proletarian." Karl Marx: "Speech at anniversary of the *People's Paper*", 1856, [HTTPS://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/MARX/WORKS/1856/04/14.HTM](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1856/04/14.htm)

ONE, TWO, MANY CRISES

NEOLIBERALISM, OR THREE DECADES OF BREAKDOWN

“The workers’ movement has not to expect a final catastrophe, but many catastrophes, political – like wars, and economic – like the crises which repeatedly break out, sometimes regularly, sometimes irregularly, but which on the whole, with the growing size of capitalism, become more and more devastating. [...] And should the present crisis abate, new crises and new struggles will arise. In these struggles the working class will develop its strength to struggle, will discover its aims, will train itself, will make itself independent and learn to take into its hands its own destiny, viz., social production itself. In this process the destruction of capitalism is achieved. The self-emancipation of the proletariat is the collapse of capitalism.”

Anton Pannekoek¹

IMAGES OF THE CRISIS

THINGS REALLY ESCALATED IN THE LAST PART OF 2008. AND NO ONE seemed to know what was going on or understand what was happening, what we were confronted with. There was no agreement as to how

1 Anton Pannekoek: “The theory of the collapse of capitalism”, 1934, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/PANNEKOE/1934/COLLAPSE.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1934/collapse.htm)

to describe the events taking place. It was as if everything was written in sand and therefore became unreadable right away, before anybody could read the words a new wave had already flushed everything away. It was difficult to see the contours of what was going on, the scale of things. It was some kind of crisis, that much was clear. But what kind of crisis and for whom? Was there one crisis or more and were they connected? The housing prices in the US were in free fall and investors were looking for 'safe investments' while national banks all over the world were holding their breath. The politicians had no clue as to what was going on and kept repeating that no one could have predicted this, whatever it was. Implicitly they were saying that they had the best of intentions and that they would have acted differently if anybody had had the slightest idea that there was some kind of problem. But that was of course not the case. Now the politicians were very concerned, and they presented themselves through the media with furrowed brows at long meetings, at which they all looked very serious. All of them looked very statesmanlike. The images were meant to cover up the grip of the events which they lacked, and the fact that politicians from all sides stumbled into the crisis not knowing what was going on.

After a little while it became clear that the crisis was not just about an overcooked housing market, but was a much more serious crisis that had to do with the financial markets and their mode of operation. The description of the crisis went from 'slowdown' to 'recession' to 'crash' to 'depression' and back again. The 1930s became a point of reference, images from Weimar Germany of wheelbarrows filled with money started to circulate in the media, but the comparison functioned primarily as a threat, as most people did not really believe in such a scenario after more than fifty years of economic growth. Experts talked about a 'double-dip recession' until it turned out that there was not going to be a new upturn, that the global markets were not really going to recover any time soon.

The new and old apparatus of mediation – from newspapers to Facebook – functioned as the scene for this hectic dance, in which the crisis was addressed and visualized as a natural disaster ('tsunami') or a nuclear accident ('meltdown'). The very same experts and economists who had not been able to predict the crisis and denied any kind of responsibility for it appeared on-screen with worried, grave faces while pointing at graphs and explaining away the events. One day

they would be reassuring viewers that everything was okay, but the next day they would be warning of more misfortune to come. Their perplexity was flagrant. The rhetoric of emergency from the 'war on terror' was thus continued as 'the financial crisis', and the result was once again a hysterical public sphere, full of panic and fear. What is happening? Is it happening here? The political image machines were working overtime and the anti-rebellion regime of the 2000s once again had to stand its test.

Throughout the shambolic run of events there was panic in the eyes of the ruling class. In a really short time former certainties had disappeared. One ruling idea quickly replaced another. The market had long been the road to economic bliss and the state thought it best to get well out of the way, but all of a sudden the wisdom of the last thirty-five years evaporated and the state had to step in. If Bush, Blair and Sarkozy had been busy privatizing Obama, Brown and Hollande talked about nationalizing and increased public spending. Sometimes things really change overnight. And all of a sudden words like 'capitalism' appeared in the media and 'neoliberalism' was for a short time an almost legitimate *as well as* critical description of the dominant economic policy of the period. The *Financial Times* ran a feature on Marx and the contemporary relevance of a Marxist analysis of crisis. Some politicians went pretty far in order to show a readiness to respond to the new situation, the unctuous Sarkozy was – ever the opportunist – photographed browsing through the French translation of *Das Kapital* while the German minister of finance Peer Steinbrücke told journalists that Marx's analysis of capitalism was perhaps not completely irrelevant in the new situation.

In the hunt for an easy explanation of the 'crisis', which was presented first of all as a 'financial crisis', the media ran stories about irresponsible homebuyers who had borrowed their way to expensive houses they couldn't afford. Next they focused on the so-called shadow banking system in which many of the inflated securities were exchanged in small and large packages without any kind of regulation or supervision. The loans were so complex that nobody really seemed to understand how they worked. The general public was presented with an impenetrable machinery and opaque products like CDOs (Collateralized Debt Obligations) that further defied most people's comprehension. The media was suddenly full of stories about this mesmerizing world of ever more ingenious loans, which the banks insured

themselves against with the so-called CDS (Credit Default Swaps), betting on the insolvency of the homeowners. Greed quickly became one of the defining images of the crisis; it was relatively easy for the media, the politicians and the experts to act surprised or even indignant when confronted with the extraordinary level of greed shown by banks and investment firms. The gigantic salaries and bonuses received by investment bankers or other people selling and packing loans was a source of constant debate. The spectacle's ritual pointing of fingers began and everybody was busy pointing at somebody else. A selected group of individuals were pilloried – Alan Greenspan was all of a sudden met with contempt and forced to pronounce 'mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa' in front of rolling cameras – and the rest just continued to do what they had been doing all along. By focusing on the greed of the banks and investors, on bad management, on tax reliefs for the wealthy and on deregulation of the financial markets it was possible to avoid a deeper and more radical analysis of the crisis. The dominant narrative became the tale of how greedy bankers caused the crisis and in this way a discussion of the structural contradictions of capitalism was avoided.

The dramatic events reached a climax in September 2008 when the investment bank Lehman Brothers went bankrupt. It was the largest bankruptcy ever in the US. Lehman Brothers owed more than 600 billion dollars. The images of the shocked and crestfallen leaving their enormous headquarters of glass and steel on Seventh Avenue, purchased in 2003 for 700 million dollars, were spectacular. Like scalded ants they tumbled out of the tall building that used to symbolize power and money, but now in the twinkling of an eye signified greed and worship of money. All of a sudden the global financial circuit was close to collapse. The US housing market turned out to have been one gigantic bubble with prices far, far above their 'real' value. A seemingly endless list of US financial institutions were on the verge of bankruptcy. Lower Manhattan was once again the stage for dramatic scenes. This time it was not an attack from outside, there were no Islamic terrorists, no hijacked airplanes or turban-dressed mujahidins, it was finance capital that was responsible.²

2 There are numerous accounts of the events in September 2008; I rely on: Robert Brenner: "What is Good for Goldman Sachs is Good for America": The Origin of the Current Crisis", 2009, [HTTP://WWW.SSCNET.UCLA.EDU/ISSR/CSTCH/PAPERS/BRENNERCRISISTODAYOCTOBER2009.PDF](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/cstch/papers/BRENNERCRISISTODAYOCTOBER2009.PDF); Jean-Luc Gréau: *La grande récession (depuis 2005). Une chronique pour comprendre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012); Karl

Lehman Brothers was allowed to fall but then the American bourgeoisie rolled up its sleeves and set to work handing billions of dollars from the state's coffers to the banks. American politicians put their serious faces on and tried to look capable. Following the advice of Secretary of Treasury Henry Paulson, who was a former chairman of Lehman Brothers and chairman of the Federal Reserve, and Ben Bernanke, George W. Bush stepped in with a gigantic rescue packet for the financial sector. The financial market had to be saved whatever the cost.

But the collapse of Lehman Brothers on September 15th was only the beginning of a substantial restructuring of the US financial world: Lehman Brothers went under, Bear Stearns also went bankrupt and was bought by JP Morgan Chase, Merrill Lynch was taken over by Bank of America, while Morgan Stanley lost over 80% of its market value. All the large investment banks either went bankrupt or – as was the case with the only two that survived the ‘tsunami’, Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley – became traditional bank holding companies, thereby ending seventy-five years of investment banking on Wall Street. The effects of the crash quickly spread to the rest of the world where stock markets experienced dramatic drops. Then the shock waves started to spread to other parts of the financial system; the largest savings and loan association in the US – Washington Mutual – went into receivership and JP Morgan Chase acquired the assets, Wachovia was taken over by Wells Fargo in order to prevent a failure, and the mortgage companies Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac were nationalized, while the insurance company AIG, which had insured many of the banks' risky loans, got a government bailout of eighty-five billion dollars in exchange for the state getting 79.9% stake in the company in order for it to stay afloat. The financial system was on the verge of collapse when the Federal Reserve lowered the interest rate to almost zero. Invoking the threat of “a total collapse” Paulson proposed a 700 billion dollar bailout which he called the ‘Emergency Economic Stabilization Act’, intended to save the financial institutions that were ‘too big to fail’. The packet was rushed through Congress and the debt effectively socialized.

As late as July 2008 Paulson had been confident about the US economy and the banking system, arguing that the economy would pick up in the second half of 2008. Things did not turn out quite as

Paulson had predicted. Not at all actually and the so-called 'subprime mortgage crisis' further escalated as the 'toxic' mortgage-backed securities became visible. Stock prices continued to drop, more and more people were laid off and more and more houses were up for foreclosure all over the US. And now it was not just in poor African-American neighborhoods, but also white middle class areas in places like Florida, California, Nevada and Arizona.

The bailout was no miracle cure and there was still no money around but instead too many houses on the market. The American economy was in serious trouble, there was no demand, shops were closing down, and another rescue package was necessary for the car industry in Detroit. Banks and financial institutions collapsed and half of private equity funds and hedge funds closed in 2008. It was not much better in Europe where several countries, led by Iceland, Greece and Ireland ran into serious trouble. The pattern was similar to the development in the US; the housing markets exploded and banks experienced liquidity problems. The picture was the same more or less everywhere and banks collapsed or experienced huge deficits. In the UK Northern Rock and Bradford & Bingley were nationalized, in Iceland a long list of banks including Glitnir bank were nationalized too. At the beginning of 2009 exports from countries like China, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea dropped by more than 20% in just two months. According to the IMF 500 billion dollars had disappeared from the capitalist world economy in just a year.

Even though it was pretty clear for most people at some stage during the highly pressurized days in September 2008 that this was not just a question of greedy bankers and opaque financial schemes nothing really happened. The banks were bailed out and the debt socialized. Even symbolic gestures like François Hollande's millionaire tax were rarely actually seen through. The way ahead soon turned out to be more neoliberalism in the form of austerity.

The cause of the crisis remained to a large extent impenetrable. The official narrative was that banks and other credit companies had allowed US consumers with a poor credit rating to get loans in order to buy houses, which they were never going to be able to pay for. The cause of the crisis was said to be the so-called subprime loans. The analysis rarely got any further than this and never amounted to any kind of structural analysis of the capitalist economy. The longer historical development in which the economy moved from a booming

post-war state-led modernization to neoliberal restructuring remained obscure. That the 'bad' loans had been a structural necessity for the US middle class during a period over which its real wages had been dropping was not addressed. In a kind of palliative for the restructuring and the slowing down of the economy, huge sums of credit were introduced that benefitted the Western working and middle class. Instead of higher wages, ordinary Americans and Western Europeans had access to credit which enabled them to buy the products global capitalism needed to make good on in order to stay above water. For the American and European consumers this was a way of sustaining a certain standard of living at a time where real wages were falling because of neoliberal restructuring: outsourcing, technological development, new forms of employment and rationalization of production. Subprime loans made it possible to keep up a certain level of consumption despite higher living costs. It was less a case of greedy bankers who had gone too far in their quest for profit and thus had to be regulated, than it was a question of structural constraints and large structural transformations. There is no question that the financial sector was greedy, but greed is an essential part of capitalism and it does not make sense to condemn it as wrong or excessive. Enrichment is what drives the system and distinguishing between more or less enrichment and greed is a false problem. Although we might try to distinguish between a 'good' factory owner who is only interested in enriching himself a little, and an 'evil' banker who wants to accumulate too much, in the end this is just a misunderstanding. In capitalism everybody must be out for themselves, that's the way the system works; capitalism is endless valorization, as Marx writes. Therefore the crisis cannot be explained as a consequence of the irresponsible actions of a group of greedy bankers; we need an analysis of the objective economic processes. This is not just a question of problems in the financial sector. Without an analysis of the shift from the Fordist accumulation regime of the post-war era to neoliberal capitalism it is not possible to understand the present crisis which is in effect an intensification of processes that have been going on for quite some time.

THE LONG 1970S

As a number of Marxist historians and economists, among them Robert Brenner, Loren Goldner and Paul Mattick Jr., have long insisted,

we have to see the economic development which has been going on for the last few decades – including the introduction of subprime loans – as one long and not very successful attempt to overcome the economic crisis that surfaced in the early 1970s. In this sense the crisis is not new, it just reached a new phase in 2008. According to Brenner the crisis has its origin in the long weakening of the advanced economies, those of the US, Japan and Germany, whose economic performances have deteriorated since 1973 regardless what figures one consults: GDP, growth in output, investments or wages. As Brenner points out the lowest annual rate of profit in the US industrial sector during the period from 1948 to 1973 was higher than the highest rate of profit in the period after 1973. At no time in the ensuing period, neither in Reagan's 1980s, nor Clinton's 1990s or Bush's 00s did the American economy get close to achieving the results of the previous period. The bottom line is that the neoliberal economy has been a kind of unsustainable pyramid scheme, where growth has not been able to finance interest payments, forcing debtors into borrowing more and more money. This of course is the bubble economy.

Brenner is very clear as to the background of this development: "The decreasing vitality of the advanced capitalist economies has been rooted in a major decline, and stubborn failure to revive, of the rate of profit, finding its fundamental (though not its only) source in a persistent tendency towards overcapacity in the global manufacturing sector, which originated with the intensification of international competition between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s."³ It is this situation that has not been resolved. Despite a consistent reduction in that part of revenue that goes to wages and welfare, it has not been possible to reach a sufficient amount of profit. Real wages for workers in the production sector were the same in the 00s as they were in the 1970s. The persistent tendency to overcapacity has produced a situation in which the rate of profit has continued to decline creating a negative spiral: suppressing wages in order to recreate returns, government cuts in public spending in order to prop up profits in the private sector and the drop in the tempo of accumulation has resulted in reduced investment as well as a weakening of aggregate demand. A solution to the problem of insufficient demand was tried through borrowing, both public and private. This 'solution' to the declining rate of profit and weakening demand was

3 Brenner: "What is Good for Goldman Sachs is Good for America", p. 9.

to incur more and more debt. The analysis is thus that the ‘value reduction’ or ‘creative destruction’ that has been taking place since the American economy started to slow down in the early 1970s has been one long and sluggish decline that, to a certain extent, has been invisible thanks to the enormous debt.

Brenner’s analysis of the crisis is focused on the post-war boom and the subsequent bubble. The long boom from 1948 to 1973 took the form of an intense and brutal competition between industrial firms which invested heavily in new technology at the expense of labor. As new countries like Japan and Western Germany got access to the advanced technology, competition on the world market intensified and the margin of profit dropped forcing companies to increase their production. The lower the profit on individual products the more products you need to produce. But as workers are being replaced by machinery the fewer workers/consumers there are to buy the products. The explosive growth and the industrial expansion of the post-war period in other words collapsed under its own weight, the investments in machinery became too big, and the financial sector had to step up. But as Brenner writes, every upturn since 1973 has become more and more shallow than the previous one and the problems in the real economy have remained unsolved and abyssal.

Brenner’s analysis is in many ways a continuation of Marx’s law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall that was itself a challenge of the idea of equilibrium between supply and demand, as put forward by political economists like Jean-Baptiste Say and Frédéric Bastiat.⁴ According to Marx the capitalist market economy is characterized by disharmonic aspects, which manifest themselves as fluctuations and crises. On the one hand it is productive labor that is the source of surplus value and on the other hand competition forces capitalist production to be more and more efficient, and therefore replace workers with machines. As Marx phrases it dead labor replaces living labor and thereby the real source of profit tends to disappear. Capitalism will thus inevitably result in crisis, because labor is the only source of new value and is yet always being excluded from the process of production. The need to streamline productivity and to produce cheaper results in more and more intense competition leads to a centralization and concentration of capital. For workers this process takes form of a

4 Karl Marx: *Capital*. Vol. III, 1863-1883, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/CH13.htm>

crisis-ridden development where fewer and fewer workers are required and where more and more workers are expelled from capital's metabolism and forced to join the industrial reserve army.

Following Brenner and Marx's account of the falling rate of profit we can see the present crisis as an expression of the shake out that has not yet taken place, or only taken place in an excruciating slow motion. Even though neoliberalism has taken the form of ongoing cuts and capital flight from an 'overcrowded' manufacturing sector to cheaper places of production and into financial services – a kind of gliding shake out – it has been possible to limit or defer the meltdown through bubbles and debt; the deep problems of the real economy has been covered up with credit. After 2008 the 'cover-up' has become extremely difficult. With the crisis and the implosion of the American financial and real estate markets it is no longer possible to postpone the shake out. Brenner thus predicts a long depression in which the alternatives to capitalism will manifest themselves in different forms. And the longer the crisis lasts the less legitimacy the capitalist mode of accumulation will have and the more legitimacy alternative ways of organizing society will acquire.

Brenner's sophisticated and empirically detailed analysis describes the development from the middle of the 20th century and onwards with a special focus on the shift that occurred with the transition from state-led modernization to neoliberalism during the 1970s and 1980s. The analysis makes it possible to embed the crisis in a longer historical perspective in which it becomes evident that the neoliberal accumulation regime has been what Loren Goldner calls "one long slow crash landing" where capitalism has been running out of steam since it came into crisis in the late 1960s and where the driving force has to a large extent been an enormous amount of credit, but also the inclusion of more workers spreading accumulation to more capitals.⁵ Brenner's description is primarily focused on national economies and the interaction between them on the world market but we can supplement his analysis with a class perspective – the most important thing remains the possible supersession of capitalism and the abolition of the classes – that will give the analysis a bit more 'body'.

5 Loren Goldner: "The Biggest 'October Surprise' of All: A World Capitalist Crash", 2008, [HTTP://HOME.EARTHLINK.NET/~LRGOLDNER/OCTOBER.HTML](http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/october.html)

CAPITALIST COUNTER OFFENSIVE

Brenner's periodization fits perfectly as a frame for the almost endless series of defeats that the reformist workers' movement has experienced since the beginning of the 1970s, when the post-war boom was replaced by recession. The piling up of debt has giving the period a semblance of normality (in the West) but it's telling that throughout the period there have been crises: 1973-1975, 1980-1982, 1990-1991, 2001-2002 and 2008 and onwards. From 1970 to 2007 there were no fewer than 124 bank crises, 208 currency crises and sixty-three debt crises.⁶ Even though many of them were of limited compass the numbers say a lot about the period. If you consider the neoliberal period from a social reproductive perspective it almost acquires the figure of a new thirty years war, not unlike the one that took place between 1914 and 1945.⁷ Like in the earlier period capital has had to devalue existing commodities in the form of labor, machines and infrastructure, in order to make possible a new expansion. The period since the 1970s has therefore been characterized by a drop in production, mass unemployment and the destruction of old capital in the West. It has thus been one long crisis where capital has been desperately trying to recreate dynamic equilibrium by spreading accumulation to more capital command centres.

This is a history of decline: In the US the standard of living has dropped between 20 and 30% since the beginning of the 1970s and it is no longer possible to support a family with one paycheck (in the 1960s a working week of forty hours was enough to support a family, today eighty hours is often not enough), wage differences have exploded (since the 1970s the difference between the richest fifth of the US population and the poorest increased exponentially and is today bigger than in 1929) and more than seven million people or almost 3% of the population, is in prison or on parole.

In Western Europe the picture is not much better. An unemployment rate of 8 to 10% has been a permanent feature, the need for two paychecks has become the norm here too, and the welfare state has been under constant pressure and is today in effect dismantled in

6 Luc Laeven & Fabian Valencia: *Systemic Banking Crises: A New Database* (Washington: IMF Working Paper 8/224, 2008), [HTTPS://WWW.IMF.ORG/EXTERNAL/PUBS/FT/WP/2008/WP08224.PDF](https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2008/wp08224.pdf)

7 For an analysis of the period from 1914 to 1945 as the thirty years war of the 20th Century, see Enzo Traverso: *À feu et à sang. De la guerre civile européenne 1914-1945* (Paris: Stock, 2007).

many places. Eastern Europe and Russia have been the objects of a brutal destruction of what was their state capitalist safety net and their societies have been divided between a tiny minority of the extremely rich and a more or less impoverished population whose conditions of existence have deteriorated. This is of course nothing compared to the development that has taken place in Africa, the non oil producing Middle East, Latin America and the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia. Here sickness, slums and death for millions of people have characterized the period. More than 100 countries in this part of the world have been the object of IMF structural adjustment plans during the 1980s or 1990s, which consistently destroys society after society with its obsession with the primacy of the market. 'Black' Africa has been the hardest hit, there wars have been raging for years and many countries are so-called 'failed states', where investment of any kind occurs only rarely, and if there does, it's only in order to extract and loot natural resources.

The primary exception to this development in the period has been Southeast Asia and in particular China, which has gone from a failed autarkic state capitalism to being the second largest economy in the world, but here too the costs have been massive. Growth has been based on a disciplined and extremely cheap labour force, but 750 million farmers have not had a share in the intense modernization, and 100 million people make up a reserve army travelling between the cities on the coast searching for work. Capitalist development is always also underdevelopment. The countries in Southeast Asia have generally done better than most countries in other parts of the world, but here too the picture is pretty mixed as South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia were hit by a severe crisis in the late 1990s, which hit their working classes hard. Even if we zoom in on the development in China and Southeast Asia the picture shows a long decline in which capital has tried to 're-invent' itself by saving on social reproduction in the West and by enrolling new wage labourers with archaic family productive relationships.

As Loren Goldner writes the list of the defeats of the workers' movement after 1973 seems endless: in Latin America brutal dictators experimented with both neoliberalism and 'disappearance' during the 1970s and the first part of the 1980s; in Iran Khomeini smashed the Iranian workers' councils and the Iranian labour movement by sending them to war in Iraq; in Poland worker resistance was quickly defused; in Algeria the youth movement in 1988 was diverted into

Islamism; in South Africa workers' more radical demands were annulled in the transition from apartheid to the ANC's neoliberal crisis management; in South Korea the Asian crisis in 1997 halted the gains the working class had achieved during the 1990s; in Argentina the piqueteros movement was embraced by Kirchner and thereby neutralized; and in the West the local working classes have moved from defeat to defeat and have not stopped losing terrain, this has been the story from the conflict at FIAT in 1980 to Reagan's firing of the 11,345 air traffic controllers in 1981 and the UK miners' strike in 1984-5 to the Californian supermarket strike in 2004. The recipe has been the same from the 1970s onwards: deindustrialization and pay cuts.⁸

By means of new telecommunication and transport technologies capital responded to the protests of the late 1960s by globalizing production, thereby largely disbanding workers in the West and rendering more wildcat strikes, like the ones that challenged capital from 1967 to 1974 in France, Great Britain, the US, Italy, Sweden, Portugal and Spain, impossible. In order to avoid confrontation with their own workers then the advanced capitalist countries established a global labour market where they could get cheaper and less rebellious workers in Asia, Latin America, North Africa and South Africa, putting pressure on the workers 'at home' through a regime of more work for less pay. The period since the early 1980s has been one long defeat for the proletariat and the bubble effectively hid capital's accumulation crisis, as well as growing local and global inequality.

PRECARIOUS, INDEBTED AND WAGELESS

Capital has systematically sought to save on its expenses for wage labor, thereby annulling the possibility for coherent worker resistance, as it showed itself in the late 1960s. The search for low costs and a world rid of a resilient working class has taken the form of a marked growth of precarious labour in the so-called developed countries and a veritable explosion of the informal economy in the so-called third world.

The Hartz reforms in Germany in the first half of the 2000s is exemplary of the first tendency, which institutionalized a low income sector that not only forces more and more people to hold down several

8 Loren Goldner: "The Historical Moment That Produced US: Global Revolution or Recomposition of Capital", 2010, [HTTP://HOME.EARTHLINK.NET/~LRGOLDNER/HISTORICAL.HTML](http://home.earthlink.net/~LRGOLDNER/HISTORICAL.HTML)

jobs at the same time but also forces them into taking on increasing amounts of debt. In 1995 the low income sector accounted for about 15% of the total workforce, in 2010 it had risen to 25%. At the same time as this the low income earners have experienced the biggest decline in real wages and their working hours have increased significantly more than those of other wage labourers. Arguing that costs had to be kept down millions of Germans were pushed into an uncertain life as under-producers and under-consumers, who knew full well that they would lose their job before long and that their next job was in all likelihood going to be worse, more insecure and definitely not better paid. Looked at from outside this is a paradoxical process, in that labour is necessary for the production of surplus value though it appears as if capitalism in the present period is trying to rid itself of labour by creating a society without workers. Of course, the working class has more or less always been on the receiving end of such a process but rarely to such a degree as during the last thirty years. Capital's response to the workers' resistance of the 1960s (from the Belgian strikes in 1961 to the hot spring in Italy in 1969) has been so violent that it tends to destroy the very relationship that makes capitalism's existence possible, that is the relationship between capital and labour.

This is of course the history of how capitalist labour has changed form during the last decades. Already in the late 1960s the Italian workerists described this development as the dissolution of the border between factory and society, where capitalist production in the advanced countries no longer takes place primarily in the factory but outside: society was transformed into one big factory. These tendencies were the starting point for Hardt and Negri's now classic analysis of immaterial labour, into which a substantial part of the working population in the West has been accommodated during the last few decades.⁹ The crucial change brought about in the transition to immaterial labour is that knowledge, information, affect and communication have become close to the centre of the creation of value. As Hardt and Negri phrase it, capital is now exploiting the human body, intelligence, creativity and our affective relations with other people. The increase in this type of work was the other side of the massive deindustrialization that took place in the West as a response to the outburst of workers' resistance in the second part of the 1960s.

9 Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri: *Empire* (Harvard & London: Harvard University Press, 2000).

Beyond Hardt and Negri it is important to understand that precarity is not just the description of a new kind of labour, but is today a general condition which also affects employment that we would not normally describe as precarious. Today so-called stable jobs share many of the same characteristics as precarious labour, they are also flexible, project based and often require dissolving the separation between work and leisure time. During the last thirty years the labour market has tended to split into three groups. At the bottom we find a group composed of unskilled workers who are primarily employed in the personal service sector, doing different kinds of paid domestic work, but this group also includes more 'traditional' manual labour, such as transport workers. In the middle we have a group of workers within education, media and research of different kinds, and on the top a group made up of all those who lead the others and get compensated with an extremely fat paycheck. The two upper groups share values up to a point, although only a very small segment of the second group will ever be able to punch its way up to the gilded few at the top. Those at the bottom are pretty much devoid of any chance of upward mobility and have to make do with the cheapest products that spectacle can offer. The workers have thus been 'separated' as the Situationists say.

One of the central aspects of the long neoliberal crash landing has thus been the creation of precarious labour, which has replaced what formerly were permanent jobs with poorly paid and moreover, more insecure and temporary employment. Neoliberalism's market driven institutionalization of insecurity makes itself felt on the labour market as a continuous expansion of insecure conditions of employment. Precarity thus equals insecurity where the individual worker is incapable of predicting her future, because she is subjected to external forces beyond her own control. Precarious labour is characterized by a divorce between labour and employment, where the duration of the employment does not coincide with the work that is being carried out. The terms of employment often only partly cover the 'labour' that is actually done and the paycheck is normally incommensurate with the 'labour' that is carried out.¹⁰ All of these characteristics have always been a part of capitalist wage labour, of course they have, but today they have once more come to the fore in the West.

10 Cf. Maurizio Lazzarato: *The Making of the Indebted Man: Essay on the Neoliberal Condition* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013).

The French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have analyzed the shift that took place when capital responded to the critique of Fordist work by transforming jobs to temporary and flexible employment. They focus on “the ideological changes that have accompanied the recent transformations in capitalism” and describe the coming into being of a new normative regime of justification, a new capitalist spirit, which broadened in influence during the 1980s as a recuperation of the anti-authoritarian critique that was launched in the late 1960s, when the workers movement’s social critique of the exploitation of capitalism fused with the artistic critique of capitalist working life’s boredom and lack of creativity.¹¹ The new spirit of capitalism is, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, the partial adoption of the critique students and workers articulated against Fordist work. In the 1980s leaders at the top of the socio-cultural hierarchy instrumentalized the artistic critique and transferred it into management discourse. The artistic critique’s demand of freedom, autonomy and authenticity was transformed into a new capitalist spirit, into new forms of organization and managing that suspended Fordism’s hierarchical and authoritarian organization models in favour of flexible, network based structures, which drew on the artistic critique’s ideas of participation and creative individual self-development. One aspect of this process was the that the artist was turned into a kind of ideal type for precarious labour, her work being seen as flexible, disposable and poorly paid. The result of this process was that the distinction between work and free time tended to disappear in a kind of expanded field of work that fused with life, and where the characteristics of precarious labour became applicable to most forms of work, which thus presented themselves as self-development projects and network based cooperation.

The other side of the shift to precarious labor is the appearance of debt as a means of survival. Because when the paycheck gets smaller the working class has to borrow in order to get by. The working class has to cover its ‘consumption costs’ through debt. The reproduction of labor in the household now takes place through credit, only thus can the fluctuations of the private micro-economy be evened out. Debt has therefore become a general condition today. In order to survive it is necessary to raise loans, whether it is to pay for housing,

11 Luc Boltanski & Eve Chiapello: *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 2005), p. 3.

transportation, education or daily consumption. The explosion of this debt and credit economy is of course connected to the last thirty years unrelenting and consistent – across the political divide – hollowing out of the provision of welfare in the advanced economies. The welfare state that was built during the post-war boom has been gradually dismantled over the last thirty years. Because of the crumbling of the Keynesian wage productivity deal it has become necessary to pay oneself in order to obtain an education and access to welfare services over the best part of the advanced world. When people became poorer because real wages fell and their social benefits were cut, neoliberalism offered compensation through debt.

The pattern has been in place since Reagan and Thatcher commanded their massacre on the social safety net in the US and Great Britain in the early 1980s: your salary and pension does not go up but that's not a problem as you get access to consumption loans and credit cards, and are encouraged to put some money aside for your pension; you can no longer afford housing but you can of course get a mortgage; you cannot afford an education but you can pay for one by getting a student loan; you are not covered in case of accidents or disasters but you can insure yourself against such events. This is the way the debt economy has superimposed itself on all social relationships and provided everybody with debt, which at some point they have to pay back: the worker becomes an indebted worker, the consumer becomes an indebted consumer and the citizen becomes an indebted citizen (who has to pay for the losses of the banks). In neoliberal society most people have debt.

Maurizio Lazzarato analyses this development as the emergence of the indebted person, man and woman as a debtor who has to pay for everything themselves. Lazzarato reads this as neoliberalism's particular mode of proletarianization, in which exchange is supplied by debt as the basis of exploitation. We have to do with a both economic as well as existential precarization where the population is made responsible for everything finance capital and the hollowed out welfare state have externalized. This process takes the form of a self-disciplination, debt produces discipline, as Lazzarato writes following Foucault. The debt economy produces specific subjects and in that way debt is not just an economic but also an existential regime. As he phrases it: "[N]eoliberal policies produce [...] 'entrepreneurs of the self' who are more or less in debt, more or less poor, but in any case always precarious. For

the majority of the population, becoming an entrepreneur of the self is restricted to managing, according to the terms of business and competition, its employability, its debts, the drop in wages and income, and the reduction of public services.”¹²

The debt economy produces the indebted human that is dominated by the need to maximize value and manage risk through radically isolated choices. This is a veritable control regime in which the individual is subjected to a personalized version of an IMF structural adjustment plan, which lays out the guidelines for her work and consumption. This same control is of course applied to firms and countries too, as in the case of Greece, which is constantly evaluated by rating companies and the EU and the IMF in order to ensure that the government carries on with its drastic cuts, no matter the consequences for the population. The individualization of neoliberalism culminates in the debt economy, in which the crisis is explained as the result of irresponsible US homeowners or as a consequence of the laziness of the Greek population. There are no genuine choices in the neoliberal debt economy because you are forced into a particular mode of behavior due to the obligation to pay back the loans that you had to take out in the first place in order to live.

As Lazzarato writes with Nietzsche in mind, debt has a moral dimension in so far as debt produces responsibility and guilt. You are yourself responsible for the debt you acquire just like you are responsible for being able to pay off your mortgage yourself. A whole series of television programs like “The Luxury Trap” and “Till Debt Do Us Part” perfectly express the discourse of guilt implicit in the debt economy, which individualizes social relationships (we all of us have debt). Debt is thus not just an economic relationship it is a social relationship that has to do with trust, as it expresses a promise: I will pay back my debt. I dedicate my future to paying back everything I owe. In this way time is cancelled, debt destroys the agency of the individual as well as the critical position of everybody with debt. Lazzarato describes this as a kind of total alienation because it is not only that specific part of the life sometimes called work life that is seized, but the whole of life. The ability to dispose of and plan one’s future that disappears. The future is literally mortgaged out or pawned, as it is not only one’s present and future work that is involved but one’s whole existence, because debt affects its subject’s morality and general

12 Maurizio Lazzarato: *The Making of the Indebted Man*, p. 48.

mode of behavior. This is in effect a colonization of the future. Debt is a promise that defines the framework for future actions, it thus not only limits but suffocates the future and deprives people of their agency and the chance for them to choose otherwise. The future belongs to capital and the individual is bound by invisible chains of debt to creditors and has to regulate her life with a view to being able to pay back the liability.

Debt and precarious working conditions are one side of the neoliberal restructuring that has been carried out in the name of globalization, outsourcing and new technology. The other side is the exclusion of more and more people from the process of accumulation. The neoliberal restructuring has produced a surplus not only of badly paid service workers but also slum dwellers who cannot even get a job or are fighting for survival in the so-called informal economy. We are faced with a situation in which ever increasing numbers of people are being excluded from the capitalist economy across the globe. They are destined to what Michael Denning calls a “wageless life” where not only have they no access to the resources with which life can be sustained, but are also superfluous for purposes of accumulation and thus no longer able to generate capital.¹³ This is the story about how a large part of the population of the globe in the second half of the 20th century, and especially since the 1980s, have become lumpen because they have gone from a self-sufficient agrarian population to being wage slaves, if they are lucky enough to find a job, as neoliberal restructuring has created a declining need for labor. This process is in accordance with Marx’s description of the general law of capitalist accumulation according to which capital produces a relative surplus population which is superfluous to the needs of capital. This development, which Marx describes in *Capital*, is an ongoing process: when the rate of profit declines capital draws back and rejects workers. Marx describes this as “the simple process that constantly ‘sets free’ a part of the labourers; by methods which lessen the number of labourers employed in proportion to the increased production. The whole form of the movement of modern industry depends, therefore, upon the constant transformation of a part of the labouring population into unemployed or half-employed hands”.¹⁴ We are confronted with a process where capital expels more and more from its process of production.

13 Michael Denning: “Wageless Life”, *New Left Review*, no. 66, 2010, pp. 79-97.

14 Karl Marx: *Capital*. Vol. I, 1867, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-C1/CH25.HTM#S4>

More and more workers find that they are unable to carve out a place in the process of reproduction whereby the proletariat tendentiously becomes an externality in its own reproduction. More and more workers are set 'free' from not only the means of reproduction but also from wage labour. They are not precarious, dequalified workers, they are instead just disqualified, they are expendable. They are what Denning calls wageless life and what Marx termed proletarians, the ones "who produces and increases capital, and is thrown out on the streets, as soon as he is superfluous for the needs of aggrandisement of 'Monsieur capital'."¹⁵ The ones who have nothing but nonetheless have to survive through the market and therefore have to subject themselves to the most abject forms of wage slavery.

A large part of the world's population, primarily in the so-called global South has thus been proletarianized during the last couple of decades and many have been turned into surplus proletarians that capital cannot use (when it comes to creating value). On a global scale we are probably talking about one billion people. Serge Latouche has described in some detail the world this mass of people live in.¹⁶ He calls it "the fourth world", a place without life where one just survives and which is materially and morally left behind. Absurdity and rottenness are two of the humiliating conditions of the fourth world, where people are crammed together in the margins of big cities without any prospect of getting included in accumulation. This fourth world is the result of neoliberal globalization and demographic growth, which together have effectively destroyed traditional agrarian systems in the global South, with the consequence that rural areas have come into crisis, which results in massive migration towards the cities where migrants are however very unlikely to find a job, as many large cities in Latin America, Africa and India (for instance São Paulo, Johannesburg and Mumbai) have experienced deindustrialization on a large scale during the last few decades. The enormous slums are less the result of growth in the cities than a consequence of dramatic changes in the countryside. A process often begun as a result of the structural adjustment plans the IMF has forced countries to follow. The consequence of the liberalization demanded of the agricultural markets has been more or less the same, that many farmers go bankrupt competing on the global market. Even though millions of jobs

15 Ibid.

16 Serge Latouche: *In the Wake of the Affluent Society: An Exploration of Post-Development* (London: Zed Books, 1993).

have been created in Latin America, North Africa, South Africa and especially Southeast Asia from the 1970s on, these new jobs by no means cover the huge demand for employment. The need is far, far greater as the exclusion process has torn one billion people up by the roots; people who now survive in the informal economy. Regardless of whether we define them as migrants, unemployed, forgotten, on the run from the countryside, or displaced in the city, enormous masses of people live in a kind of limbo, outside the law and outside the metabolism of capital. These are the ones who have nothing, the inhabitants of the 'real global village', stripped of rights and thus free, the ones who are continually and directly exposed to the systemic violence of market relations. We can call it "bare life" following Giorgio Agamben, people who are pushed outside the political and economic order and placed in a state of emergency without access to resources or political rights.¹⁷ They are worthless, expendable. As a consequence of the privatization of public goods and the deregulation of markets millions of people across the globe have been transformed into naked life and now survive in this hell to the best of their abilities and with the remains of scraps the capitalist economy has left them.

The 'development' of Africa, Latin America and Asia is the historical culmination of the brutal negation of the hopes for development and equality held by many at the start of the decolonization process. A hope that manifested itself in the 1960s both in national liberation movements in Africa and Indo China and in the broad coalition of developing countries that tried to launch "The New International Economic Order" (NIEO) in the UN. But right from the off the interests of Western capital derailed any attempt at regional autonomy in these parts of the world. The potential challenge was quickly put to rest and the potential of decolonization was never realized, but instead replaced with puppet despotism (Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, etc.), military dictatorship (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay), 'market socialism' (Vietnam) or just massacres and looting (Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda). The national liberation movements more or less all collapsed during the 1970s and more than 100 countries were subjected to the IMF's structural adjustment programmes, which only meant further underdevelopment, more slums and wageless survival. The revolts in North Africa and the Middle East are

17 Giorgio Agamben: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

delayed reactions to this cancellation of the decolonization process.

Mike Davis has described this development as the transformation of the globe into a planet of slums, where more and more people are forced to migrate to cities that grow without being able to offer the migrants any work.¹⁸ During the hottest period of industrial capitalism in the 19th century it was often at least possible for workers who were forced from the country to the city to find work, but this is not the case today. The enormous mass of people is forced to survive in the hell of the informal economy. They work for extremely poor employers, often as street vendors, or in food stalls, or restaurants. Contrary to the predictions of the World Bank at the beginning of the 1970s, when the term 'informal economy' was introduced – because the informal sector was going to be a temporary phenomena that would pass it wasn't necessary to worry about the extremely low wages – this sector has in no way disappeared but instead become an integrated aspect of neoliberal globalization. The informal sector has expanded exponentially and today almost 90% of the Indian work force labours in the shadowlands of the off-the-books economy. Confronted with the growth of this sector the IMF and the World Bank concluded – without a shade of irony – that the real problem was actually the formal economy. Strong unions were the problem and, surprisingly enough, the solution was greater adaptability and further liberalization. Workers in the informal economy were all of a sudden presented by the World Bank as 'creative entrepreneurs', able to climb the social and economic hierarchy thanks to their flexibility and inventiveness. If the slum worker was the solution in the global South the flexible precarious laborer was the new black in the West. Davis rejects the myth of the slum worker's possibility of career advancement and concludes that "the majority of the slum-dwelling laboring poor are truly and radically homeless in the contemporary international economy".¹⁹

After three decades of intense mismanagement of the poor countries' economies we are confronted with an overpopulation that is not able to join the formal economy, but remains outside able to find jobs neither in the old nor the new industries, in which the increased use of technology means less demand for labour. Therefore the superfluous masses are not able to enter into the process of accumulation of capital and are forced to survive outside of or in the margins of the capitalist

18 Mike Davis: *Planet of Slums* (London & New York: Verso, 2006).

19 Ibid., p. 178.

mode of production. Both Latouche's and Davis' analyses show that Marx's description of the production of the industrial reserve army of labour rings true in our current circumstances: "On the one hand, therefore, the additional capital formed in the course of accumulation attracts fewer and fewer labourers in proportion to its magnitude. On the other hand, the old capital periodically reproduced with change of composition, repels more and more of the labourers formerly employed by it."²⁰ In 2030 it will be 2.4 billion people. They will be excluded from both country and city, neither able to get a job in the rural economy nor in industry, but have to drag themselves through as best as they can in the slum of the informal economy.

BIO-CRISIS

THE LONG, GRUELLING NEOLIBERAL WEARING OUT OF SOCIETY HAS ANOTHER dimension, namely the ongoing biospheric meltdown that only slowly and very reluctantly has become an object of political debate, though rarely political action during the last few years. The economic and political crisis is thus supplemented with another crisis, the bio-crisis, which is also closely connected with capital's need for constant growth. This need puts the ecosystem, which guarantees collective survival on earth, to one side. Scientifically this is hard fact, it is difficult to find scientists that dismiss the bio-crisis. It is, nevertheless, not possible to do anything, because that would require a fundamental break with capitalist modernization and the idea of growth.

It is not even as if the bio-crisis is invisible. The consequences are becoming clearer and clearer and manifest themselves in changes in climate that occur all over the world and in the rapid reduction of biodiversity, which means that more and more animal and plants species are disappearing every day. The effects of global warming, in which rising temperature materializes in melting ice caps, rising sea levels, droughts, plagues, and migration on an enormous scale are there for all to see. The burning of carbon dioxide, which is the major emission from the burning of oil, natural gas and coal, combined with deforestation produces a much larger dose of carbon dioxide than nature can absorb, causing temperature to rise. The higher temperatures are melting the ice at the North Pole and the glaciers in the Antarctic,

20 Karl Marx: *Capital*. Vol. I, 1867, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-C1/CH25.HTM#S3>

resulting in floods not just in lowland areas of the world, but all over the world. At the same time many glaciers will melt and there will be a shortage of clean drinking water. The course is set: climate change will get more and more tangible, through extreme weather conditions like storms, droughts and floods. But the bio-crisis is not just global warming, it is also the biodiversity crisis. Every hour on average three species are disappearing. That is 100 or 1,000 times faster than before capital's process of accumulation became the driving social force. Within the next two decades this mass extinction could accelerate to 10,000 times what has been the normal, or background rate of extinction. This would constitute the sixth mass extinction in the earth's history; the last one took place sixty-five billion years ago when the dinosaurs became extinct. As the biologist E. O. Wilson writes we are well underway with the sixth mass extinction and destruction of eco-systems, and this time it is man who is responsible.²¹ And global warming and the reduction of the planet's biodiversity are just the most visible examples of the destruction of the biosphere, we also have to address pollution, overfishing, desertification and ocean acidification. We are destroying the planet and fast.

It has long been a well known that it is necessary to keep global warming down to two degrees Celsius. This would be a 'manageable' warming scientists argue. It was even recognized by politicians at the climate meeting in Copenhagen in 2009. It is a question of whether the two degrees warming is low enough, and scientists like James E. Hansen warn that this is "a prescription for long-term disaster".²² But it is not even likely that it will be possible to keep to the two degrees limit. A number of reports argue that global warming is rising so fast that it is not even possible to stick even to this limit. In 2012 the World Bank was already expecting a four degrees increase to be likely in the near future. And temperature has already risen 0.8 degrees. At the present speed we will have reached the two degrees in just fourteen years. At that time the 565 gigatons of carbon dioxide we are able to release into the atmosphere and still stay within the two degrees limit will have been used. Unfortunately the big energy companies and states like the US and China have already planned to release 2,795 gigatons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. This is five times the

21 Edward O. Wilson: *The Future of Life* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

22 James E. Hansen: *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth of the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2010).

amount that will allow us to keep global warming manageable. The number appears in account books and it is not likely that the companies will let go of the value of the 2,795 gigatons of carbon dioxide, an estimate of the value of the emission is twenty-seven trillion dollars.²³

That the hunt for profit is not compatible with the survival of the species is also clear from the fact that the 200 biggest energy companies in 2012 alone spend 674 billion dollars on locating new oil, gas and coal sources. We are in other words a long way in excess of the two degrees already. And unless there occurs a radical change in perspective as of today we are not only talking about more pain for the wretched of the earth but nothing less than the destruction of the biodiversity of the globe.

Scientists like the Nobel prize winner Paul Crutzen argue that there has occurred a shift, in which man has become a geologic player who is capable of changing life on the planet.²⁴ The last 12,000 years of history are being brought to an end as we are moving from the Holocene epoch to the Anthropocene where mankind is folding herself into the atmosphere, ocean, earth, and animals and changing the biosphere of plants. Scientists write about the stratigraphic signals man has left in the form of cities and roads that are carved into the landscape, but of course also about the above mentioned biochemical processes, greenhouse gasses, genetically modified crops etc. The conclusion is that the modern, industrial fossil burning economy is transforming the evolutionary course of the planet by paving the earth, cutting down its trees, changing waterways, ocean acidification, warming the atmosphere and exterminating species. And being so effective that its effects will be felt for tens of thousands of years to come.

Although the different aspects of the bio-crisis are of course connected to specific processes related to individual bio-systems they are all a result of the contradiction between the capitalist mode of production's need for profit and the survival of the human species in a relatively stable eco-system. As Gene Ray, paraphrasing Horkheimer, writes: whoever is not prepared to talk about capitalism should remain silent about the climate.²⁵ James O'Connor describes the

23 Will Hutton: "Burn our planet or face financial meltdown", *Guardian*, April 21st, 2013, [HTTP://WWW.THEGUARDIAN.COM/COMMENTISFREE/2013/APR/21/CARBON-PROBLEMS-FINANCIAL-CRISIS-HUTTON](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/21/carbon-problems-financial-crisis-hutton)

24 Paul Crutzen et al.: "The New World of the Anthropocene", *Environmental Science & Technology*, no. 7, 2010, pp. 2228-2231.

25 Gene Ray: "History, the Sublime, Terror: Notes on the Politics of Fear", *Left*

contradiction between capital's search for profit and the survival of the biosphere as the second contradiction of capitalism. The ongoing environmental crisis is an effect of capital's 'under-production' of nature. Capitalism depends on nature and cannot produce it itself. But capitalism treats nature as if it was a 'free' resource; capital needs nature but does not 'pay' for it. Put differently, capital exploits nature and does not pay the replacement cost, effectively failing to reproduce its own conditions of production. Capital is thus according to O'Connor confronted with an 'external' contradiction that is just as important as the inner contradiction of a capitalist mode of production (overproduction), and is therefore "inherently anti-ecological". Because capital is based on an abstract logic of value it is in direct contradiction with nature. As O'Connor laconically writes: "The basic (and not very well publicized) fact is that by its nature, *capital is bad at preserving things*, whether the social well-being of people, land, community values, urban amenities, rural life, nature, or private fixed capital, including structures."²⁶

The neoliberal phase of capitalism has, according to O'Connor, only further accentuated this basic contradiction; the flood of deregulation and privatizations only deepen the contradiction between capital's need for profit and the reproduction of the biosphere. The plundering of nature has only intensified as national regulations have been undone and the market has been turned into the fundamental and inescapable world picture where one size fits all.

Following O'Connor we can describe capital's pillage of nature as a variant of the process Marx analyses as primitive or original accumulation. Marx introduces the concept as a critique of previous, idealizing accounts of the origin of capitalism, with a view to describing how a group of people were separated from their former means of subsistence, became dispossessed and therefore had to sell their labour power in order to survive. As Marx writes "great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled as free and 'unattached' proletarians on the labour-market".²⁷ The transition to capitalism is never possible without a large-scale destruction of individual and collective means

Curve, no. 32, 2008, p. 10.

26 James O'Connor: *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism* (New York: Guilford, 1998), p. 317.

27 Karl Marx: *Capital. Vol. I*, 1867, [HTTPS://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/MARX/WORKS/1867-C1/CH26.HTM](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch26.htm)

of production ‘freeing’ workers with “nothing to sell except their own skins”. Even though Marx only used the term to describe the expropriation of the rural population in England from the 16th century to 19th century we can, following Rosa Luxemburg, use it as a description of continued capitalist looting that compensates for the inner imbalance of the capitalist dynamic.²⁸ The process of pillage is a permanent dimension in capitalism; it is not just a specific historical event but a continued process. Neoliberal globalization is a testimony to that fact: the outsourcing of jobs where Western capital is not paying for the reproduction of cheap labour power in the global South, the non-reproducible wages in the West that makes it impossible to produce a new generation of workers or necessitates debt, the plundering of nature where capital is not paying for the permanent damages it causes, the looting of resources in the Middle East, where Western companies and states steal oil, and the slow wearing down of infrastructure and industrial plants that are not maintained and therefore slowly disintegrate. All of these examples show the continued presence of primitive accumulation.

Beyond the neoliberal phase of capitalism that is based on debt, outsourcing and technological innovation, which meets the eye in the exclusion of hundreds of millions of people globally, *the slow shake out*, we are confronted with a basic contradiction between the continued existence of capitalism and the survival of the species. Beyond the appropriation of the ruling class of a larger share of global wealth we are confronted with a limit where capitalist modernization is destroying the biosphere of the planet. The division of the world into two sharply separated spaces, where the privileged entrench themselves in luxury condos and private roads, will only intensify, but we are all subjected to capital’s destructive need for expansion. At some stage there will be no life vests even for the rich. As Amadeo Bordiga phrases it: “So now when the ship goes down, so too do the first class passengers, half clad like the poor devils, hardly toggged up in their dinner jackets. [...] The ruling class, for its part incapable of struggling against the devil of business activity, superproduction and superconstruction for its own skin, thus demonstrates the end of its control over society, and it is foolish to expect that, in the name of a progress with its trail indicated

28 “Yet, as we have seen, capitalism in its full maturity also depends in all respects on non-capitalist strata and social organizations existing side by side with it.” Rosa Luxemburg: *The Accumulation of Capital*, 1913, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/LUXEMBURG/1913/ACCUMULATION-CAPITAL/CH26.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1913/accumulation-capital/ch26.htm)

by bloodstains, it can produce safer ships than those of the past.”²⁹
End of story for everybody.

We are not quite there yet, even though things are moving very fast. So far climate change and the bio-crisis are part of the attempts to either continue neoliberal accumulation – in the US the number of people that worries about climate change has dropped from 72% in 2000 to 55% in 2012, and the number of deniers have grown from 33% to 42% in the same period – or make some kind of New Deal with a ‘green profile’ that can solve the economic as well as biospheric crisis. But the plans for a ‘green capitalism’ modeled on the post-war Keynesian wage-policy will in all likelihood not be able to solve the fundamental problems the bio-crisis confronts us with. Only a much more radical approach that questions the capitalist mode of production would be able to prevent biospheric meltdown. Right now, however, we are paralyzed, unable to critique the idea of growth and accumulation.

Like the financial crisis the threat of a biospheric meltdown takes on a particular dimension as part of a growing politics of fear, in which images of catastrophe legitimize political and juridical interventions that do not alter the fundamental problems, but only sustain the inequality of the already existing world. As Frédéric Neyrat writes, today the primary function of all kinds of catastrophe discourse – excited or anxious – is the prolonging and intensification of the control, surveillance, stress and consumption of capitalist mass society.³⁰ We are in a situation where any attempt to contain the coming catastrophes only propels us towards them. Today the threat of climate catastrophe legitimizes authoritarian interventions, by which the state manages social disorder instead of trying to solve the real problems. The struggle to avoid exclusion or avoid being exposed to increasingly violent weather has already begun. This social process forces everybody to sharpen their knives, people as well as nation-states. Growth is alpha and omega. Capital and biosphere are apparently doomed to collide, the search for profit sets the course for extermination and continued consumption destroys the globe’s biodiversity. Green capitalism is an attempt to profit from the bio-crisis not solve it. The fundamental problems are not even addressed. Instead a tightening of control occurs and the climate is turned into a question of security.

29 Amadeo Bordiga: “Weird and Wonderfull Tales of Modern Social Decadence: Lax and uncaring technology – Parasitic and pilaging management”, 1956, [HTTPS://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/BORDIGA/WORKS/1956/WEIRD.HTM](https://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1956/weird.htm)

30 Frédéric Neyrat: *Biopolitique des catastrophes* (Paris: Dehors, 2008).

FROM AUTUMN TO WINTER, FROM FINANCIAL CRISIS TO DISORDER, CHAOS AND UPEHEAVAL

The crisis did not start in 2008. The last three decades have been one long crisis and neoliberal crisis management has taken the form of the exclusion of ever more people, the creation of a gigantic debt economy, the generalization of precarious jobs and an explosive expansion of the informal economy, and an intensification of the exploitation of the limited resources of the earth. We are three decades into a long and deep capitalist crisis and it is very difficult to envision what is going to happen next, but climate destruction, broken down infrastructure, the decay of cities, the rise in the number of 'surplus' proletarians and the restructuring of production and reproduction under the law of value, all testify to the scope of the crisis. This is a global crisis, capitalism cannot reproduce humanity and we are headed towards an even bigger and more violent shake out. The alternative of course is a revolution that abolishes capitalism, its classes, the money form and any idea of property and the distinction between private and public.

In the words of Giovanni Arrighi we are witnessing the way in which the autumn of finance capital is turning into winter, the neoliberal accumulation regime is running on empty and the American empire is becoming weaker and weaker.³¹ It is a major crisis we are confronted with, it takes the form of a plummeting double spiral where the hegemony of the US is crumbling and world economy collapsing. The question is of course how long the winter will last, what shape the crisis will take and what will come afterwards. As Arrighi writes the end of the Italian city-states was unlike the ending of the Dutch empire even though there has been a general mechanics in the four stages of world capitalism (from the Italian Republics to the Dutch Empire to the British Empire to the US empire, from industrial capitalism to finance capitalism and onwards to a new regime of accumulation). But the question is what shape the next winter will take and what happens afterwards? Are we talking about world war and fascism like when the US replaced the British Empire? Or are we confronted with the arrival of China as the new hegemon, or maybe even the great break, the abolition of capitalism, the abolition of wage labor

31 Giovanni Arrighi: *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Time* (London & New York: Verso, 1994). Arrighi builds part of his analysis of the seasons of world capitalism on Fernand Braudel's analysis of the early history of capitalism. Braudel: *Civilization and Capitalism, 15-18th Centuries: The Perspective of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

and the nation state? It is of course too early to tell: both the end of the neoliberal accumulation regime as well as the possible beginning of something new are still highly unpredictable, and capital is doing everything to prevent the coming into being of a new revolutionary movement. But something has happened and it is clear that the crisis is not just a passing phenomenon. The question is then how we approach the crisis. Following Arrighi we can interpret it as an ending, but we can also see it as a beginning. As an exit from the hell of the 20th century. What is coming into being is not clearly visible. No matter what, this beginning of the end calls for a commitment to the negation of capital and not Left melancholia. Meaning letting go of a narcissistic identification with historical ideals – no matter what kind of state capitalism with a human face we are dealing with – in favour of a revolutionary anti-political intervention now. As Benjamin wrote in 1931, it is about replacing received ideas with intervention in the historical situation's complex and ever changing network of forces.³²

32 Walter Benjamin: "Left-Wing Melancholia", *Selected Writings II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 425.

THE REVOLUTION TURNED UPSIDE DOWN OR, THE LEFT DID IT TO ITSELF

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”¹

Antonio Gramsci

THE END POINT OF HISTORY

IN HIS CLASSIC ANALYSIS OF POSTMODERNISM AS THE CULTURAL expression of late capitalism in which past and future evaporate in an expanded present, Fredric Jameson writes that postmodernism is characterized by a lack of premonitions about the future and, on the contrary, is preoccupied with endings. Jameson’s own examples in 1984 are ideology, art, social classes, Leninism, social democracy and the welfare state. “The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that.”² In retrospect, Jameson’s examples are obvious, and it is only Leninism that seems a bit odd. It says quite a lot about the following period

1 Antonio Gramsci: *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 276.

2 Fredric Jameson: *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), p. 1.

- from the middle of the 1980s up to today - that it would have been hard to imagine Leninism being used as an example just a few years later and completely impossible from 1989 onwards. By that time, Leninism was so outdated that it would have been counterproductive for the argument on postmodernism's endings to use Leninism as an example (Žižek's repeated references to Lenin make sense as an obscene exaggeration or provocative gesture).

The question remains what Jameson actually means by Leninism in this context, and on a list that includes art, ideology and class but also more specific phenomena such as social democracy and the welfare state. There are not many references to Lenin or Leninism in the title text or in the 438 page long book version that was published in 1991. Lenin only appears twice in the book: once, together with Marx as an exponent of the possibilities capitalism produces, where Jameson critiques primitivist positions that criticize late capitalism and its culture with a view toward going back in time (to something more authentic). Jameson is critical of postmodern society but going backward is not an option. Marx and Lenin knew that. Postmodernism is a condition; that is the starting point for both Marxist analysis and political praxis. Echoing Marx on capitalism, Jameson writes that it comes down to conceiving postmodernism positively and negatively at the same time. The second time Jameson mentions Lenin in the book is in a discussion about the necessity of updating Marx's analysis of capitalism, which Lenin did with his analysis of imperialism, Jameson writes. Jameson's own thesis on postmodernism is, of course, yet another attempt to update Marx and the critical Marxist analysis of capitalism. Part of the problem of postmodernism is precisely that this rarely takes place, Jameson writes. The exception here is Ernst Mandel's *Late Capitalism*, which is the primary contemporary reference in Jameson's diagnosis of late capitalism and its cultural expression. The problem, in other words, is that the Marxist analysis of capitalism is rarely brought up-to-date. Therefore, Marxism has difficulties presenting an adequate analysis of the changes taking place. Jameson is, thus, pretty clear as to why Leninism is ending or experiencing a crisis. As a critique of political economy and as a Marxist analysis of the recent phase of the capitalist mode of production, Leninism is no longer adequate.

Jameson does not write Marxism. In many ways, perhaps, it would have been more appropriate to write 'the end of Marxism' rather than just 'the end of Leninism', but Jameson does not do that. He does

not cut the branch he is sitting on. He marks the problem, and both the article and the book are attempts to persevere with a materialist analysis at a time when this was increasingly difficult. Jameson is confronted with an object that withdraws or makes impossible the historical analysis he knows is necessary. That is the problem with postmodernism.

Leninism is probably also a stand-in for revolution. As in the case of Marxism, Leninism is as far as Jameson wants to go. It would be too much to write 'the end of revolution', but it is pretty close, and Jameson does write that postmodernism is a symptom of a significant historical change that has taken place, a change in which revolution is turned into or replaced by pastiche. His example is visual art in which the interwar avant-gardes understood their project as a revolutionary undertaking – both art and society had to be changed – while art in the 1980s is completely without any revolutionary pretensions; today, it is almost not even about formal innovation but only about poaching art history, Jameson writes. So, it is not a complete misreading to see Leninism as synonymous with revolution, and Jameson's description of postmodernism surely points in that direction. In postmodernism, the different spheres of life have fused into a frozen social mass dominated by appearance. Culture and economy can no longer be separated but are part of an expanded image production that holds a divided society together, but only the image of society. There is no outside; the two last vestiges of nature, pre-capitalist agriculture and the unconscious, have been swallowed and subsumed under the logic of capital. There is, therefore, only one flat time in postmodernity, which consists of a series of nows. The effect of this development is that "distance in general (including 'critical distance' in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism".³ Jameson notes the contrast between the first half of the 20th century, which was characterized by a belief in and a wish for a transformation of both the social and the individual person, and the present in which this belief and wish have apparently disappeared. The historical consciousness that was part of earlier historical epochs seems to be lacking today, Jameson writes. Nevertheless, he insists that this new condition of fragmentation, these endings and the fusion of economy and culture have to be analysed and historicised. Postmodernism must be seen in connection with changes in the economy Jameson insists (following Mandel); it is what Jameson

3 Ibid., p. 48.

describes in a no nonsense way as “the superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world”.⁴

For years, Jameson’s analysis of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism was looked upon by many as a bit too coarse and sweeping (in other words, too Marxist), but it presents itself as very relevant in view of the present crisis, which has emphasized the need to be able to analyse broader and longer structural transformations. Jameson’s Marxist take makes possible just such a critical analysis of the historical dynamics that have been at play since the late 1970s. In that way, Jameson supplements the previous Brenner-inspired reading of the crisis as a long, slow crash-landing after the sudden shortness of breath of the state-led Fordist accumulation regime in the beginning of the 1970s that was replaced by the neoliberal accumulation regime, with a reading focused on the cultural expression of the period.

BEYOND

If Jameson is one of the few and best examples of a critical Marxist analysis of the many endings of postmodernism, Francis Fukuyama’s essay and book *The End of History and the Last Man* from, respectively, 1989 and 1992 are obvious examples of an affirmative reading of the same development. With Fukuyama, the many endings join together in a grand thesis of the end of history. According to Fukuyama, the liberal democratic model of the West has shown itself to be the most adequate way of organizing society, and it has shown itself to be superior to all other models. If there was a bit of doubt in 1989 when Fukuyama published his article, where the title had a question mark – “The End of History?” – that doubt had disappeared completely when the book version came out a few years later. In the meantime, the wall had come down and the Soviet Union had collapsed. Fukuyama did not shy away from proclaiming that the combination of liberal democracy and market economy was the last and final stage in historical development. “We are now at a point where we cannot imagine a world substantially different from our own, in which there is no apparent or obvious way in which the future will represent a fundamental improvement over our current.”⁵ Fukuyama was wrong and history did not end in 1989. But

4 Ibid., p. 5.

5 Francis Fukuyama: *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p. 78.

he was also somehow right in his diagnosis – not in the sense that liberal democracy and the market are the realization of some kind of world spirit but in so far as it became very difficult to imagine complex historical transformation; it became more difficult to conceptualise history in its full complexity, much less analyse it as the realisation of contradictory dynamic sequences. As an argument about a crisis in thinking the historical, Fukuyama's thesis was somehow on the mark (beyond Fukuyama's own teleology and the idea of a triumphant end point of history in liberal democracy and capitalism). The long neoliberal crash landing is precisely a closing of history; it is a radical narrowing of the political horizon. Following Jameson, we can talk of one long ending in which history is emptied of content or, as in the case of Fukuyama, the end point of history and the disappearance of conflict arrives. Postmodernism, then, is characterized by an inability to envision a future and think in historical patterns. The thing that is missing in Fukuyama's history of the end of history is class struggle. In his book, it seems as if there has been an almost magical disappearance of the fundamental antagonism in capitalism. For Fukuyama, the fall of the Berlin Wall is a confirmation of his thesis that history has now ended. There are no longer any contradictions, history has come home. It is, of course, this diagnosis that makes Fukuyama's book so exemplary for the neoliberal period in which liberal economists and political thinkers described the expansion of the market as a natural and incontestable historical advance: The invisible hand that created a stable and just market was a politically neutral economic rationale that transcended ideology. Free market ideology was common sense and, thanks to inflated real estate prices, there was no need to worry about alternatives to neoliberal dogmas.

If there is an almost triumphal sweep about Fukuyama's thesis, Jameson's analysis has the opposite tone, it is a desperate attempt to perform a critical analysis, and it almost appears as a kind of history of decline although Jameson never really produces a truly grand dramatization (as many of his implicit or explicit forebears such as Adorno or Debord, for instance, do). Jameson writes Leninism and not Marxism or revolution. He is trying to keep a critical position open; it is a failure. History is somehow closing down or becoming ever more opaque – he is in agreement with Fukuyama on that point, but it is a closing that it is necessary to analyse and undo somehow. Something still remains; it is hidden but still there, part of the postmodern condition that cannot be seen directly but Jameson calls “the global dimension”.

It is just a question of articulating it. The global dimension – the possibility of the revolution, perhaps – is still there, at least there are symptoms of the disappearance of the revolution, symptoms that it is possible to map critically. That is what Jameson is trying to do, go through the ideological resistance towards the analysis of the totality, the global dimension, which he exemplifies with “the economic system” and “the relations of production”. He will not content himself with an analysis of the separate spheres of society but attempts to map the global social process in which the spheres are embedded or become undone and acquire relative autonomy. Jameson, thus, maps the relations between the changes in the capitalist relations of production and the transformations taking place in the cultural sphere. That is, of course, the meaning of the title of the book; despite the new ending of history, despite the postmodern condition, Jameson tries to challenge and historicise the closing, connecting local and global in a totality. “Always historicize [read: totalize]”, as he writes.⁶ But this is precisely what postmodernism does not allow. History has ended, and Leninism has fallen into ruins – Leninism meaning both Marxism and the revolution, the capability of reading the historical situation and changing the course of history with a view toward the abolition of capitalism. This is Jameson’s problem and his starting point, and ours.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF REVOLUTION

In relation to Jameson’s attempt to analyse postmodernism as an expression of a broader structural transformation and as a crisis of historical thinking, it makes sense to look closer at the change that has taken place in the imagining of revolution in the last thirty to thirty-five years. Revolution understood as a quick and thorough transformation of all social relations – in particular, the ones that have to do with the economic and political structure of society with a view toward ending exploitation and repression. There is no doubt that this idea of revolution entered into a crisis with the transition to neoliberalism. It is this change Jameson is trying to point to and decipher with his inclusion of Leninism on the list of endings. And it is pretty clear that a significant change occurred in the course of the 1970s away from the idea of revolution, a shift so radical that, already by the early 1980s, it was difficult to find publications that dealt with the theme,

6 Fredric Jameson: *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 330.

even in so-called radical left circles in France and Italy, which in the post-war era had been the most important hotbeds for the production and dissemination of revolutionary theory.⁷

For more than 200 years, the Western world was the home of movements, organisations and even parties that understood themselves as revolutionary. They were dedicated to making the revolution, participating in it and organizing it. In the last few decades, it has been difficult to find groups or organisations with such pretensions. It has even been difficult to find groups or organizations that refer to this radical heritage. Even the memory of such groups seems to have gone missing. Groups that still understand themselves as revolutionary today will most likely be characterized by a lack of praxis because they are unable to envision a revolution in the near future. If they have kept any reference to revolution, it is most likely nostalgic. In other words, the notion of revolution has no practical existence today in the advanced countries, and that has, broadly speaking, been the case since the early 1980s. During the neoliberal period, revolution went from being something to be realized to being a future possibility, and now finally it has completely disappeared.

Once, the concept of revolution was the most important political concept. That is probably why Jameson is somewhat reluctant to include revolution on his list of endings even though his description of postmodernism makes it more relevant to write about revolution than Leninism. Jameson is very aware of the disappearance of the idea of revolution but cannot or will not go that far. The end of revolution will be the triumph of postmodernism.

The shift has been profound. Once the revolution was something one dedicated one's life to; it was something one used as a *point de capion* in one's life, something that connected the individual to something greater. The revolution had historical logic or a historical force that pushed the world and the interpretation of it. The revolution was a historical necessity; it was nothing less than a historical law that made it more and more necessary and realistic to replace the existing order or, rather, disorder with a new, more rational order beyond the impenetrable dependency and exploitation of capital. But already in

7 For an analysis of this shift in France with a focus on the use of the notion of totalitarianism, see Michael S. Christofferson: *French Intellectuals against the Left: The Anti-Totalitarian Moment of the 1970s in French Intellectual Politics* (London: Berghahn Books, 2004). See also Peter Starr: *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory after May '68* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

the 1970s, the concept of revolution began to lose its historical significance and, in the 1980s, when Jameson was writing his book on postmodernism, it began looking outdated and anachronistic. From then on, very few maintained the historical power and self-confidence that characterized the idea of revolution, much less the 'scientific' status with which it once was endowed.

We have a perfect example of the emptying out of the idea of revolution in the debates that have taken place in the Danish Red-Green Alliance (*Enhedslisten*) during the last few years in which members of the party, when asked by journalists in search of a 'good' or easy story, have talked about the party's programme, trying to use its vocabulary. In the programme, written in 1989, one can read that "*Enhedslisten* is a revolutionary socialist and international organisation" that fights for "a socialist revolution in Denmark". The debate about the Red-Green Alliance's programme and "a socialist revolution in Denmark" has been the same every time: Not only has the party come out looking like a group of irresponsible and naïve idealists completely out of touch with reality but the notion of revolution has been further emptied of any content. The debate has, thus, only confirmed the already established representation of revolution as anachronistic. Because isn't a revolution a violent, authoritarian thing? Weren't Stalin and Pol Pot revolutionaries? For the last couple of decades, revolution has meant the same thing as fanaticism and mass death in the Western world. Every time journalists have been able to get statements from members of *Enhedslisten* about a socialist revolution, Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen, the party's young, attractive and very popular political spokesperson, has had to put a lid on the whole matter and publicly declare that she, of course, is not in favour of a violent upheaval and that the programme needs to be "updated as it contains old and anachronistic phrases about a revolution". Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen is caught in a media spectacle in which she has to accept the terms of the public debate unless she wants to come off looking as mad as a hatter and unfit for a political mandate. She tries desperately to navigate the popularity she and the party have experienced in the last five years – in 2011, the party got almost 7 % of the votes in the election – confronted with newspaper headlines such as "a majority of voters would not like a revolution in Denmark" and "Danes do not believe in revolution".

The conclusion is obvious: revolution is out. It is just very, very

difficult to imagine a cause worth fighting for with the kind of passion the word revolution once carried. As reasoned and enlightened Westerners, we look sceptically at the kind of dedication and fidelity that characterizes the revolutionist in Ernest Hemingway's short story of the same name from 1924 or the character of Lazare in Georges Bataille's *Blue of Noon* from 1935. Hemingway writes: "In 1919 he was travelling on the railroads in Italy, carrying a square of oilcloth from the headquarters of the party written in indelible pencil and saying here was a comrade who had suffered very much under the Whites in Budapest and requesting comrades to aid him in any way. [...] He was a Magyar, a very nice boy and very shy. Horthy's men had done some bad things to him. He talked about it a little. In spite of Hungary, he believed altogether in the world revolution. 'But how is the movement going in Italy?' he asked. 'Very badly,' I said. 'But it will go better,' he said. 'You have everything here. It is the one country that every one is sure of. It will be the starting point of everything.'"⁸ A little more than ten years later, Bataille's excess junkie of a character Troppmann describes Lazare in the following way: "She was a girl of twenty-five, ugly and conspicuously filthy. [...] Lazare – her surname – suited her macabre appearance better than her given name. She was strange. [...] She inspired uneasiness. She spoke slowly, with a serenity of mind to which all things were alien. Disease, exhaustion, poverty, and death did not matter to her. [...] She cast a spell as much by her lucidity as by her visionary powers of thought. I used to give her the money she needed to print a tiny monthly review to which she attached great importance. In it she defended Communist principles that were a far cry from the official Communism of Moscow. [...] What most fascinated me was the unhealthy eagerness that prompted her to give her life and blood for the cause of the downtrodden."⁹ Both characters believe in something and are true to an idea, insisting on the possibility of a revolution. They believe and fight for another world. The Jewish Marxist, Lazare, fights for the Spanish Republic and against Franco's counterrevolution, and the young Hungarian revolutionary in Hemingway's novel is fighting against Mussolini's fascism and for a continuation of the revolutionary wave that had spread from Russia to Germany and Hungary and onwards in the years after 1917. Today, we simply do not understand this kind of commitment. The

8 Ernest Hemingway: "The Revolutionist", *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 119.

9 Georges Bataille: *The Blue of Noon* (London: Penguin, 2001); pp. 21-22.

revolutionary venture comes off looking like fanaticism, a lack of reflection or just plain fundamentalism.¹⁰ Who is committed in that way today? Isn't it only Islamic terrorists such as Bin Laden who show that kind of commitment?

As a political concept, revolution disappeared. It was no longer something one could be committed to. The political horizon was closed down; the revolution is just not on the agenda today. The revolution has been consigned to the historical past. As Jameson (and, later, Žižek) put it, it is easier today to imagine the end of the world than imagine the end of capitalism.¹¹ Neoliberal ideology completely eradicated the idea of revolution. The triumphant rhetoric of the end of utopia and the death of Marxism has swept through the Western world. On the left, the mood was of confusion and doom. For a long while, there seemed to be agreement that the last revolution was the fall of the Berlin Wall. With the dissolution of the Iron Curtain, the world was liberated from the last grand totalitarian ideology, communism. This was Fukuyama's reading of the development or, at least, the quick reading of his analysis. The idea of an end of history was a perfect expression of this *Stimmung*. Liberal democracy and market capitalism were the right mixture; there were no longer any major political conflicts. As an echo of Jameson (or is it the other way round?), Fukuyama writes that nobody can imagine a world beyond the one liberal democracy and market capitalism have created. Therefore, no one can any longer imagine a radical and decisive break. There was no reason to revolt. Following Jacques Rancière, we can call this state of affairs consensus politics; there is what there is.¹² The sensible has always already been divided into functional and separate parts that cannot be made into the object of discussion or disagreement. As the former Danish prime minister, and later Secretary General of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen often retorted: "There is nothing here."

In the world of postmodernism, the revolution was not just unnecessary or undesirable, it was just plain unthinkable. Time had run out; the idea of a revolution was over. But, as the concept of revolution disappeared as a political term, it reappeared as fashion in the image of the cool or the authentic. Revolution was a T-shirt with Che

10 Cf. Alberto Toscano: *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London & New York: Verso, 2010).

11 Fredric Jameson: *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. xii.

12 Jacques Rancière: *Chronicles of Consensual Times* (London: Continuum, 2010).

Guevara or a Parisian fashion brand named Commune de Paris. Photos from May '68 of demonstrating youths and angry workers throwing bricks advertised Alexander McQueen (the year before, the theme of his collection had been American cheerleaders). Revolution became a description of everything from washing powder – “Biotex: Prepare yourself for a revolution in your washing machine” to jeans – “Revolution! Freedom! Life! RFL: The revolutionary jeans”. When former revolutionary moments and events surfaced, they were like detached fragments emptied of any former content, a picture on a T-shirt or a description of washing powder. The revolution had become a part of an expanded consumer culture.

At the same time, as Boltanski and Chiapello write in their book about the new spirit of capitalism, the term revolution was internalized as a kind of individual demand in which the individual is constantly forced to adapt and to re-invent herself. Everybody is being told that it is necessary to be able to adapt to radical changes.¹³ We have to be ready to affirm every conceivable kind of individual re-organization, meaning that we have to be able to change ourselves again and again in accordance with the constantly changing demands of the market. We have to be ready to start all over, go back to school and re-educate ourselves. In this way, the idea of revolution has become part of everybody's work or everyday life in which we are constantly subjected to the demand of continuous change. In order to be able to get a place in the new just-in-time production, you have to be adjustable and ready to begin all over by developing an ability to react to unforeseen events. The revolution has been turned into a precarious work/life, characterized by movement and flux.

The Western middle class can still determine to a certain extent where we want to work, thanks to new technologies such as the computer and the mobile phone, both of which played a central role in this development. As such, they are both perfect media for the new revolutionary life of neoliberal capitalism. They constitute a technological and work-related revolution in themselves; thanks to them, you can transcend the bureaucracy and hierarchy of the Fordist work process in favour of autonomy and freedom. ‘The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit’ is replaced by youngsters dressed in polo shirts, drinking continuous cups of flat white in a café while

13 Luc Boltanski & Eve Chiapello: *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 2005).

working and updating their Facebook profiles, all at the same time. Today, the revolution is no longer an extraordinary break, it is just the way we live and work in late capitalist society, to use Mandel's and Jameson's description. We are not unlike the Jews in the Old Testament who after having managed to flee from slavery in Egypt find themselves stranded in the desert.¹⁴

Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis points to the recuperation of the demands expressed by rebellious workers and new critical subjects during the 1960s: We want freedom and self-determination; we want to escape boring and repetitious work and become co-creators of our own life. As Boltanski and Chiapello write, this critique was turned into a discourse of self-realization that has been dominant not only within management literature but has acquired the status of truth in Western societies, turning the individual into a company (with debt to pay back).

THE REVENGE OF THE BOURGEOISIE

The capitalist counter-offensive has been very effective. The revolutionaries of '68 sought to liberate women and men from the dominance of capital, but it turned out to be the bourgeoisie that took charge of the changes that were to occur, in which new forms of control supplemented or replaced old ones. The pressure from protests forced the bourgeoisie to come up with an effective answer, addressing many of the points of critique voiced by new critical subjects. As always, the objective was to make sure that the valorization of capital was never put into question. The result was a massive neoliberal counter-offensive in which new needs, new desires and new dreams saw the light of the day, transforming '68 into a veritable hedonistic programme. The new programme consisted of looser morality, less seriousness and the dissolution of a whole series of moral restrictions, which were presented as obsolete; the individual and his pleasure became the centrepiece of the new hedonist programme, which blossomed like never before. Everything that used to be provocative or shocking was now permitted and encouraged. As long as the new desires were mediated by the commodity form, there seemed to be no limits to the opening. The revolutionary aspirations were turned into a looser sexual morality and new ways of organizing work. More or less everywhere, the

14 Bifo quoted in Mark Fisher: *Capitalist Realism* (London: Zero Books, 2009), p. 35.

protest wave stopped, confronted with the accelerated development it had itself launched but that was now being taken in a new direction by the bourgeoisie. The shift from anticapitalist protests to a new hedonism was rapid.

Following Debord's thesis about the society of spectacle, we can analyse this development as the absorption of all the new subversive focus points from desire to minority and difference and deviation into an all-encompassing movement of inclusion, resulting in a renewal of the very same social norms the protests sought to challenge in the first place. In this way, the anti-authoritarian critique of '68 was embraced and displaced, using the odd, the non-conformist, the crazy and the schizophrenic as medium for an expansion of the colonization of everyday life by the commodity: from Henry Miller to internet porn. All the most important cultural phenomena in the last three decades from the diffusion of the shopping mall to gentrification and the re-conquest of the inner city to atomisation of people through personalized technology such as mobile phones have to be understood as reversals of the virtual and material human community the protests pointed towards and sought to realize. A revolution in reverse. It was not only Leninism that was being emptied of content, Marxism was also being torn apart. And the idea of revolution went through a complete disfiguration. As Debord would phrase it: No ruling class has had so much power as the bourgeoisie in the neoliberal period.

The freedom of capitalism reached its zenith: An individual more or less completely liberated from the ties of tradition, transcending limits related to place, family, religion and handed-down norms. Today, a woman in Copenhagen can sit in her apartment and watch a movie from Burkina Faso and check the latest publications on French philosophy on the Net as she is sipping a glass of Argentinian wine, eating nuts from Spain, ordering a pair of jeans from Japan, or booking a trip to the Biennale in São Paulo. In other words, she has an abundance of choices. It might be a spectacle in the Situationist meaning of the term, but it is so well run, and passivity is held at bay by an equal amount of indulgence and passion.

NEOLIBERAL TRIUMPH

The disintegration of the notion of revolution is, of course, related to the development through which the European Left went after 1968

but can also be seen in a longer perspective. In his list of endings, Jameson includes both Leninism and Social Democracy – in other words, the two dominant or leading Left positions in the 20th century. Not only is revolutionary socialism in ruins, the reformist project is also ending, Jameson writes. It is, then, the Left as a united project or force that is in crisis and has been for a while. Socialism is no longer an ideal, as it used to be in the second part of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century, Jameson seems to say.

If there is a word that can describe the situation of the Left since the 1970s, it is disorientation; thirty years of intense neoliberalism has effectively undone many of the victories that the working class achieved in the period from 1860 to the beginning of the 1970s. Socialism faded away as a historical project without there being articulated a new project capable of replacing it. In the 1980s and 1990s, the social democratic parties in Western Europe accepted and took neoliberal ideology on board, making it their own. They had no choice since the restructuring drastically narrowed the horizon. As Perry Anderson writes, the social democratic embrace of neoliberalism came full circle in the 1990s, when the Western European Social Democratic parties confirmed the hegemony of neoliberalism by accelerating deregulation and privatisation of not only industries but also sectors such as education and health that conservative governments had launched in the 1980s but not been able to carry through.¹⁵ The so-called ‘Third Way’ that Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder and Poul Nyrup Rasmussen were among the primary exponents of what was, in reality, a social democratic shell carrying a neoliberal project. Social democracy was made into a soft version of neoliberalism and contained the very same proposals that Reagan, Thatcher, Kohl had pressed for. Thus, the Social Democratic parties confirmed beyond any doubt that they were, in effect, no longer working class parties in the traditional sense and that there was no alternative to the neoliberal dogmas in the West. Mitterand plotted the course for this development when he was quickly forced to back down from promised nationalisations and, instead, pursue a tight economic policy after he was elected in 1981. He thereby joined the neoliberal project launched by Reagan and Thatcher in the US and Great Britain. Socialism lost its meaning as an alternative political project on a government level.

The established left was not capable of addressing the neoliberal

15 Perry Anderson: “Renewals”, *New Left Review*, no. 1, 2000, pp. 6-7.

counter-offensive and analyse it. Instead of critiquing the widespread restructuring (deregulation and deindustrialization) that occurred, the social democratic parties and the established Left surrendered and, when they were in power, pursued the same policy as their conservative opponents. The examples of this are abundant, though here it will have to suffice to point to the present Danish social democratic government, which has continued the previous right wing government's policy including Danish participation in military operations in the Middle East and North Africa and widespread savings on welfare and education that have resulted in a significant rise in inequality in the country.¹⁶ A long series of reforms have been carried out, including social security reforms, a reform to the payment of sick leave and a wide-ranging reform of unemployment benefits. These reforms are carried out at a time when the largest Danish firms announce record-high profits. The beneficiaries of the different kinds of welfare are, thus, made to pay for the crisis, and the minimum wage is put under tremendous pressure. The picture is more or less the same all over Europe: local Social Democrats are competing with the right in administering the crisis at the expense of the workers.

As Stuart Hall writes, one of the victories of neoliberalism has been its ability to redefine some of the most important political concepts such as society, state and democracy.¹⁷ The social democratic parties accepted neoliberal terminology wholesale without even putting up a fight and did not manage to problematize the reshuffling of the relationship between the market and state that neoliberalism sought to achieve. One of the primary focus points of neoliberalism has been the post-war welfare state, which has to be cut or, ideally, dismantled in order to allow the expansion of the market and the creation of profit. In the hegemonic neoliberal dogma, this meant that state interests should never come before private interest. The state should serve capital, and it has to be left to the individuals to decide how they want to dispose of their property, which means that those with property decide. As Hall writes, the decisive change was not that neoliberalism put the market above the state but that it introduced a particular market rationality into all spheres of society. The state had to facilitate the market, and it was to be organised according to a market rationality

16 Denmark has been the country in Western Europe in which inequality has risen the most in the period from 2001 to 2012 according to Eurostat. [HTTP://APPSO.EUROSTAT.EC.EUROPA.EU/NUI/SHOW.DO?DATASET=ILC_D112&LANG=EN](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ILC_D112&lang=en)

17 Stuart Hall: "The Neoliberal Revolution", *Soundings*, no. 48, 2011, pp. 10-11.

and address citizens as economic agents. The citizen was, thus, transformed into an individual entrepreneur with debt, selling herself on the market bereft of any kind of welfare protection.

An important component in neoliberal discourse is the transformation of the notion of democracy to the idea of the market, disconnecting democracy from the class struggle that had been a condition for its realisation. Its political vocabulary was replaced with a new one focused on productivity and profitability. The argument was always that the market was the best expression of democracy, as it made visible what people wanted, or rather, wanted to buy. Marketization resulted in a radical depoliticization that made possible a suspension of democracy's ideas of equality and universalism in favour of factual inequality, which is presented as an inevitable condition of the democratic fluctuations of the market. Class, race and gender disappeared as social markers and social difference, and inequality were naturalized facts that could not be changed. As Wendy Brown phrases it: "Equality, universality, political autonomy and liberty, citizenship, the rule of law, a free press: However inadequately realized over several centuries of constitutional democracy in the Euro-Atlantic world, these are its fundamentals. And these are what neoliberal political rationality jettisons, or at least severely challenges, with its alternative principles of governance."¹⁸ Neoliberalism succeeded with its project big time: the idea of revolution was annulled and democracy narrowed. Perry Anderson calls neoliberalism the most successful ideology in world history.¹⁹

THE CRISIS OF THE LEFT

Since the late 1970s, the left and the workers' movement have been on the defensive in the Western world, and they have almost disappeared as a popular project with a broader legitimacy. In the prevailing European cultures, the left has lost large parts of its constituency and, even when it manages to win elections, this has happened within the framework set up by neoliberalism in which politicians fight for popularity in the absence of genuine political projects. The left has been characterized by a kind of existential disorder. The problem is, of course, that neoliberalism has pulled the carpet out from under

18 Wendy Brown: "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism and De-Democratization", *Political Theory*, no. 6, 2006, p. 696.

19 Perry Anderson: "Renewals", p. 13.

the Left, its parties and organisations. When the post-war Keynesian model became obsolete and was replaced by neoliberalism, the reformist Left and the established workers' movement suddenly had no project. Beyond Keynesianism, they were no longer necessary for the mediation of the discontent of the workers. As Antonio Negri has argued, the Keynesian planning-based state, which was the political form of capital during the post-war period, avoided crises by joining workers' resistance and the 'creative destruction' of capital in an expanded economic plan that connected higher wages with higher productivity, making worker resistance the motor in capitalist development.²⁰ But the enhanced socialization of capital put it under increased pressure, resulting in the breakdown of the wage-productivity deal in the late 1960s. The strikes and general unrest in 1968 were a sign of that development, forcing capital to undergo a restructuring in order to increase the rate of exploitation.

We are dealing with a very large shift. The long 1970s had begun, and neoliberal restructuring transformed the working class from a collective subject negotiating with capital into individual workers who must each sell her own labour to capital. As a consequence of this development, the unions and workers' organisations lost the significance they had in the previous period. Their voices did not have the same kind of impact either in collective bargaining or in society at large. The working class was no longer recognised as a social agent that capital had to take into account.

In this way, neoliberalism comes off looking like the paradoxical realization of the bourgeois utopian dream of a world without labour, the creation of surplus value beyond variable capital (labour). A utopia that can never be realized. But individualisation left the Left and the established workers' movement in ruins; they were blown to pieces and have not been able to resist the accelerated fragmentation of the working class in the shape of precarity, debt and the exclusion of even more people from wage labour. The condition of the Keynesian compromise is, thus, no longer present, and the working class does not seem to be able to produce the political forms to create the setting for such a compromise.²¹

The Left mistakenly believed that the welfare state was a permanent

20 Antonio Negri: "Crisis of the Planner State: Communism and Capitalist Organization", *Revolution Retrieved: Selected Writings on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis and New Social Subjects* (London: Red Notes, 1988), pp. 95-148.

21 Antonio Negri: "No New Deal is Possible", *Radical Philosophy*, nr. 155, 2009, pp. 2-5.

structure and forgot that its historical condition of possibility was a revolutionary pressure that was translated into a compromise between workers and economic interests. The Left forgot that the wage relation is civil war.²² The crisis of Keynesianism was also the crisis of the Left. The numbers say it all when it comes to the unions, which are unable to unite the same mass of people they did four decades ago. Their members have simply disappeared. A symptom of the process in which unions have become weaker and weaker is the expansion of working hours in the US and most of Europe over the last decades. From the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, one of the primary demands of the workers' movement was the eight-hour day and the forty-hour week. In the period after the Second World War, working hours were reduced, but this development was slowly reversed with the rise of the neoliberal accumulation regime. Not because there was not enough labour power but because capital intensified the rate of exploitation.

Another sign of this development in which the workers' movement lost its power is the fact that an average American and European household today needs two or three pay checks in order to get by. Until the mid-1960s, one pay check was sufficient (the access of women to the labour market was an important achievement of the necessary critique of the patriarchy of capitalist society, but it was also an economic necessity).

At the same time as unions have lost their historical role, a split has occurred between party and movement. In other words, the parties of the left today lack the extra-parliamentary dimension that was so important in the struggle with capital. Very few left-wing parties in the West have a direct connection to activism on the streets. Before, both social democratic and communist parties were characterized by an activist dimension. Today, very few parties are interested in and succeed in forming an organic relation to grassroots activism. The break between the political parties competing for votes in a national-democratic setting and grass-root activism already occurred with the emergence of the New Left in the 1960s, when the new social movements distanced themselves from the established political parties that had played a significant part in the creation of the welfare state but, on the way, had lost the appetite for more significant change. The break

22 "The establishment of a normal working day is [...] the product of a protracted and more or less concealed civil war." Karl Marx: *Capital. Vol. I*, 1867, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch25.htm#S3>

was further consolidated with the green movements of the 1970s and the peace movement and identity politics of the 1980s. The result was the emergence of a fragmented landscape of extra-parliamentary activity that was no longer a natural ally of the Left parties. Instead, many activist milieus were often in direct opposition to the parties of the Left, which were considered to be part of the system. Thus, a decisive break occurred between the street and parliament during this period that left the parties without political backing and the activist milieus without political continuity. Different groups addressed different kinds of domination, but they were rarely connected through a superior and more principled critique. Because of this, the protests on the street have tended to become more and more toothless during the last thirty years, culminating with the huge protests against the invasion of Iraq in 2003 in which millions were in the streets protesting to no effect whatsoever. Another perfect expression of the perplexity that has characterised the Left in recent decades was the support of some protesters for those national democracies that were reluctant to invade Iraq (France and Germany). This was 1914 all over.

In the first two-thirds of the 20th century, there was an almost unbreakable bond between the political parties of the Left and social movements in which any democratic push and any improvement of workers' conditions were always the result of a double pressure uniting parliament and factory and street (this was the case on a global scale in 1968, and this was the case in national contexts such as Hungary in 1956, Portugal in 1974, Spain in the middle of the 1970s and Poland in 1981). The twofold pressure of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary force was very important for the Left. This two-pronged approach has disappeared during the last thirty years in the West.

The Left has been unable to respond to the neoliberal counter-revolution. Neither the established nor the alternative Left has been capable of confronting capital's offensive. Therefore, there has not been any kind of coordinated and coherent resistance to neoliberal capitalism in the last thirty-five years (in the West). This does not mean that there has been no resistance, of course there has. From the anti-structural adjustment protests of the 1980s and early 1990s to the alter-globalisation movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s, people have protested against neoliberal restructuring, but the protests have at no time reached a level that comes close to what took place in the late 1960s. The resistance that has taken place has rarely been able to

create connections to other struggles and has quickly become isolated. Every time an opening seemed to be possible, full scale repression put an end to the protests. And the Left and the established workers' movement have not played any leading role in these protests but have, on the contrary, been part of the repression along with conservative and liberal forces. After 2011, a new cycle of protests has begun with a few years of delay after the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, exposing the debt-based reconstruction of neoliberal capitalism and the enormous inequality that goes with the neoliberal accumulation regime. For a long period, it was almost as if this inequality was invisible and considered to be structurally necessary. But, with the protests, things have started moving: the revolts in North Africa and the Middle East and the Occupy movements in Southern Europe and the US constitute a real challenge to neoliberal capitalism. But they do so in a language that only partially refers to the vocabulary of the Left. It is present, but it is just one language among many. The language of socialism has been seriously destroyed. In the mobilizations that took place during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, socialism has just been one discourse among a long list of discourses. Neither the reformist nor the revolutionary vocabulary of the Left has been able to impose itself as the dominant prism through which to analyse the ongoing struggles. As a language of society's surface of fracture, the discourse of class struggle has become marginalized to such an extent that today it is on the verge of oblivion.

In retrospect, it is obvious that the Left was part of and helped create a particular historical period that was conditioned by a particular set of political and economic relations of which the most important were capitalist industrialisation and the related urban concentration and condensation of the working class in the cities, resulting in a new kind of solidarity and the establishment of a workers' movement that gained popular legitimacy, and, through struggles inside and outside, the political system gained access to government through the state and was allowed to influence the national economies in a direction that improved conditions for the national working classes in the West (including Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union). Today, we have a resurgence of protests but outside the traditional framework of the Left, leaving the protesting masses without the strength the Western working class had in the period from 1848 to 1968.

THE HISTORICAL DISAPPEARANCE OF THE WORKING CLASS

At the beginning of the 1970s, Jacques Camatte concluded that the Western working class had at no time been a real obstacle to the development of capital and had never really been involved in a fight for the creation of a different society or a different way of life. The working class was “fully capable of destroying the social order that presented a limit to the development of the productive forces and thus to the development of capital but when it came to establishing another community it remained trapped by the logic of rationalisation of the productive forces and remained tied to the question of managing them differently”.²³ According to Camatte, the working class had never truly been anticapitalist but had adapted to the market economy over the course of the 20th century and consented to improvements in the conditions of local workers provided and promised by the economy. The workers’ access to increased consumption through the Keynesian wage-productivity deal was a Pyrrhic victory. The working class was put to sleep with a steady flow of commodities. Through wages and later debt, consumption was turned into an extremely effective and sophisticated instrument of control, and discontent functioned as a constantly growing object of inflation the bourgeoisie used and tuned. This is not only the history of how working class resistance forces capital to develop, this is also the history of how the working class becomes a project and an identity that is constantly produced instead of dismantled. The history of how the working class fused with capitalism. The result was recuperation and fragmentation.

In the century from 1869 to 1970, the working class in the West was an internal challenge of and adaption to the capitalist system, which certainly improved living conditions for the working class and gave them some stake in society but did so by giving up on the abolition of capitalism and by giving up on the working masses in the rest of the world. The organisations, parties and unions of the working class fought for higher wages, shorter working hours and better working conditions within the framework of the capitalist mode of production and the nation state. Therefore, the Western working class reduced class struggle to a question of improving the conditions of Western workers within capitalist society, channelling the independent initiative of the workers into bureaucratic, organized forms that

23 Jacques Camatte: “Prolétariat et révolution”, *Invariance*, 2. Series, no. 6, 1975, p. 40.

were only interested in wage negotiations, monopoly of employment service and, first and foremost, the reproduction of themselves.

The Western working class played a hugely important role in the establishment of welfare society and the establishment of parliamentary national democracies with rights for subjects formerly excluded from politics. As Geoff Eley writes, the working class gained access to the liberal political rights that the bourgeois revolution promised but never actually put in place.²⁴ The working class forced the bourgeoisie and the *ancien regime* to realise the ideals the bourgeoisie had in its time mobilized in the struggle against feudalism, but would not have generalized without a massive offensive by the working class. If we look at the period from the 1860s to the 1960s, it is obvious that the socialist tradition and the workers' movement played a decisive role in the establishment of the post-war democratic welfare society. This history, however, is also the history of how the organized workers' movement became an integrated part of the capitalist machine, accepting bourgeois society's formal separation between politics and economics. The working class, thus, reduced its potentially anticapitalist resistance to an internal struggle for the interests of the national working class in a national-democratic context, thereby losing an international and revolutionary perspective. The abolition of capitalism was abandoned in favour of securing political rights and a bigger paycheck. It was, in reality, the quasi-feudal structures of the old regime and not capitalism that the working class abolished, as Arno Mayer writes.²⁵ As the Situationists put it, "the workers' movement [...] achieved immense results but not the ones it had originally intended".²⁶

Class struggle was time and again put on standby or channelled into projects within capitalism. The liquidation of the old regime's feudal privileges by the workers' movement in the last half of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, its pressing to establish the Keynesian solution in the 1930s and 1940s and its attack on the wage productivity deal in the late 1960s are all expressions of the strength and weakness of the Western workers' movement. The struggle against the old regime that lost its cultural and political domination

24 Geoff Eley: *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

25 Arno Mayer: *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

26 Situationist International: "The Bad Days Will End", *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), p. 109.

during the 'Thirty Years' War' of the 20th century made the working class a powerful counter-power, but only within the limits of national democracy. In the 1930s and 1940s, the workers put aside the revolutionary project in favour of higher wages, access to consumption and welfare, affirming the social compromise Keynes and Roosevelt worked out, and which the bourgeoisie in the US, Great Britain and France had to be forced to accept. In 1968, the workers effectively stopped production and rediscovered and restarted the revolutionary project of the interwar years, only to go back to work without any kind of significant change taking place. May '68 was the last test of the Western workers' movement, and it failed. Since then, it has been put through an extremely intense phase of neoliberalization, leaving it numb and fragmented without any ability to force capital into any kind of compromise. This is the starting point for the present struggles. This is where we have to begin.

BREAK AND COUNTERREVOLUTION

“When everything is at an end, give me your hand, so that we may begin again from the beginning. Let the dead bury their dead and mourn them. On the other hand, it is enviable to be the first to enter the new life alive; that is to be our lot.”

Karl Marx¹

THE EXPLOSION POINT OF IDEOLOGY

EVEN THOUGH THERE WERE MANY PROTESTS AGAINST THE NEOLIBERAL restructuring which began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the general picture of that period is one of complacency and an almost unchallenged neoliberal hegemony. Neoliberal ideology narrowed the political horizon in an attempt to eliminate the idea of radical or fundamental change. It became very difficult to imagine another world beyond the established neoliberal one on offer. Even though the 2008 financial crisis revealed the problems built into the neoliberal accumulation regime and the gigantic inequality it produced, neoliberalism remained the dominant ideology and governments all over the world responded to the crisis by confirming neoliberalism as the

1 Karl Marx in a letter to Arnold Ruge, May 1843, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/MARX/WORKS/1843/LETTERS/43_05.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_05.htm)

only game in town, thus saving even more on social reproduction. The refrain has been the same throughout the process: we have to trust the politicians and accept the cuts. There is no alternative.

But in 2011 the world all of a sudden experienced protests that far superseded anything that had happened in the previous forty years in scale and intensity. From Tunis to Cairo, from Madrid to Athens and London and onwards to New York, people took to the streets and rejected the inequality of neoliberal capitalism. In Europe and the US thousands protested against the austerity programmes that national politicians had implemented after the outbreak of the financial crisis, and in North Africa and the Middle East people protested against dictators who were the visible symbols of an extremely unequal neoliberal world order.

After thirty-five years of intense neoliberalization the protests seemed to come out of the blue, and they were contradictory and cacophonous. In North Africa and the Middle East local dictators were the sticking point, who, supported by the West, ruthlessly ruled lumpen, despotic regimes characterized by enormous inequality; in Europe the austerity programmes triggered the protests; in the US it was the enormous inequality that the crisis made visible and the government's bailout of the banks; and in Southeast Asia and China workers are demanding better wages and working conditions.

The dramatic turn of events started when a twenty-six-year old street vendor Mohamed Bouaziz set himself on fire in Sid-Bouazid in the central part of Tunisia on December 17th, 2010, following an incident in which his goods were confiscated by the local police. Bouaziz' desperate protest – he died on January 4th from his burns – set in motion a month-long series of protests and then riots in Sidi-Bouazid that spread to Tunis and the rest of the country. The protests reached such a scale that the local dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali surprisingly left the country on the 14th of January after less than a month of protests.

The ejection of Ben Ali, the first Arab leader forced to step down due to protests in the streets, inspired people in Yemen and Egypt to start protesting against Ali Saleh's regime and Hosni Mubarak's military dictatorship. The dramatic events in Egypt almost took on a life of their own in the global media, and the Egyptian insurrection became a constant reference in the subsequent protests around the globe. Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets because

of the rising prices of food and a desire for democracy. This quickly escalated into violent battles throughout most of Egypt, between protesters on the one side and police and military on the other. Tahrir square in Cairo became the focal point of the rebellion and the square was occupied for eighteen days before Mubarak stepped down. While Egypt (a culturally and geopolitically much more important country than Tunisia) was in flames, the protests spread to more or less all the other countries in the region. Violent confrontations between protesters and the regimes took place in countries such as Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait and Sudan. In Libya and Syria the confrontations escalated into civil wars. At the same time the youth in Spain started mobilizing, and on May 15th demonstrators occupied squares in Barcelona and Madrid, protesting against the political system and rampant unemployment. The critique of the bailout of the banks and the widespread corruption of the political system took the form of a fundamental critique of democracy, and the occupied squares were used as sites for concrete experiments with alternative modes of organization that might replace neoliberal capitalism and its institutions, at least virtually. Greece was the next Southern European country where large scale protests broke out. Syntagma Square was occupied with a demand to end the draconian austerity programme that the local political elite had decided to implement after pressure from the EU and the IMF. The protests made references to each other and inspired protests in other places. In September 2011 the magazine *Adbusters* called for a demonstration against Wall Street in New York under the motto "Occupy Wall Street". Inspired by the occupations elsewhere, the demonstration ended at Zuccoti Park between Wall Street and the World Trade Center, where protesters set up a tent camp which over the next months became the centre of many marches, meetings and speeches in which the inequality of neoliberal capitalism and the subservience of the political system to the markets were critiqued. The protests have continued since 2011 and countries such as South Africa, Bosnia and China have since joined the list of places where the class war is becoming more visible and intense.

The many rebellions and riots are all a response to the economic crisis and the continuous neoliberal reduction of social reproduction that is affecting more and more people as governments all over the world launch violent austerity programmes that consolidate enormous wage differences and divide access to privileges and welfare. The

splitting of the world into two separate spheres that has taken place over the past thirty years is being accelerated, and the separation between the valorization of capital and the reproduction of labour power is widening. On the top we find a sphere of investments, privileges and wage labour, and at the bottom a sphere for the wretched of the earth who can look forwards to nothing but humanitarian missions and occasional emergency aid.

The protests that have swept the world since 2011 are all reactions to this development, though the circumstances in Egypt, Spain, the US, and so on vary enormously. The protests are all characterized by desperation, and the common denominator across the national and regional distinctions is indignation. People react, often without having any clear idea of the available alternatives. The neoliberal hegemony has effectively distorted any idea of significant social change. Therefore the point of departure is confusion. Previous revolutionary events seem very distant, are not available as ways forward, and cannot easily be reactivated. Therefore it is very much indignation that characterizes the protests; they express a radical moral awakening that is taking place without any connection to previous revolutionary battles. The moral dimension is very visible in the Spanish *Indignados* movement, but it cuts across all the new occupation movements. For better or worse, the protests are taking place amid the disappearance of a left wing vocabulary; today's critiques and indignation are merging on the streets and in the squares after the dissolution of the historical reformist-revolutionary Left. The language of the Left is not available, whether in Europe, the US, North Africa or Southeast Asia. Nowhere does it function as *the* framework for critique, but remains as one language among many.

Even though there is a huge difference between the movements in the West and those elsewhere, Occupy Wall Street reveals the common erosion of a leftist vocabulary that makes the protests seem at once diffuse and desperate. This is not an organized revolutionary movement. As the previous chapter made clear, the present period is characterized by regression; it is very difficult to think politically. Decades of neoliberal politics and propaganda have left their mark. The Occupy movement is therefore characterized by obvious contradictions, as is the movement in Spain and the Arab revolts. In the Occupy movement a moralizing and reformist critique was articulated alongside an anarchist critique that rejected the whole established political system

and finance capitalism. A symptom of these very different kinds of critique has been the very open-ended slogans and mottos that the movement has put into circulation, such as “We are the 99%”, which of course points to the extreme inequality of the neoliberal world, but which can be deciphered in many ways and thus lends itself to a number of different analyses of the crisis and its causes. These slogans can encompass everything from the hope of a new New Deal to a communist critique of money. The movement has protested against everything from foreclosures and the bailout of the banks to police brutality, and for things like free education, access to public space, etc. The détourned Victor Hugo sentence – “Nothing can stop an idea whose time can come” – that has been used repeatedly on flyers, banners and signs does suggest a unifying idea binds together Occupy’s many points of critique, but it remains unclear what the idea actually is, and what unites the highly heterogeneous group of people that occupied Zuccoti Park in September 2011.

At no time has the idea taken on a more concrete form; instead, Occupy Wall Street has remained a very open and inclusive project. The movement has of course continued to put out a number of vague demands, but generally Occupy has been marked by its lack of demands. The Occupy movement distinguished itself from previous protest movements from the 20th century by having no clear and recognizable demands. As opposed to the protesters of the 1960s, today’s protesters do not demand better wages and working conditions, they only ask to be allowed to keep their poorly paid jobs. They fight for the right to be exploited. The exclusion of more and more workers from the production of value has forced workers in the imperialist centre to fight for survival. This is the starting point for Occupy and the indignant in Europe. The lack of demands is an expression of this problem.

However, the lack of demands also points towards a more fundamental critique of neoliberal capitalism. The lack of demands to the state and to capital shows that the capitalist system is no longer able to take care of us, meaning that we have to set to work ourselves, that we are left to ourselves. In this way the lack of demands turns into an expression of a fundamental distrust of the established order. The protests thus point beyond a demand for mere economic reallocation, beyond redistribution. In a strange way, the new protest movement understands intuitively that the political and economic

system is no longer capable of supplying unbearable, precarious jobs and will no longer guarantee mere survival for more and more people on the planet.

The protest movement in the old centres of accumulation in the West oscillates between a nostalgic redistributive discourse and a blank revolutionary position, between talking inside and outside the already established political system, between unsuccessfully addressing the political institutions with a desperate hope of securing jobs and creating autonomous zones in direct confrontation with the police and the state. Even though Occupy and the Southern European protest movements lend voice to vague wishes for a return to the welfare society of the post-war years, to the old Keynesian wage productivity deal, it is becoming more and more clear that the movements are not about affecting a different distribution of wealth to ensure that the 99% gets a larger slice of the pie, but about a transgression of wage labour and the totality of capitalist society, i.e. a supersession of capital and labour. From this perspective, then, the project is no longer about the reproduction of the labour-capital relationship or achieving a 'fairer' distribution, but about the outright destruction of capital: a thorough critique that transcends reformist or systemic demands and makes it possible to acquire what is necessary in order to live. This is the hidden perspective of the protests in Europe and the US: the hidden communist perspective.

The protests in the Middle East and North Africa are different. There, the people demand a different redistribution of the world's wealth. The inequality of the local despotic regimes and huge, global inequalities are being rejected and dictators are being forced to step down. Although the local elites and the Western powers do all they can to derail the process, the protests continue. In the weak links of accumulation the protests are more powerful and offensive. This is also the case in China, where workers are beginning to demand bigger paychecks. In the Arab revolts, the masses want social equality and justice, while in China the demands are still relatively modest, namely better compensation for the wage slavery that has been going on since the late 1970s, when the Chinese economy was opened. The revolutionary awakening that is sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East is still isolated, and the Western powers are doing what they can to ensure that this remains the case. Overcoming the global economic disaster and disrupting the capitalist money economy will

require that the rebellious masses in North Africa and the striking workers in China are connected with the protests in the imperialist metropolises. We are still very far from this scenario, but something has happened, and the crisis will only get worse.

The background of the present situation is not revolutionary activity but the self-destructive activities of neoliberal capitalism. The new cycle of protests is a reaction to this movement. This is why the resistance is darker in tone than for instance the alter-globalization movement in the late 1990s, when it was still possible to envision a Hardt and Negri-like counter-empire of the multitude. The idea of another world has been replaced with the lack of a future. When a response to the continuous shock doctrine of neoliberal capitalism finally materialized it took the form of occupations of squares. From Tahrir in Cairo to Puerta del Sol in Madrid to Syntagma in Athens and onwards to Zuccoti Park in New York, people set up tent camps and refused to move, using their bodies as barricades. To occupy a place is a radical gesture that symbolizes resistance. When a square is occupied it is transformed into an object of antagonism. A fracture becomes visible and previously hidden contradictions are exposed. This was what happened in 2011, when the protesters did not only use the squares as meeting places or the endpoint for marches, but occupied them and refused to move. Resistance was made concrete. It was a process of political subjectivization: 'We are the 99% and we won't move'.

A new political subject made itself visible, refusing the established order and using the city to do something different from just consuming or working. In their own ways, the occupations all rejected the neoliberal city, which is characterized by a lack of public space, whether it is filled with cars, as in Tahrir, has been privatized like Zuccoti Park, or turned into a tourist non-place like Puerta del Sol. By occupying the squares the demonstrators insisted on using the squares as open urban spaces where people could meet and debate: as places for political organization. The lack of demands was precisely an attempt to produce a political space that precedes the daily political procedures whereby all places are always already distributed. It was not a question of taking power but of refusing and showing this refusal. In that sense the occupations were a kind of withdrawal that opened up a genuine political space characterized by a radical equality, where there were no leaders and spokespersons

but only voices that are normally not heard. The refusal to formulate demands functioned as a critique of the established political system and produced a more fundamental framework for political debate. Instead of leaders there was a space, a square that was occupied. The protest movements in Egypt, Spain, Greece, the US, etc. articulated a radical critique of any kind of vedette-ism, there were no stars and no icons, there was an anonymous mass of people. The protesters on Tahrir had a Facebook profile but the profile had no face. There was no charismatic leader leading the troops and explaining what to do or how to understand the situation. If the protesters had a face it was either anonymous or a Guy Fawkes mask.

The general assemblies that quickly became the decision-making organs of the movements and its primary internal medium of communication stressed the bodily presence that, ideally, might block or halt the accelerated time of neoliberal capitalism. The high-speed transactions of finance capital, with its opaque security systems and computerized risk control systems, were replaced by speaking bodies that slowly spoke to each other and exchanged views. You had to be present in order to make your voice heard. In other words, you had to get involved and affirm the break with the established political system and its procedures. When the general assemblies worked they constituted a refusal of the abstract time of finance capital, which was briefly replaced by the bodily, human presence that materializes in the heat of the moment during a battle when former certainties are shaken.

The bodily slowness of the occupations which decelerated the abstract rhythm of capital went hand in hand with the fast micro-communication of the movements. In the revolts in North Africa and the Middle East, new media played an important role in the organization and communication of the protests. This was also the case in the US and Southern Europe. The protests in 2011 are the most documented protests in history. The revolution was recorded live on camera in Cairo, Madrid and New York. New social media made possible a hitherto unseen level of self-documentation. Thousands of protesters became the Victor Serge or Sergej Tretjakov of the movement, producing revolutionary propaganda outside the traditional mass media: autonomous information production in the margin of the spectacle. More or less all meetings, demonstrations and speeches were documented on mobile phones or cameras and posted online. The protesters themselves reported from the occupations and demonstrations, bypassing

the traditional mass media and its framing. It was possible to report live from the 'scene of the battle'. The same media also made it possible to mobilize, coordinate and organize extremely quickly.

In the following pages I will offer a presentation of the most important protests that took place in 2011 in North Africa, the Middle East, Southern Europe and the US. I will also account for the development in China, where the process has been going on for some years, with more and more protests and strikes taking place. Just as Chinese workers have played a very important role in the neoliberal restructuring as disciplined and extremely low paid employees, the militant actions of the Chinese proletariat could well turn out to be very important in the coming insurrections. But in 2011 it was the Arab masses that set the agenda.

THE ARAB REVOLUTIONS

There is no doubt that the most important events after 2008 have taken place in North Africa and the Middle East. From December 2010 on, a number of countries including Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, Oman and Syria have seen widespread demonstrations and clashes between the state on one side and young people and workers on the other; clashes that have developed into outright civil war, resulting in external military intervention and regime change. As Gilbert Achcar writes in *The People Want*, the events constitute an unprecedented manifestation of the Arab people as a critical, collective, revolutionary subject.² As such, we are faced with a real revolutionary process that will have a decisive impact on the development not only of the region but probably the whole world, since the deeper causes of the revolts cannot be solved within the neoliberal accumulation regime and the present world order. The region has a number of pressing problems: enormous unemployment, especially among young people who have to survive in the informal sector; weak economic development, mainly benefitting the local elites; widespread corruption and nepotism; and political systems that have no democratic legitimacy (dictatorships and monarchies), but are often supported by the West. The contradictions of neoliberal capitalism are clear for all to see in the Middle East and North Africa and a radical critique of

2 Gilbert Achcar: *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (London: Saqi Books, 2013).

the postcolonial world order is imminent.

Over the last three decades the Arab world has undergone various forms of neoliberalization; in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, failed forms of bureaucratic state capitalism have been replaced by neoliberal policies that have caused inflation, a drop in real wages and higher food prices (in Egypt about half of a family's income is spent on food, while in France it is less than 15%). While the national, state capitalist modernization projects of Nasser, Bourguiba and Boumédiène benefitted a fairly large part of their populations, this has not been the case at all with the neoliberal initiatives launched by Ben Ali and Mubarak, which have overwhelmingly served the interests of the ruling elite and further increased inequality, which was already massive. The neoliberal measures that privatized national industries have only consolidated the existing corruption and nepotism whereby a small elite enriches itself and gains control over large parts of production and commerce, leaving the large majority in extreme poverty and without any kind of political influence. The number of poor people in Egypt has grown steadily in recent decades. In 2011 nearly half the population of eighty-four million lived in poverty on less than two dollars a day, while six million lived in extreme poverty. About twelve million Egyptians live in slums and 48% of working people are employed in the so-called informal sector and are thus not ordinary wage labourers, but have been pushed to the margins of society as slum workers or low-paid service workers.³ The result of the neoliberal reforms has been that millions of Egyptians have been condemned to scraping by in slums. Already in 1977, Egypt was the scene of violent protests when hundreds of thousands poured onto the streets in a number of cities to protest against IMF-imposed cuts in food and gas subsidies. Since then there have been frequent protests in Egypt. The regime has consistently responded with brutality and cracked down on the protests, but has also been forced to go back on some of the proposed cuts, only to try and implement them again later. The situation has been the same in many countries in the region since the late 1970s, and protests have occurred in Algeria, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and Turkey. Only the oil producing countries and the Baath controlled regimes in Iraq and Syria have managed to avoid food riots. And in both Tunisia and Egypt in 2010 and 2011, it was

3 Gouda Abdel-Khalek: *Growth, Economic Policies and Employment Linkages in Mediterranean Countries* (Geneve: International Labour Organization, 2010), p. 16.

once again rising food prices that mobilized people and triggered the protests. In 2010 the price of wheat in Egypt rose by 73% while the price on corn rose by an astonishing 88%, causing fears of starvation among large parts of the population.

The protests that broke out in Tunisia and in just three months spread to Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, Oman, Jordan and Syria and other places were a reaction to this historical development, this continued process of pauperization in which the working Arab masses have experienced a thoroughgoing deterioration, while the local elites have enriched themselves and consolidated their power over the economy. It is in light of this situation that Samir Amin has written that the uprising cannot really be said to have come out of the blue.⁴ Contrary to other regions in the world, such as Latin America, Southeast Asia and South Africa, where there have been developments towards the introduction of national democracies of different kinds, the decolonization process in the Arab world has not been characterized by any kind of democratic development. On the contrary, the region has suffered the continual presence of dictatorships and tyrannies. In Saudi Arabia, the small Gulf states, Jordan and Morocco, royal dynasties rule with absolute power and attempts at political reforms are very rare. In the so-called republics of the region, the situation has been more or less the same, one man or family dynasties being the norm: Gaddafi ruled for forty-one years, father and son Assad have been in power even longer, Saleh managed to govern for thirty-two years and is still close to power, Mubarak held power for twenty-nine years and Ben Ali ruled Tunisia for twenty-three years.

However, overcoming the lumpen, despotic Arab regimes is not just a question of challenging local authoritarian regimes that protect the privileges of the ruling class. It is also a reckoning with the postcolonial world order, with its disparity between wealthy, white national democracies and poor, non-white countries with corrupt regimes. The West has been present in the region throughout the last hundred years, at no time has Western imperialism left much to chance, from Morocco to Egypt to the Gulf states. A succession of Western powers have encouraged continued underdevelopment in the region. Britain, France and then the US have played a decisive role in the geopolitical development in the Middle East and North Africa, as formal

4 Samir Amin: *The People's Spring: The Future of the Arab Revolution* (Nairobi & Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2012), p. 1.

colonialism has been replaced by an uninterrupted continuum of military and financial interventions. Of course oil has been extremely important to the West, but so, increasingly, has the state of Israel, especially to the American administration. The connection between Western dominance and a lack of any democratic initiative has been clear for everybody to see. Every time movements towards democracy or socialism have threatened Western capital in the region, the response has been prompt. (Mossadegh in Iran is just one example; elsewhere the destinies of Árbenz in Guatemala, Lumumba in Congo, Allende in Chile and Aristide in Haiti testify to the violent nature of US hegemony.) The most important factor remains acceptance of Western hegemony, and this can be engineered through some kind of nation-state democracy. But the US has rarely allowed the Arab masses to express their political agency through democratic elections – probably with good reason. After more than a century of colonial or postcolonial dominance, interventions and support for local dictators, the US and the other Western powers are not popular among the Arab populations. But as long as the local dictators and kings are able to keep the masses subdued everything is fine. The US does everything it can to prevent a pan-Arabic front and postpone an awakening of the critical potential of the Arab masses. An independent and internationally conscious Arab proletariat is definitely not in the interests of the US. An independent Arab proletariat that transcends national borders would represent a huge challenge to the present world order. The policy of the US and the West in general has been to prevent this from happening. In retrospect it is evident that most Western interventions have served a double purpose: on the one hand to gain access to oil and on the other to negate the ability of the Arab masses to unite and create alternatives to the present misery. That is, they have been intended as preventive counterrevolutions. Israel has functioned as a geographic ‘cut’ in the Arab world for decades, instigating religious conflict and forcing the countries of the region to maintain armies that drain their budgets but still cannot match a nuclear-armed Israel supported by the US. The wars in 1956, 1967 and 1973 as well as the presence of the Palestinian refugees have effectively prevented Arab development.

All countries in the region except Syria have lived by the US’s rules since the early 1970s. Saudi Arabia’s Saud dynasty has been the US’s most important partner in the region for decades. But after its

military defeat in 1973, Egypt and the Egyptian military has also been an important ally for Washington. Tunisia has been close to France while Algeria and Libya have had more room for manoeuvre thanks to their natural resources – but even Gaddafi eventually became part of the club and buddied up with Berlusconi. It is really only Syria that has defied the US – though without trying to prevent important projects like the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

When the events took off in Tunisia and Egypt, the Western powers had a hard time understanding what was happening. Their reactions to the course of events in Tunisia, for example, reflected this bewilderment. In less than a fortnight, France moved from unrelenting support for “our friend” Ben Ali to disowning “the dictator” and cheering on “the democratic forces” which a few days before had been described as “terrorists”. When the protests started in December 2010, there was no question of not backing Ben Ali: France was behind him all the way, as it has been since 1987 when he first came to power. After twenty-three people lost their lives in battles between police and protesters in Tunisia on the February 9th, the French Minister of Culture Frédéric Mitterand stated that it was a gross exaggeration to describe Tunisia as a dictatorship. Two days later, when the number of casualties rose and the fighting escalated, the French Foreign Minister Michèle Aillot-Marie offered Ben Ali French anti-terror equipment to allow him to get the situation under control and “restore order in the country”. Even after Ben Ali had left the country French politicians spoke highly of him and his actions. The former French Minister of Justice Rachida Dati praised him for his contribution to the fight against terror. It was not until January 15th that the French government came out in support of the protests. The American response to the events in the different Arab countries has also been characterized by bewilderment and a wish for continuity without unforeseen changes. The most important thing is to secure American interests. It is not about democracy or democratic progress; it never was. The priority is to keep the region in a subordinate role and keep the oil flowing. All necessary measures must be taken to prevent an autonomous Arab world from materializing, including invasions or military interventions. This was the case with Iraq and it is now the case with Libya and Mali. The aim is to keep the Arab masses separate and divided and prevent the protests from spreading and forming an alternative. The interventions in Gaza, Lebanon and Iraq

were preventive and those in Libya and Mali are attempts to contain the revolutionary forces unleashed by the recent events. It is not about solving local problems but about creating new ones in order to prevent development. The military, technological and economic support to the rebels in Syria is also primarily intended as a way of keeping the civil war from ending and slowly draining the revolutionaries of energy. Prolonging the civil war seems to be the preferred solution. And the intervention in Mali is a way of preventing protests from breaking out in Morocco and Algeria. In the last instance the model seems to be Iraq, which today is divided between three warring groups (Kurds, Sunni and Shia) that together are terrorizing each other and destroying what few ruins of the education system and infrastructure are left after the Iraq war obliterated most of it.

The uprisings that spread like wildfire in the first months of 2011 have their background in socioeconomic conditions that Western imperialism has helped create and sustain. The lumpen, despotic Arab regimes have held together largely thanks to support from the West, which has benefitted from their underdevelopment and enormous inequality, or what Samir Amin (following André Gunder Frank) terms “lumpen development”. The protests are thus not only an expression of a wish to oust local despots and achieve political and social justice, but also an attack on decades of Western imperialism that has only benefitted local ruling classes and kept the Arab countries in a position of subjection. The military interventions in Iraq and continued support for Israel’s apartheid policy are the most visible examples of Western interference, but in terms of the everyday life of the people in the region, the structural adjustment programmes, which really took off in 1990s, are no less tangible. While the IMF and the World Bank praised Egypt for its willingness to privatize its textile industry – causing 250,000 people to lose their jobs – and singled out Tunisia as “an economic success”, standards of living dropped significantly in both countries.

The reasons to rebel are thus evident, and most of the region was in revolt within a matter of months. The uprisings have developed very differently from country to country. The uprising in Tunisia, which like the one in Egypt was caused by rising food prices, caused the dictator Ben Ali to flee the country after only a few weeks of protests. Bouazizi set himself on fire on the 17th of December, and on January 14th Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia. The situation was chaotic

and the protests spread extremely quickly. In Tunisia almost a hundred protesters died and in Egypt the protests were even more violent: 800 people were killed in battles between police and protesters and 10,000 were injured in the seventeen days it took to force Mubarak to step down. In Egypt in particular, it does not make sense to talk about peaceful protests, as the Western media did. Many police stations were burnt down and public institutions were smashed and looted. In both Tunisia and Egypt the uprisings were the culmination of a longer period of political and social struggles. Between 2006 and 2009 Egypt experienced the most extensive wave of strikes ever seen in the country. Workers stopped working and demanded higher wages and better working conditions. In 2008 in Tunisia, the Gafsa region experienced a kind of permanent strike for almost six months, when a big phosphate mining company, *Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa*, initiated a massive layoff. The protests quickly turned into a rejection of the local dictator, and in both countries the protest movements succeeded in ousting the head of state surprisingly quickly. The tyrants Ben Ali and Mubarak were forced out and a kind of open political process took place, including elections in which several parties participated. In both countries Islamic parties won the elections and formed governments in alliances with other parts of the old elite. The army and the mosque joined forces. The agreement was clearly to stop the revolutionary process. In both countries the Muslim Brotherhood party acted as a blockade and was supposed to derail the revolutionary take off just as Islamism has been doing for decades in the region after the breakdown of the nationalist modernization projects.

Gilbert Achcar has pointed out that political Islamism in the Arab world is inextricably connected to the disappearance of a genuine political perspective in the region. In the wake of the collapse of the national modernization projects, the growing nepotism and the constant presence of Western imperialist powers that has kept the lumpen dictatorships in place, Islamism has been able to present itself as the only real opponent to the system, even though this was never really the case. But Islamism has been able to appropriate an authentic demand for equality and justice. Over the last thirty years political Islamism has grown against the background of the growing misery of the masses and the staggering concentration of wealth among a few local tribes and clans allied with foreign powers. However, the fact that political Islamism was never really an alternative was made apparent

after the elections in Egypt and Tunisia, when the political wings of the Muslim Brotherhood allied themselves with other segments of the ruling elite and the old state apparatus. In Egypt the army is the decisive factor. It has a standing force of one million men, it has its own industries and it has placed officers in more or less all of the key posts in the state administration. The list of the army's assets is long, ranging from the production of oil, olive oil and shoe polish to the voting booths that were used in the post-Mubarak elections. The army also holds the largest share of the revenue from the Suez Canal as well as a large part of the international economic aid the country receives. The military has a strong interest in attracting foreign investments and transnational capital and in the past few years it has entered into collaborations with, among others, the US, Russia, Britain, China, South Africa, France, Germany and Italy. During the uprisings in the first half of 2011 the army supplied troops to several foreign companies in order to ensure that production did not stop.⁵

The 'solution' to the explosive unrest (read: the derailment of the revolutionary dynamic) in Egypt was initially a social compromise between the army and the Muslim Brotherhood. In Tunisia the local Tunisian power elite entered into a fragile alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood's political party Ennahda, which received half of the votes cast in the election of October 2011, which the army monitored. Although there are important differences, the situation is pretty similar in both countries, insofar as a fraction of the ruling elite has taken a blow while the social hierarchy remains fundamentally intact. A limited political revolution took place, the old tyrants disappeared, elections were held, but there has not been a real social transformation. In both countries the state apparatus of the old regime remains intact and continues relatively unchallenged, only in the form of new alliances that are continually renegotiated. As Gilbert Achcar notes, it is difficult to see any real difference between the economic policy of Ben Ali and Mubarak and the new regimes.⁶ For as long as the Muslim Brotherhood was in power in Egypt, it was actually more faithful to the free market than Mubarak, and Morsi committed the country to carrying out drastic austerity programmes set forth by the IMF in

5 Shana Marshall & Joshua Stacher: "Egypt's Generals and Transnational Capital", *Middle East Report*, no. 262, 2012, [HTTP://WWW.MERIP.ORG/MER/MER262/EGYPTS-GENERALS-TRANSNATIONAL-CAPITAL](http://www.merip.org/mer/mer262/EGYPTS-GENERALS-TRANSNATIONAL-CAPITAL)

6 Gilbert Achcar: "Extreme Capitalism of the Muslim Brotherhood", *Le monde diplomatique*, June 2013, [HTTP://MONDEDIPLO.COM/2013/06/05BROTHERS](http://mondediplo.com/2013/06/05BROTHERS)

order to gain access to new loans. The neoliberal deterioration continued with the new democratically elected rulers. But unlike under Mubarak there was no escape in the illusory comfort of religion. The Muslim Brotherhood was responsible.

The important point, of course, is that the fundamental problems remain the same, and therefore the process that was triggered by Bouazizi's self-immolation is far from over. The events in Egypt in June and July 2013 testify to that fact. Discontent with the Muslim Brotherhood increased massively within a short time and the army felt it necessary to end the alliance with the Brotherhood within a year. The revolutionary masses' demands for bread, freedom and social justice were quickly contained by Morsi, who introduced cuts to subsidies and higher taxes on consumption in line with the IMF's recommendations, which also included a devaluation of the Egyptian currency, which in turn resulted in a further increase in the price of food. At the same time, Morsi allowed the police to take a strong line with people and did not take any legal action against the policemen who had killed protesters during the uprisings in 2011. The government refrained from localizing the assets Mubarak and his cronies amassed. Instead it quickly reconciled itself with former members of Mubarak's regime, referring to the necessity of getting the economy back on track. Discontent with the Muslim Brotherhood grew exponentially, and in June 2013 the military started to look the other way, allowing bourgeois news channels to criticize the Brotherhood. The critique quickly gathered pace, turning into protests in the streets. The army did not intervene, as it had otherwise always done when the regime was criticized. Instead it used the protests as a legitimate excuse to remove Morsi and declare a state of emergency. The army once again tried to stage itself as the saviour of the people. In January 2011 it was Mubarak who had to go, now it was Morsi. And the army remained in power. The streets might be quiet now, but the fury remains.

Libya is the country where the changes have been most thoroughgoing. In Libya the state apparatus was more or less completely crushed during the civil war that broke out in February 2011 when protesters started protesting against Gaddafi and quickly managed to take over several big cities in the country. The conflict escalated into a civil war and NATO decided to impose a no-fly zone, launching air strikes against Libyan compounds, the state TV station, army tanks

and vehicles from March 19th until the fall of the regime in late August. NATO carried out a total of 26,500 missions. The background to the civil war was discontent with the widespread nepotism and growing unemployment, which had reached 30% (50% of the Libyan youth were unable to find a job), despite the fact that the country was one of the wealthiest in the region because of its oil resources. Gaddafi had created a regime with an enormous amount of corruption that left most of the population more or less powerless. The insurgents quickly gained control over larger cities in the east, such as Benghazi and Misrata. Already on the 20th of February, a large mass of demonstrators took over Benghazi, and the next day a so-called National Transitional Council was set up, effectively creating a situation of double power in the country. Gaddafi's heavy-handed crackdown repelled the rebels, and in late March when Gaddafi's troops were just outside Benghazi, the UN intervened and created a no-fly zone, leaving it to NATO to carry out the mission. French fighters bombed Gaddafi's positions, and the civil war entered a new phase in which the rebels were on the offensive. During the summer the rebels approached Tripoli, which they conquered on the 22nd of August. In October the last government troops surrendered and Gaddafi was killed. More than 30,000 people were killed during the fighting between Gaddafi's army, the rebels and foreign forces, and today Libya is a chaos of rivaling militias and local warlords. The old order has effectively been smashed. In its place, a series of local militias have stepped in and control different parts of the country. There was an election in July 2012, after which the National Transitional Council handed over power to the elected General National Congress, which was supposed to form a government and begin the drafting of a new constitution. However, different groups within and outside the Congress have been fighting each other since the summer of 2012, effectively leaving the country without any central government. At present the picture is one of political chaos and sectarian violence.

In Yemen protests also quickly broke out. Already before the Egyptian protesters took to the streets, a large group of people in Yemen's capital Sana'a protested against President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the Middle East and is characterized by a strong tribal structure, a kleptocratic regime in which the leading tribe enriches itself. Saleh came to power in North Yemen in 1978 and became president of a united Yemen in 1990. In Yemen the protests

developed somewhat differently from Tunisia and Egypt. Saleh not only cracked down on the protesters (who criticized the worsened socioeconomic conditions due to the civil war and the implementation of structural adjustment programmes), but also tried to 'disarm' them by entering into dialogue with them. (The protesters included students, different religious groups, nationalist parties but also parts of the ruling elite.) Saleh both tried to make a deal with the protesters and gave the police a relatively free hand to break up the protests, resulting in many casualties during large demonstrations in late March in Al Mukalla and Salā'a, among other cities. Then followed a long process in which the Gulf Cooperation Council tried to make a deal between Saleh and the opposition while protesters and security forces fought each other across the country. On the 3rd of June, the presidential compound was bombed and Saleh and several others were injured, forcing Saleh to flee to Saudi Arabia for treatment. In the end Saleh – pressed by Saudi Arabia, which did not want the situation to develop into a full-scale civil war or an uncontrollable regime change – agreed to step back and hand over power to his Vice-President Abu Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi in November 2011. The result was a new power-sharing agreement between the local elite's different tribes, a new compromise between the followers and opponents of Saleh, in which Saleh and his family still played a central role. Saleh is thus still the leader of the largest party in the country, and his son is the chief of the National Guard. With reference to the threat of a stronger Al-Qa-eda, Saudi Arabia and the US have backed the new division of power and the attempt to prevent new democratic initiatives in the country.

The situation in Syria has some features in common with the development in Libya, such as the escalation of protests into a civil war and the introduction of money and weapons from abroad. But there are also clear differences. In Syria the West has abstained from actively participating in the conflict, which is held in check by China and Russia. The West has no wish to enter a direct war with the Syrian regime, which also plays a major role in Lebanon and is backed by Iran. As the situation in Iraq spirals increasingly out of control, involvement in Syria is not very attractive to the Western powers. And all the while the war between the rebels and the Assad regime continues. One of the main reasons for the protests is the continued enrichment of the elite Bashar al-Assad has headed since he took over as leader from his father Hafez al-Assad in 2000. Whereas Hafez al-Assad sought to include

the Sunni Muslim part of the population in his power base, his son has instead concentrated power and privileges among a small group of Alawites. At the same time the introduction of neoliberal measures has worsened the living conditions of the population, unemployment has grown significantly and the rural population in particular has experienced hardship. There has been a massive depopulation of the rural part of the country and the informal sector has grown. The contrast between the visible wealth and luxury of the Assad clan and an impoverished population led to protests in March 2011 in a number of cities following the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt. These started out as protests against local authorities, which responded brutally, escalating the conflict. From being a protest against local corruption and the right to work and bread, the movement turned into a protest against the president and the regime. Spurred on by the revolts in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa, and the massive coverage of them, the Syrian protesters went beyond local problems and started voicing criticism of the system, knowing full well the track record of the Assad regime (in 1982, Assad's Sr.'s forces killed between 10,000 and 40,000 members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama). Assad Jr. refused to listen to the protests and dismissed them, only to see them spread from Daraa to Homs and Hama and soon to the whole country. Unlike in Libya, where the rebels quickly gained a foothold in Benghazi, the protesters in Syria initially did not take over any larger cities. But in parallel with the development in Libya, the protests turned into an armed rebellion and the confrontations acquired a formal military character. In July 2012, defecting officers formed the Free Syrian Army, "aiming to bring the Assad regime down". In August a number of anti-government groups formed the Syrian National Council in an attempt to coordinate the opposition, including the Muslim Brotherhood, a faction from the Syrian Communist Party and other parts of the political and religious opposition. Militant Islamists formed groups of their own, backed by Hizbollah, and the opposition groups did not hold back from fighting each other. The fragmented character of the military resistance against Assad has tended to give Assad more options and the regime has managed to go on the offensive after initial setbacks, though it has not been able to defeat the opposition. Material support from abroad – Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states finance and arm the rebels, while Iran and Russia have supplied the regime with military equipment and battle troops – has played a role

in keeping the conflict going. The international meddling on the part of the opposition has only helped to fragment the opposition, which surprisingly quickly acquired a sectarian, ethnic and religious pattern, with tribes and groups fighting both the regime and each other in an accelerated process of destruction. As a result, there have been more than 100,000 deaths and the regime still has the upper hand.

In all countries in the region, people have protested against the local regimes and the extremely unequal economic development: in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Yemen, Lebanon, Bahrain, Sudan, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Syria, Saudi Arabia and all the small Gulf states. In Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya the result has been political changes, in Syria a bloody civil war is raging in its fourth year, while in Bahrain for example the regime has been able to crush the opposition. Saudi Arabia and the US have been involved in the places where the counter-revolution has the upper hand. For the US and the local elites, it is in fact preferable for the region to become mired in chaos and violence than to have the Arab masses join ranks and launch a decisive attack against the present postcolonial order. If that were to happen, the whole system could very well collapse, and if the Arab lumpen dictatorships fall, the European nation states would come under tremendous pressure.

The uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East could be the start of a genuine revolutionary break. As Hamid Dabashi writes, a mental break has happened. The Arab Spring is a “delayed defiance”, in which the Arab masses reject the postcolonial order and its extreme global and local inequalities.⁷ The local lumpen despots and their particular mixture of corruption and neoliberal policies, which has only further worsened the conditions in the region, have been shown the door. According to Dabashi, while a decisive mental break has occurred, this has not been accompanied by a decisive political and economic break. The reforms that have taken place are all quite superficial: they are, in Asef Bayat’s term, “re-folutions”. In Egypt the army is still running the show, but therefore the protests also continue.⁸ The revolutionary process is not dead. The underlying causes of the unrest remain intact and make the situation explosive. Almost all the regimes in the region are on shaky ground. The

7 Hamid Dabashi: *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

8 Asef Bayat: “Paradoxes of Arab Re-folutions”, *Jadaliyya*, 2011, [HTTP://WWW.JADALIYYA.COM/PAGES/INDEX/786/PARADOXES-OF-ARAB-REFO-LUTIONS](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/786/paradoxes-of-arab-re-folutions)

socioeconomic conditions that set this explosive process in motion are still present, and we seem to be in the very first phase of a long process in which the battle between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries will only intensify.

The revolution is once again taking off in the 'margin', as it did in 1848 and 1917. In 1848 Germany was the weak link, in 1917 it was Russia, and today it is Tunisia and Egypt.⁹ Then as now, it is important to create a connection between the centre and periphery in order to ensure that the Arab masses are not caught up in a form of autocratic socialist accumulation. The remains of the working class in Europe, the US and Japan must also be mobilized, as happened at moments of the occupy the square movement. The 20th century is full of tragic examples of attempts to create 'socialism in one country', and we need to make sure this will not be the fate of the Arab masses if they manage to produce an autonomous space. As C.L.R. James wrote, the only exit remains a world revolution: "Marxists must know and seek every possible means of making it clear that the national quality of the state must be destroyed; that is to say, the revolution has to be an international socialist revolution. [...] The nation state cannot function today. And not to know that, not to make that clear means the destruction of the revolution."¹⁰ The abolition of capitalism and the money system can only occur through a joint effort of workers in both the 'old centre' as well 'the weak links'. Only through a radical questioning of the fundamental premises of this society – an economy based on the production of value – will we be able to transcend the contradictions capitalism confronts us with, including the nation state and attempts to embed socialism in one country.¹¹

9 It was of course Trotsky who developed the idea of a permanent world revolution in which a proletarian offensive in the centre of accumulation went hand in hand with an independent workers' resistance in the weak links of capitalist accumulation. Leon Trotsky: *The Permanent Revolution*, 1929, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/TROTSKY/1931/TPR/PR-INDEX.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/TPR/PR-INDEX.HTM)

10 C.L.R. James: "The Way Out – World Revolution", *Radical America*, no. 7, 1971, pp. 57-58.

11 This has been the Communist position for a long time. Engels phrased it thus in an outline to *The Communist Manifesto*: "Will it be possible for this revolution to take place in one country alone? No. By creating the world market, big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth [...] into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others. [...] It follows that the communist revolution will not merely be a national phenomenon but must take place simultaneously in all civilized countries. [...] It is a universal revolution and will, accordingly, have a universal range."

INDIGNATION AND RIOTS IN EUROPE

The Arab revolution was the crucial event in 2011, and the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East were the spark that ignited a whole new protest movement. In a few months, people assembled in the streets of a number of European countries in solidarity with the events in Tunis and Cairo. At that time the crisis in Europe meant that circumstances had been ripe for active resistance for quite some time. After the initial shock in September 2008, when politicians and experts had to deal with the bursting financial bubble, it had been back to business as usual. The financial crisis did not significantly shake the neoliberal hegemony, and across the political left-right spectrum, politicians apparently agreed that there was no reason not to continue the neoliberal project or even to intensify it. Draconian austerity programmes were lined up and the crisis suddenly became a reason for further cuts to welfare. Everybody had to buckle up and make sacrifices. The clichés were trotted out and there was an almost uncanny dimension to the discourse, which argued that neoliberalism was the remedy to a sickness it had itself caused. But the course was set: the long neoliberal crash landing and the dissolution of the post-war welfare state had to be intensified, the only difference being the speed: now it had to go much faster. The crisis necessitated much more brutal cuts. The sovereignty of finance capital was beyond dispute, and the threat of limiting credit and lending was enough to force the states to take over the debt and continue down the same path.

Finance capital continued to dominate, and Thatcher's TINA doctrine was still seen to hold true: there was no alternative. The lesson seemed to be that the market was still the best way of distributing wealth and that the market would eventually regulate itself by letting some bubbles burst. This was the way to let the economy and society regulate itself. The spokespersons for yet another attempt to go back to some kind of Keynesian deal, or at least some kind of regulation (such as the 1933 Glass-Steagall legislation that split ordinary banking from speculative investment), had a hard time getting exposure in the media. Plans for a 'green capitalism' that could recreate part of the industry in Europe and the US that had been outsourced to China and other places with cheaper wage labour remained at best a supplement, or was forced further back into the shadows by the calls for cuts in the

"Principles of Communism", 1847, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/11/PRIN-COM.HTM>

face of the crisis. Instead of regulation and nationalization of finance capital and investments in 'green energy', capital's immediate response has been more of the same, with small additions like the Volcker rule (making it illegal for banks to engage in speculative investments that do not benefit their consumers).

The response to the debt crisis has been massive austerity programmes. All over Europe politicians have proclaimed cuts. In the UK Cameron was quick to introduce a plan that drastically cut public expenditure. But it was the same more or less everywhere. The need for cuts was evident to those in power, politicians from left and right all subscribed to the plan. It was simply necessary in order to save Europe. The logic seemed to be that, in order to save what was still left of the welfare system, we have to dismantle the last ruins of the post-war welfare system. In Ireland, Portugal, Spain, France, Denmark, etc., the course was set for cuts and different degrees of austerity, regardless of the governments' political stripes.

The massive austerity programmes created a new wave of protests across Europe. Already before the images of protesters in Cairo and Tunis started to circulate, there were strikes and occupations of factories in many places in Europe. But in 2011 the protests reached a new level and started to come together as a new global cycle of protests rejecting the neoliberal dogma in favour of a different way of organizing the world. In a number of countries, such as Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, France and Britain, strikes and large demonstrations occurred from 2008 to 2010, and in some places people even resorted to illegal means, for example in Montbrisson, where, in March 2010, workers in a Siemens factory took two executives hostage to force the board to renegotiate a firing round. As governments imposed austerity programmes, the resistance on the street grew. In October 2010 Greek workers blocked the port in Piraeus, Spanish air traffic controllers and Portuguese firemen went on strike, in France thousands protested against Sarkozy's plans to raise the retirement age, and in Marseille workers from the oil terminal went on strike. Belgian train workers, German train workers and London firemen went on strike. In Italy thousands of metal workers protested against the government's austerity plans. There were general strikes in Slovenia and Croatia. Protests or strikes took place more or less all over Europe. Most of them were defensive: it was about keeping one's job and limiting the extent of the austerity programmes. Only in very few places did a more principled

rejection of neoliberal globalization occur. This changed in 2011, after the Arab revolts made a more radical critique possible. This was especially the case in Spain and Greece, the countries that have been hardest hit by the crisis: there the masses rejected the neoliberal cuts outright. But in Italy, Britain and France, people also protested against the neoliberal austerity programmes in 2011.

The Spanish youth were the first to take the baton from the protesters in Tunis and Cairo. Thousands of people invaded Puerta del Sol in Madrid and the Plaça Catalunya in Barcelona, shouting: *no nos moveran* (“we won’t move”) and *democracia real ya* (“real democracy now”). The protests were aimed directly at the established political system, the political parties, but also the large unions. The background of course was the economic crisis. Unemployment was at more than 25% and youth unemployment almost at 50%. After the real-estate-inflated Spanish economy collapsed, changing Spanish governments have made massive cuts that have resulted in a drastic deterioration in the living standards of most of the Spanish population. Spain was struggling with high unemployment (especially youth unemployment) even before the crisis, and its labour market is characterized by many temporary jobs and low wages. To make things worse for the Spanish youth, the inflated housing market – real estate prices rose by 200% from 1996 to 2007 – has forced many young people to live with their parents. The successive Socialist Workers Party and conservative People’s Party governments did nothing to change this development in the 1990s and 2000s. Across the left-right divide, the politicians appear for the most part as a corrupt elite unable to handle the political and economic problems and instead focus on keeping their power and privileges. The political system appears as a spectacle in which the two main parties take turns forming governments without any clear political changes occurring. The Socialist prime minister José Luis Zapatero announced a dramatic austerity plan in the beginning of 2010 and cut public salaries by 5%. The conservative prime minister Mariano Rajoy, who won the election in November 2011, has continued this policy, launching a new sixty-five billion euro austerity plan, which includes cuts in wages and benefits and a VAT increase from 18% to 21%. The big unions backed the plan.

The protests, which quickly became known as the M15 movement, were a reaction to the government’s austerity plans. But they were also a more radical critique of the political system in its entirety,

as one could see in the YouTube video that was made public on the 8th of April. The video had no 'political signature' and was only composed of words and some sad music: "Corruption, monarchy, sad, precarious, companies, fear, capitalism, abuse of power, cuts, manipulation, debt, unions, the church, isolation, war, shitty contracts, mortgages, lies, repression, Wall Street, stock, Moody's, misinformation, powerlessness, depression, IMF." The critique of politicians' handling of the crisis was connected to a more fundamental critique of everyday life in capitalist society.

The M15 movement was in some regards a continuation of previous protests such as the huge mobilization against the Iraq war in 2003 and 2004 and the student protests against the Bologna process in 2008. The demonstration on May 15th was organized by a number of different groups and campaigns, including *V de Vivenda*, who fight for cheaper housing, *Ipotecados*, who fight for indebted families, and Anonymous, who protest against regulation of the internet. The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt played a huge role in inspiring the events in Spain, where people also occupied squares and critiqued the corruption of the political system. The protesters made explicit references to struggles elsewhere: on Puerta del Sol a huge Egyptian flag was shown and on the Plaça Catalunya the square was divided into three zones: Tahrir, Palestine and Iceland. In the second half of May people set up camps in more than 120 cities across Spain. The camps were run by daily assemblies that organized food, medical aid and political discussions about the crisis. There was a performative dimension to the occupations: they functioned as rehearsals of political empowerment.

An important aspect of the M15 movement was the lack of leaders or spokespersons. This of course represented a critique of the transformation of politics into a kind of reality show that fuses politics, media and advertisement. The movement rejected this development and refused to produce a new political star. Spokespersons always appeared under pseudonyms and all communiqués were signed collectively. Around 10,000 activists were involved in the daily assemblies in Madrid and Barcelona. Everywhere the protesters discussed the need for a reform of the political system, and the refrain was "real democracy now".

This was explicitly a 'no stars' movement, which also refused to issue recognizable and 'easy' demands to the politicians, favouring a more radical critique of the political system. Thus the movement tried

to distance itself from the existing unions and refused to become a part of a predefined political scenario. Its demands were formulated as “a minimum programme for the reconstruction of the political and economic system”. Instead of recognizable demands, the movement has consistently demanded an end to the privileges of the ruling class, a basic income for everybody, a new kind of participatory democracy and a huge cut on military expenses. But the debate was never restricted to a critique of the political system; it also included a discussion of the workings of neoliberal capitalism, and even a discussion of the capitalist money economy and its reduction of wo/man to a commodity. The movement was thus able to link itself with the Spanish republic and the revolutionary movements of the interwar period. The M15 movement encompasses both a reformist critique and a more radical critique, and has functioned as a platform for a number of different movements and positions, from a discourse of democratic civil society focused on regaining social guarantees, to a genuine critique of capitalism that strives to abolish the money system as such.

After a brief period of confusion, the political parties and the media joined forces in describing the movement as dangerous, criminal and a threat to democracy. This rhetoric has legitimized the police's brutal crackdown on the movements in Barcelona and Madrid and other cities, where it has tried to clear the occupied squares. The movement has defined itself as non-violent from the beginning, and the brutal behaviour of the police has only managed to further delegitimize the ruling order. However, the renunciation of violence is also a symptom of the limits of the protest, which remains within the framework of the existing political sphere. It is questionable whether it is feasible to continue to define yourself as non-violent when you are confronted with a more and more active state power that has experimented with and refined its anti-rebellion forces for the last ten years. When social movements get big enough and the protests spread, the state will always reveal its more repressive side and beat down the protests. Then the distinction between political organization and militant resistance will quickly disappear, not as an overall strategy of the revolutionary fight but as a matter of self-defence. The lesson from the 1930s and 2000s is that national democracy is never protection against the totalitarian grip. As Karl Korsch wrote in the late 1930s and Giorgio Agamben in the late 1990s, a modern nation state with debates and elections has never prevented camps from being erected – the capitalist state can always suspend political and juridical

rights and take on an authoritarian form.¹²

Although the M15 movement played a part in the election in November 2011 and again in the election to the European Parliament in the spring of 2014, when the *Podemos* party represented part of the protest movement, the general distrust of the political system is evident. When Rajoy and the conservative People's Party won in 2011, 28% of the population did not vote. It is evident that there is a process going on in which more and more people are becoming more and more alienated from the political system. The constant exclusion and pauperization created by capital were made visible by the crisis, and people are trying to develop a vocabulary with which to critique the present order of things. Not unlike in North Africa and the Middle East, this contributes to a political awakening that is radicalizing those with an already frayed trust in the existing system.

Nonetheless, as Corsino Vela writes in *Échanges*, the M15 movement remains connected to a democratic reformist critique that does not address the fundamental contradictions of capitalism.¹³ The scandals that continue to be revealed about the political parties are both good and bad. They are good insofar as they reveal a ruling class that seems to be totally disconnected from the everyday life of ordinary people, but bad in so far as they tend to limit the critique to being a question about the ruling class and not about the capitalist system as such. Many of the slogans tend to move in that first direction and limit the critique to a moral critique: "We fail to understand why we should have to pay the costs of the crisis, while its instigators continue to post record profits. We're sick and tired of one injustice after another. We want human dignity back again."¹⁴ But the reformist critique is more or less always supplemented with a more radical rhetoric that tends towards a more anti-political stance which does not just criticize the political elite but also neoliberal capitalism and the capitalist mode of production. 38% of the protesters describe the movement as a break with the present order, and more and more realize that the crisis prevents any kind of traditional reform of the education system

12 Karl Korsch: "State and Counter-Revolution", 1939, [HTTPS://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/KORSCH/1939/STATE-COUNTERREVOLUTION.HTM](https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1939/state-counterrevolution.htm); Giorgio Agamben: *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

13 Corsino Vela: "En Espagne, la révolte citadine de mai 2011". *Malaise social et régénération démocratique*, *Échanges*, no. 137, 2011, pp. 3-12.

14 Take the Square: "How to cook a non-violent revolution", [HTTP://TAKETHESQUARE.NET/2011/07/15/HOW-TO-COOK-A-PACIFIC-REVOLUTION/](http://takethesquare.net/2011/07/15/how-to-cook-a-pacific-revolution/)

and the job market, and that the crisis will only intensify further. The M15 movement can thus be seen as an expression of a limit that has been reached where more and more people are realizing that they have been robbed of a future. *Que Se Vayan Todos* ("Out With All of Them") phrase it thus: "It is not about improving this or that aspect of life because the fundamental conditions will remain the dictatorship of the economy. It is about changing the world, changing everything. Capitalism cannot reform itself so it must be destroyed. There is no middle ground. It is necessary to get to the root of the problem, it is necessary to abolish capitalism."¹⁵ The M15 movement's political critique is here being transcended by an anti-political critique of parliamentary democracy and capitalism as a contradictory totality.

While the M15 movement in Spain helped expand the protests launched by the Arab masses and developed an explicit critique of the present nation-state democracy, the Greek youth gave the new protest wave an explicitly negative dimension. The economic situation in Greece is graver than in Spain. So far the crisis has found its European epicentre in Greece, whose economic policy has de facto been run by the IMF and the European Central Bank since May 2010. In December 2009 the international credit rating agencies downgraded the Greek state's long-term loans, and the rate of interest rose dramatically. The government's attempt to regain credibility and control the growing budget deficit through cuts failed. In May 2010, the Greek government thus had to sign a deal with the IMF, the EU and the European Central Bank for a loan of 110 billion euros. Since then a number of 'rescue packages' have followed. As part of the loans, the Greek government has agreed to implement a dramatic austerity programme that includes massive cuts to public expenses, longer working hours, cuts in wages and pensions, privatizations and tax reliefs for big business. All in all this amounts to a massive deterioration of the population's material conditions.

Today, the opportunities for children of the Greek petit bourgeoisie of getting jobs are dismal. Unemployment continues to rise: it has increased from 8.8% in January 2009 to 24.4% in June 2012. The number of the homeless has exploded: in Athens alone more than 25,000 people are homeless. Wages have been cut by 22% and pensions have been cut by between 15% to 25%.

Greece is caught in a debt trap not unlike the ones so-called third

15 Anticapitalista en la otra: "Carta del bloque que se vayan...", 2011, [HTTP://ANTICAPITALISTASENLAOTRA.BLOGSPOT.DK/2011/05/CARTA-DEL-BLOQUE-QUE-SE-VAYAN.HTML](http://anticapitalistasenlaotra.blogspot.dk/2011/05/carta-del-bloque-que-se-vayan.html)

world countries have been in for decades. Since 1985, Greece has been paying off 628 billion euros on loans three times the Greece GDP, but the debt has only increased, and the country has now been forced into cuts that will only make the crisis worse. This is the background of the protests that have taken place in Athens and elsewhere in the country. Greece currently functions as a test case for the neoliberal crisis management in Europe, as it is subjected to a treatment that previously was reserved for countries in the former East after 1989 and many countries in the global South. The neoliberal shock doctrine has come home and several European countries are being threatened with 'Greek conditions'. The so-called 'rescue packages' have done little but further indebt the country and force it through some excruciating cuts that are pulling it apart. The lesson for the European politicians seems to be that it is much worse to end up with 'Greek conditions' than to face popular protests against yet another round of neoliberal austerity. The 2011 protests in Europe do not seem to have frightened the politicians into making changes, as they are continuing the neoliberal reforms of the state and the public sector more or less everywhere.¹⁶

The process is much the same every time a country is forced into a structural adjustment programme: with reference made to the country not being competitive enough, an 'internal devaluation' takes place that forces wages down. In many of the countries where the IMF has been responsible for the process, the local currency has also been devalued. However, this is not possible in Greece, which is part of the euros. In Greece, only wages and public expenditure can be cut. At the same time, a process of large scale privatization is implemented with the purpose of 'opening the country to foreign investments'; in the case of Greece this amounts to the sale of public services, infrastructure and land at very cheap prices, not unlike what went on in Eastern Europe after 1989. For instance, in February 2013, the Emir of Qatar bought four Greek islands for a price of 8.5 million euro. Publicly owned water and energy companies, ports, banks, public transportation and the biggest European lottery company have all been sold. The adjustment programme negotiated by the Greek state and the EU has dramatic consequences for Greek society and it is hollowing out the Greek working class's ability to reproduce itself. The exclusion that has been part of the neoliberal restructuring since

16 Cf. Aufheben: "The Euro Crisis: Taking the PIGS to Market", *Aufheben*, no. 21, 2012, pp. 7-43.

the late 1970s is being intensified and more and more workers are left with nothing. To capital, they are useless. This development is taking place across national borders and it is visible in Greece, all the other EU countries, the Middle East and the rest of the world.

The developments in Greece since 2010 now appear as a ‘bloodless coup’ in which banks and the leaders of the Eurozone have overthrown an elected government and replaced it with their own people.¹⁷ In Greece (as in Italy) a technocratic government composed of bankers and officials from the European Central Bank took charge in 2011 with a mandate to carry through the reform programme outlined by the EU and the IMF. Greece was de facto put under forced management. The events in Greece have been spectacular. In late October 2011 the Greek prime minister George Papandreou announced a referendum in which the Greek people were to decide about the rescue package the EU and the IMF had offered the country. In the beginning of November, after publicly being put in place by Merkel and Sarkozy at the G20 meeting in Cannes, Papandreou cancelled the referendum only to step down as prime minister two days later. Lucas Papademos, former Vice President of the European Central Bank, was then appointed prime minister on November 10th. He appointed a joint government that was composed of members from Papandreou’s Pasok party, but also members of the right wing party Laos, which had never previously been a member of any government. Then came an election in May 2012 in which the two traditional parties Pasok and ND experienced a veritable exodus of voters, while the old style communist party Syriza gained 16% of the votes and the extreme right wing party Golden Dawn entered parliament and received 7% of the votes. Despite massive pressure from the EU, it was not possible to form a government, and a new election took place in June, after which a joint government composed of ND, Pasok and Dimar and headed by Antonis Samaras from ND took over with a firm commitment to follow the rescue plan. Throughout this process, European and especially Northern European politicians and media have represented Greece as an irresponsible country with an overgrown welfare system, carelessness in public governance and rampant tax evasion. German politicians in particular put pressure on Greece and even talked about the necessity of establishing a protectorate in Greece unless the country pulled itself together.¹⁸

17 Stathis Kouvalakis: “The Greek Cauldron”, *New Left Review*, no. 72, 2011, p. 17.

18 Thomas Straubhaar: “Wir brauchen ein Protektorat”, *Der Tagesspiegel*, May 6th, 2012.

The looting of Greek society has not gone unanswered: there have been protests throughout. There is a straight line from the large demonstrations in December 2008 following the police shooting of a young Greek student, Alexis Grigopoulos, to the protests that took place in 2011 as a direct response to the rescue packages put together by the EU. The riots in December 2008 turned into a three week protest campaign of pillaging and street fighting against the police in a number of cities in Greece; protesters threw molotov cocktails and set fire to shops, cars and banks. Already on the first night, twenty-four policemen were wounded in riots in Athens, thirty-one shops looted, nine banks burnt down and twenty-five cars set on fire. The street protests continued during the following three weeks, while high school students occupied more than 600 schools and university students occupied 159 university buildings across Greece. Unions called for a general strike, the big Christmas tree on Syntagma Square was set on fire, and in the streets protesters fought the police, throwing Molotov cocktails, bricks and red paint at them. The police bombarded the protesters with tear gas and light grenades to such an extent that they ran out of tear gas and had to order more after just six days. The violent protests in December 2008 were primarily carried out by young students, the unemployed and migrants, who also played a central role in the 2011 protests.

The protest movement thus got a head start in Greece, but after the revolts in North Africa began, the Greek protesters became part of a larger movement and quickly started using the tactics employed by the protesters in Cairo, occupying squares and setting up camps. The demonstrations that took place in Athens and in many cities in Greece on May 25th, 2011 made direct references to the struggles in Tunisia, Egypt and Spain. As with the protests in North Africa and in Spain, the discourse was initially primarily focused on the bankruptcy of the political system and the politicians' subservience to finance capital: "For a long time now, decisions have been taken for us, without us. We are workers, unemployed, pensioners, youth who came to Syntagma to struggle for our lives and our futures. We are here because we know that the solution to our problems can only come from us. We will not leave the squares before those who led us here leave first: governments, the troika, banks, memorandums and everyone who exploits us. We are here to tell them that the debt is not ours. DIRECT DEMOCRACY NOW! EQUALITY

– JUSTICE – DIGNITY!”¹⁹

As in Spain, this was a composite movement that included everything from *ressentiment*-based nostalgia through radical democratism to militant anticapitalism. Due to the implosion of the political system, large parts of the petit bourgeoisie and the working class, who had been passive until the crisis became ‘official’ in Greece in 2010, were mobilized in large numbers, disappointed by the politicians they had trusted to represent them. Disappointed social democrats and conservative voters who had lost their jobs also found themselves on the street in large numbers – the general strikes counted up to half a million demonstrators in the streets – showing the collapse not only of the political system but of the entire Greek state. This group experiences the crisis and the austerity programme as a violent and sudden proletarianization that catapults them into social declassification and the loss of privileges they cannot realistically hope to get back. The perception of the crisis as caused from ‘outside’ – it is the EU and Germany that is to blame – resonates within parts of this group. They are receptive to the nationalist rhetoric that threatens to fuse with the recurring fascism that manifested itself in the form of the Golden Dawn party (which is both present as a political party in the parliament and on the streets as a mixture of neighbourhood militia and relief work for ‘Greeks’). Syriza and the Greek Communist Party are trying to match the radicalization of the streets and both have rejected the rescue plans. In this way they are trying to use the protests. Neither party represent anything new, but are variants of the 20th-century Stalinist enclosure of the revolution within one country, which amounts to no revolution at all. One-nation socialism is not even half a revolution: without an abolition of the nation state there is no communist perspective. Marx and Engels made that clear already in 1848.²⁰

However, as in Spain, the dominant discourse among the Greek protesters is a critique of the political system in which the present parliamentary democracy is contrasted with a genuine direct democracy practiced in the occupied squares where, ideally, all are heard and all can participate in the political discussion and decision making process. The refrain ‘real democracy now’ is also heard in

19 Popular Assembly of Syntagma Square: “Resolution”, [HTTP://WWW.OCCUPIED-LONDON.ORG/BLOG/2011/05/28/603-RESOLUTION-BY-THE-POPULAR-ASSEMBLY-OF-SYNTAGMA-SQUARE/](http://www.occupied-london.org/blog/2011/05/28/603-resolution-by-the-popular-assembly-of-syntagma-square/)

20 “The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. [...] Proletarians of all countries unite!”

Greece and, there too, is an expression of the rejection of the established political parties and the whole politics-media-capital circuit in favour of a new public space. However, the repeated use of terms such as 'citizen' and 'decent' is telling, and illustrates the movement's present limits: the critique remains embedded in a bourgeois imagination and does not include a consideration of the fundamental contradictions of capitalism but remains attached to an idea of the political as a separate sphere.

The 'decency rhetoric' of radical democratism, which is dominant in the protests in Spain and Greece, is challenged by an explicit anti-capitalist stance that does not counterpose a coming, true democracy to the ruling political system, but instead rejects the specializations of capitalist society. The anti-political critique points beyond the 'citizen' discourse and tries to embed the critique of the political establishment in a critique of the capital/labour relation. As the crisis worsens, the democratic majority that is unable to gain access to capitalist value production will probably become radicalized, unless of course the struggle for daily survival becomes so intense that it engulfs all energy, further increasing the already rampant fragmentation and confusion and making fascism appear as a solution.

Spain and Greece have without a doubt been the frontrunners in Europe when it comes to protests against neoliberal austerity, although protests, demonstrations and strikes have happened in almost all European countries since 2011. But in Spain and Greece, the contours of a real protest movement have been visible: a fragmented but still relatively coherent protest movement that has explicitly defined itself in relation to the breakups of the Arab revolts. The M15 movement in Spain and the protest movement in Greece contain both reformist and radical democratic elements that still subscribe to ideas of rights and decency, as well as more antagonistic and anti-systemic commitments that transcend the more moralizing stance which is focused on the greed of finance capital and political corruption instead of on the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. But something has happened. In Spain and in Greece there is something new going on: radical and more negative voices are being heard after three decades of defensive protests that essentially stopped short of challenging the existing system.

Protests swept across Europe in 2011, and they still do, though in a more haphazard and makeshift manner than in 2011, when it seemed

as if it was possible to connect the struggles. We are not there yet. In 2011 the protests had an international dimension and referred to the events in North Africa and the Middle East. These references seem to have become less frequent as the protest movements have moved away from the streets and concentrated on specific issues such as housing. The so-called debt crisis and the austerity it legitimizes have a firm grip on Europe. As the cuts are being carried out the conflict will become more intense, as has been the case in Bosnia, Bulgaria and Slovenia in 2013 and 2014. However, the intensification of the crisis does not necessarily mean that we will see more revolutionary activity, since the crisis may just as well take on other forms. This is the lesson of the 1930s. The development in Greece, where fascism suddenly became very visible in the form of fascist militia hunting down migrants, speaks volumes about this possible 'solution' to the crisis.

The protests have not only taken place in Southern Europe, but also in Northern Europe, for instance in London. In late 2011 people camped outside St Paul's Cathedral protesting the announced cuts and the enormous wealth of the finance capitalist elite. However, London has also seen a different kind of protest. In the summer of 2011, groups of young men and women fought the police, set cars on fire, burned down buildings and looted shops in London and a number of other cities across England. Four nights in a row, between the 6th and 10th of August, areas in London and then in Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester were in flames and goods and properties worth more than 200 million pounds were destroyed. Thousands participated in the lootings, as well as the protests that broke out after the police shot and killed Mark Duggan in Tottenham on August 4th. According to the journal *Aufheben*, there were three kinds of riots going on: riots in neighbourhoods that were heavily proletarianized and subject to police brutality; so-called commodity riots in which shops and supermarkets were looted; and so-called anti-rich riots in which wealthy areas in London were attacked and cars, cafés and shops were smashed. The riots reached such a scale that David Cameron felt he had to cut short a holiday in Italy and hurry home to explain what was occurring. The situation was pretty clear to Cameron, who told the cameras that, this was a case of criminal elements vandalizing ordinary citizens. He had seen "sickening scenes – scenes of people looting, vandalizing, thieving, robbing. [...] This is criminality, pure and simple, and it has to be confronted and defeated." This was the return of *les classes*

dangereuses. “And if you are old enough to commit these crimes, you are old enough to face the punishment”, Cameron warned and promised. The solution was once again to criminalize the poor, as if they had not already been excluded by standing on the other side of the shop window looking at the commodities they could not get access to. As if the riots were not an expression of that very fact. No, the riots were not related to the shooting of Duggan and a racist police force, they were not related to the structural exclusion of people who cannot get a job in order to sustain themselves and their families, not related to the slow destruction of the welfare state, the hollowing out of social benefits and pensions. By rejecting the importance of these structural conditions, Cameron only confirms the ongoing exclusion and identifies the marginalized as marginalized and superfluous, if not abject, subjects.

The riots in London were not motivated by any direct political statements. There was no programme, no plan, or for that matter any kind of idea behind the looting and the arson. Unlike the riots that took place in England in the early 1980s, which contained some kind of optimism and an enthusiastic belief that the protests could achieve something, could make visible a social wrong, the riots in 2011 were without hope. There were no demands. The fact that the riots did not involve any revolutionary demands like those made in the 1960s in the US in Detroit, Watts and Seattle cannot come as a surprise, but not even modest reformist demands to improve the life of the excluded were made in the London riots. The belief in any kind of amelioration was absent. There was no new social compromise in sight. Whereas in the 1981 riots, there was an element of empowerment and community, the 2011 riots were just expressions of frustration and individualized anger. There was no transgression towards a common consciousness, no collective agency that could take on a political form. In this way the London riots of 2011 were a direct result of the neoliberal restructuring that began in the early 1980s.

Like the M15 movement in Spain and the protests in Greece, the riots in London are a reaction to the ongoing neoliberal readjustment in which it is always necessary to make more cuts. But the riots are also a sign of the withering away of a vocabulary that can transform comprehensive destruction into a negation of property right and value. The riots were not political, but neither were they anti-political: they were primarily expressions of desperation and anger. In this way

the riots are related to the protests that are also primarily defensive: they are about survival, not about replacing the old structures with new and better ones. People react against daily injustices and the erosion of structures of living. This does not mean that there wasn't an element of organization in the riots; there was. There was also a certain amount of disruption of formerly existing structures of loyalty – not in a coherent way, in which the state and capital was attacked – but in a more immediate and uncoordinated way, in the sense that was an excess of anger that, at least virtually, negated the existing order. What we have is something like the Imaginary Party in Tiqqun's sense.

And there is a connection between the riots in London and the more negative part of the protest movement in Southern Europe, in that they not only refuse to be represented within the framework of the established political public sphere but also reject the very aspiration of being included in this sphere. As the Madrid-based collective *Observatorio Metropolitano* phrases it: "For the emerging European movement this means that there is no institutional counterpart to the movement, no force capable of thinking and launching a consistent programme of reforms to 'resolve' the crisis. No New Deal, no programme of progressive redistribution and reordering of the financial system and public spending that would be able to overcome the situation without a social debacle."²¹ There is something going on between desperation and rejection. Nothing that has yet taken on the form of a communist negation; we are not there quite yet. The long and painful self-dissolution of the European working class is not yet complete; that seems to be one of the lessons of 2011 in Europe. We have to go deeper, we have to destroy more and stay affirmative towards the events on the other side of the Mediterranean.

OCCUPY

If the European protest movement that materialized in 2011 came as a surprise (even though it built on existing resistance against politicians' bailout of the banks and the subsequent austerity), the US occupy movement came completely out of the blue and was an even bigger surprise. After more than three decades of neoliberal hegemony, the resistance and scope of the protest movement was truly a novelty. In

21 Observatorio Metropolitano: *Crisis and Revolution in Europe*, 2011, [HTTP://WWW.OBSERVATORIOMETROPOLITANO.ORG/WP-CONTENT/UPLOADS-OBSERVATORIO/2012/05/CR_ENG_02.PDF](http://www.observatoriomropolitano.org/wp-content/uploads-observatorio/2012/05/CR_ENG_02.PDF)

2009 only 0.05% of the American workers went on strike, as opposed to 20% in the beginning of the 1970s. The difference is huge and it speaks volumes about the one-sided nature of the class struggle in the last decades in the US. After more than thirty-five years of neoliberal blackmail, something finally happened in the US following the revolts in North Africa and the protests in Europe. Occupy Wall Street made visible the neoliberal offensive and was the start of a completely unexpected wave of protests that spread to more than 1,000 cities across the nation.

The official response to the crisis in the US has been consolidation of the status quo. The American government bailed out the banks, and in accordance with the policy of the Obama administration everything has been done to secure the elite's privileges. The Obama administration has launched two stimulus packages which have not alleviated the crisis for the 99% but only further widened the divide between rich and poor.²² Thus, despite the crisis, many American companies have accumulated large profits, but they do not invest them. At the same time, wages have been pushed down, continuing the drop in real wages that has been the tendency since the late 1970s. The consequence is that today the US is more divided than before the crash in 1929.

This is the last phase of the long and painful dismantling of post-war American society that has been going on since the late 1970s. It has been one long defeat for the American working class, which today lives in a society that is effectively breaking in two. The connection between increased productivity and higher wages that was such an important ingredient in the long post-war upturn has been broken and the rate of exploitation has risen significantly. The graphs in the Congressional Budget Office's report show this to be the case.²³ The result is that wage differences are bigger today than ever before in history. From 1979 to 2007 the richest 1% gained three-fourths of all income increases in the country and the largest part accrued to the richest tenth of the most wealthy, who had an average raise of 5.6 million dollars. The average real wage rose by 275% from 1979 to 2007 for the richest 1%, while the average income of a typical

22 Cf. Center for Economic and Policy Research: "Already More Than a Lost Decade", 2012, [HTTP://WWW.EPI.ORG/PUBLICATION/LOST-DECADE-POVERTY-INCOME-TRENDS-CONTINUE-2/](http://www.epi.org/publication/lost-decade-poverty-income-trends-continue-2/)

23 Congressional Budget Office: "Trends in the Distribution of Household Income between 1979 and 2007", 2011, [HTTP://WWW.CBO.GOV/PUBLICATION/42729](http://www.cbo.gov/publication/42729)

working class family dropped by more than 2,000 dollars from 2000 to 2007. Even after Lehman Brothers collapsed in 2007, these differences have only grown.

The drop in income manifests itself in other ways as well. From 1982 to 2005 the average income rose by 147%, while health-related expenses rose by 251% and expenses related to education rose by 439%. From 1989 to 2004 the average family's income has risen by 35%, but housing expenses have risen by 56%, pension expenses by 119% and debt by 119% (103% of which is made up by home loans). In 2010 the Center for Economic and Policy Research concluded that "one in three Americans lacked the income to make ends meet".²⁴ While an American working class family was able to survive on one paycheck until the mid-1960s, two or three checks are now required. Since the outbreak of the crisis this division of society has only further accelerated. The production of goods and services has risen by 6% yearly, despite massive layoffs with millions losing their jobs, and despite a 6% drop in salaries. The official unemployment figure is now almost 8%. The US may very well still be the only capitalist superpower, but as Giovanni Arrighi writes, the dominance of finance capital is a sign of decadence. The numbers speak for themselves: 26% of all bridges are falling apart, the US has the highest rate of child mortality of all developed countries, it has the most insecure workplaces of all developed countries and it is number forty on the UN's list of average life expectancy. Moreover, almost 2% of the population (primarily blacks and Latinos) is in prison.

This development, of course, is the background of the mobilization that took place in 2011 and 2012 all over the US, when cities like New York and Oakland became scenes for urban protests on a scale not seen since the late 1960s. As is the case in Europe, Occupy is not an offensive movement so much as a reaction to the intensified exploitation and exclusion that has taken place since the outbreak of the crisis, driven by neoliberal capitalism, which for more than thirty years has been busy undermining and dissolving the post-war Keynesian model. The crisis presented itself as an opportunity to finish this undertaking once and for all. But in 2011 the neoliberal project all of a sudden met with fierce resistance: the old mole resurfaced, not only

24 Center for Economic and Policy Research: "One in Three Americans Lacked the Income Needed to 'Make Ends Meet' in 2009; Young Adults Among the Hardest Hit", 2010, [HTTP://WWW.CEPR.NET/INDEX.PHP/DATA-BYTES/POVERTY-BYTES/POVERTY-2010](http://www.cepr.net/index.php/data-bytes/poverty-bytes/poverty-2010)

in Europe but also in the US.

As early as February 2011, a first break with three decades of neoliberal hegemony took place when thousands protested in Wisconsin against the newly elected Republican governor Scott Walker's plans to eliminate collective bargaining rights for public employees. Walker was elected in November 2010 as part of the right wing wave that swept across the US in the form of the Tea Party movement, which is a populist continuation of the last forty years of neoliberal bashing of big government. This rhetoric of a repressive minimal state facilitating a liberated market has been part of US politics since the late 1970s, and is a racist reaction to a demographic development in which white Americans are becoming a minority (Obama is one scary 'proof' of this development, according to this 'analysis'). The Tea Party movement and its economic backers like the Koch brothers effectively used the crisis and the growing discontent with the Obama administration to launch yet another attack on the remains of the welfare state and public services in the US. The cancellation of public employees' right to collective bargaining was part of that plan. Walker's initiative was thus a test case, and on the 9th of March 2011 the bill was passed. Already a few days after the budget repair bill was proposed on February 11th, teachers and other public employees started protesting outside the Wisconsin State Capitol. Teachers and students occupied the building housing both chambers, the Wisconsin Supreme Court as well as the Governor's Office. A court order ruled the occupation illegal and it ended on the 3rd of March. Originally Walker was unable to pass the bill because Democratic senators left the state in opposition to the bill, preventing it from being passing by the Republican-controlled legislature due to the absence of the quorum necessary for a vote. Walker then removed certain fiscal provisions, allowing it to be passed by a simple Republican senate majority. Protesters immediately reoccupied the building. Almost 100,000 people took part in the action on March 9th, shouting "kill the bill". The protests continued for months, with large demonstrations outside the State Capitol building in Madison. Even though the protesters employed the relatively radical strategy of occupying a building, the protests were characterized by a democratic discourse that inscribed them within the established political public sphere and made it possible for the Democrats to present the situation as yet another battle with the Republicans. But the

scope of the protests was remarkable and signalled a shift that was confirmed a few months later in New York, where the occupation strategy was put to use by Occupy Wall Street.

The protests in Wisconsin were important as an example of the possible transformation of anger and discontent into active resistance; anger towards the banks and financial institutions that developed and sold complex loans, discontent with the politicians who facilitated the finance economy and bailed out the financial sector when the bubble burst. The demonstrations, the occupation of the Capitol building and the discussions became a kind of counter-image to the Tea Party movement and its mobilization. Paradoxically, it was initially the extreme Right that was able to use the crisis as a cause for mobilization. Obama did nothing to prevent that development, as he sided with the banks and capital, in accordance with the Democratic Party's historical role in American political history (as the moderate right wing party as opposed to the far right Republican party). The protests in Wisconsin and the occupations across the country did not only open up a space to the left of Obama, but rejected the false choice between Democrats and Republicans. The established order's reasonable centre in the form of Obama was suddenly unmasked.

Wisconsin was a breakthrough, but it was not until protesters decided to occupy Zuccotti Park in New York on September 17th that the fresh air from North Africa really reached the US. In Madison there had already been Egyptian flags present during the protests, but in New York the connection to the events in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, etc. was made explicit from the start. In the text that David Graeber wrote for *Adbusters*, "Awaiting the Magical Spark", which made the magazine call for a demonstration on Wall Street, he explicitly asked how one could use the Arab revolts in the US.²⁵ The references to Tunis and Cairo were clear, and the decision to erect a camp in Zuccotti Park was directly inspired by the use of squares in North Africa and Southern Europe. Tahrir was coming to New York. The US was going to get its own version of the "Liberty Square" created by the Egyptian revolutionaries.

That Occupy Wall Street's *dérivé* ended in Zuccotti Park with an occupation was in itself an important statement. The park had once been named Liberty Park Plaza and had been a public park. After 9/11

25 David Graeber: "Awaiting the Magical Spark", *Adbusters*, no. 96, 2011, [HTTPS://WWW.ADBUSTERS.ORG/MAGAZINE/96/DAVID-GRAEBER.HTML](https://www.adbusters.org/magazine/96/david-graeber.html)

it was sold to Brookfield Properties, which renamed the park after its CEO John Zuccotti. By occupying this private park, which is situated near Wall Street and in the periphery of the financial district, the protesters put into practice a kind of reterritorialization that disrupted the intense deterritorialization of neoliberal capital. The transformation of the city and previous public space into private property was undone as the demonstrators placed their bodies in the park, appropriating it for other ends and refusing to leave.

After six months of struggle against neoliberal globalization in North Africa, the Middle East and Southern Europe, the resistance had reached New York, where a park close to the world's biggest stock market was occupied by thousands of people who refused to move, insisting that enough was enough. The protesters refused to put up with it any longer, rejected a world in which the top 1% accumulated wealth at the expense of the rest. Therefore people did not go home, but built a camp and set up a communization centre. In this way the camp quickly became a place from which the protesters communicated with the rest of the world, creating connections to the other protests that were occurring. Occupy Wall Street became an important node in a network of resistance whose goal was a different society.

The occupation of Zuccotti Park had an almost explosive inspirational character. From all over the world people sent statements of support, money, pizzas and books to the park and in a few weeks a nationwide protest movement had come into being modelled on Occupy Wall Street. Suddenly there were Occupy movements in Chicago, Florida, Denver, etc. In more than a hundred cities across the US parks and squares were occupied under the motto: "we are the 99%".

The majority of occupations in the US took place between October and November 2011 and most of them only lasted a relatively short time. Some of them managed to last longer, such as the one in Washington, which ended in June 2012. The occupation of Zuccotti Park lasted until the 15th of November, when the police raided the camp and arrested 200 people, including a number of journalists. In the period from the seventeenth of September to the fifteenth of November, the occupation of Zuccotti Park developed a veritable micro-society, with daily meetings, talks and concerts and seventy working groups that were in charge of different tasks in the camp, from providing food to running a hospital. All decisions were made at the New York City General Assembly, which took place every night at seven o'clock. The

meeting was public, there was no formal leadership, and those present made decisions based on a consensus process in which participants attempted to make decisions.

During the occupation of Zuccotti Park, Occupy Wall Street organized several demonstrations and marches in New York. In several instances the police interfered and arrested several hundred protesters, as was the case on October 1st, when protesters tried to cross the Brooklyn Bridge. After the raiding of the park there were demonstrations on a regular basis for half a year, and across the US financial companies, universities and high schools have been occupied in a steady flow since 2011. On New Year's Eve 2011 Zuccotti Park was temporarily re-occupied by a group of protesters who forced the police out of the park and partied. After a few hours most of the protesters left the park and police in riot gear took it over. On March 15th protesters once again tried to occupy the park, but this time with no luck. A number of American cities have seen similar scenes of occupations, evictions and attempts to reoccupy squares. More or less every time the police response has been brutal.

The peak of the American protest movement probably came when protesters closed down the port of Oakland on the 2nd of November 2011 as part of a general strike, effectively blocking the circulation of goods into and out of Oakland. Occupy Oakland has been the most confrontational part of the Occupy movement and has built on a decade long radical Black movement in the area, as well as the radical student protests that took place at several Californian universities in 2009 and 2010. Between 50,000 and 100,000 people participated in the general strike.

The rallying point for Occupy Wall Street and the Occupy movement was economic inequality and financial greed, but the protests also included a critique of the political system and the fusion of politics and finance capital that was revealed by the bank bailout. As in Europe, the critique was both directed at the financial sector and the political system, but while the protests in Spain were more focused on the question of political representation, in the US the protests were characterized by a leftist, populist focus on economic inequality. And following the pattern from Southern Europe, both reformist and more radical voices were heard in the protests: radical democratic demands for a return to a post-war Keynesian compromise sat uneasily next to arguments about the necessity of a revolutionary transformation of capitalist society.

It has no doubt been one of the strengths of the Occupy movement that it has not adopted a democratic parliamentary form, but has tried to stay outside the parliamentary spectacle. The assembly is in itself an outright rejection of the national democratic electoral system, and its ability to present itself as a leaderless structure is an important expression of Occupy's anti-parliamentarism. This rejection of the present parliamentary system was also expressed when Occupy refused to take sides in the 2012 presidential election and issued a statement about the need to refuse the reduction of politics to a question of a black or white conservative, both serving the interests of capital. In opposition to the national democratic system with a series of leaders, the Occupy movement created a mass movement without a head.

The movement included a range of different ideological positions and political attitudes, and there were big differences between the different local Occupy movements, from New York to Portland. Local circumstances gave the various protests particular characteristics, from Occupy Oakland's confrontational anti-politics (which included forcing their way into the City Hall, smashing the inventory and filling the building with rubbish, and shutting down the city's port) to Occupy Las Vegas' dialogue-seeking approach (which saw the protesters applying to the city council for permission to set up a tent camp).

The protests gathered a large section of the American population. Middle class people in reduced circumstances and young students with debt and without prospects of getting a job made up the majority, but working class and unemployed people also participated in large numbers.²⁶ The class composition of the protests is of course a reflection of the radical destruction which neoliberal capitalism has wrought for the last decades, which has hit both the poor and the middle class, the unemployed and wage labourers, young and old. All these groups have experienced being pushed to the margins of society and becoming redundant to capitalism. The populist moralizing discourse that played a central part in the Occupy movement made it possible for right wing elements to enrol in local Occupy movements, as was the case in Phoenix, where an armed and uniformed right wing militia calling itself the US Border Guard took it upon itself to guard the camp erected at the Cesar Chavez Plaza in downtown Phoenix. Such developments point to the necessity of analyzing the underlying

26 Cf. Ruth Milkman, Stephanie Luce and Penny Lewis: *Changing the Subject: A Bottom-Up Account of Occupy Wall Street in New York City* (New York: The Murphy Institute, 2013).

causes of the crisis in order to avoid becoming trapped in a moralizing discourse in which banks and politicians are staged as evil crooks.

Highlighting the opposition between the 99% and the 1% was a very effective approach that made visible the inequality created by neoliberal capitalism and the transformation of the US into a plutocracy run by private interests. After decades of neoliberal hegemony during which everything was turned into a question of individual success or failure – “there is no such thing as society”, in Thatcher’s famous phrase – highlighting the opposition was a way of both creating a composite collective subject and making visible an unjust difference. There is a collective subject, a people, but it is divided between rich and poor, between those who have everything and those who have nothing. The slogan expresses a rejection of the neoliberal discourse and its destruction of social solidarity. But it also tends to mystify the causes of the crisis that run much deeper than the introduction of risky loans and has to do with the transformation from the post-war state-led economy to neoliberal globalization. It is important to take a more comprehensive view of the crisis and analyze financialization as a symptom of more fundamental problems that have to do with both production and reproduction. It is important to stay clear of the unreflective anticapitalism that Moishe Postone finds in Nazism’s anticapitalist rhetoric, in which the social relations of capitalism were split up in concrete and abstract; applied today, this would mean opposing Occupy Main Street to Wall Street, the man on the street to the CEO of a bank, and so on. A moralizing discourse risks becoming an opening for fascism that short circuits the analysis of capitalism in favour of identifying scapegoats, whoever they might be.²⁷ Getting the rich to pay their share does not really change anything. As Occupy Wall Street’s homepage states: “The only solution is a world revolution.”

As the Occupy camps across the US were cleared by the police, many protesters moved back to their neighbourhoods, where they continued the struggle. In this way the social critique was embedded in more concrete struggles in people’s everyday life. Ideally this would amount to a cross-pollination between the general and systemic critique and the

27 In a kind of anticapitalist short circuit, Nazism identified the Jews as the cause of the abstract dominance of capital. Nazism valued the natural and the concrete (and ignored that concrete labour is itself materially shaped by social relations) and tried desperately to eradicate the abstract and the mobile (which the Jews incarnated in Nazi mythology). Moishe Postone: “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism”, *New German Critique*, no. 19, 1980, pp. 129-141.

struggles on the ground; the risk of course being that the more radical and systemic critique disappears and a reformist rhetoric takes over.

As was the case in Spain and Greece, in the US protest movement a more radical critique of neoliberal capitalism was supplemented by and even tended to be replaced by an engagement in concrete cases, primarily debt and foreclosures. A prime example of these kinds of actions is the Rolling Jubilee initiated by Strike Debt, a subgroup of Occupy Wall Street, in which the group simply buys up the debt and cancels it. The project is important as an attempt to make visible and critique the neoliberal debt economy, but of course it mainly has a symbolic value – credit card debt alone is 664 billions dollars so it is illusory to think this kind of activity can make a major difference – and tends to focus on financial matters disconnected from questions about the long-term crisis and the fall of the rate of profit.

Even though the Occupy movement has tried to avoid being identified with specific demands, the movement has in fact primarily put forward a demand to the state and the market, urging them to reproduce the capital/labour relation and stop excluding workers at the same intense tempo as in the last couple of decades. This nostalgic reformism is related to the fact that the protests are taking place after a long historical development which has seen the disappearance of the previous historical models of workers' resistance. Because of this, the protests are primarily defensive in the West and a majority in the Occupy movement hope that it will be possible to reconstruct the post-war wage productivity deal. However, there is also a different perspective present in the Occupy movement, namely a revolutionary perspective that wants a radical break. The lack of specific demands is an expression of this dimension: these protesters are not only demanding a radical redistribution of value – what Nietzsche calls “grand politics” – but a total and all-inclusive abolition of capitalism, including the money and wage forms. Of course nothing guarantees that such a revolution will take place, but a return to post-war Keynesianism seems downright impossible in the present situation. The reformist critique itself illustrates this, in so far as people are not asking for more welfare or a bigger paycheck: it is just about avoiding exclusion.

Even though the Occupy movement is very much characterized by a soft self-reflexive democratism that blames the political system for not setting up barriers for finance capital, it is difficult to overestimate the significance of Occupy after a long period of one sided class war.

The political situation in the US has been totally frozen, with two right wing parties as the only options for a nation in which half the population does not vote. The election of the first black president did nothing to change this situation. Obama has not remotely curbed neoliberal deregulation, and the list of broken promises – promises that are anything but radical! – is very long. They include early withdrawal of the troops from Iraq, closure of the Guantanamo camp, stimulus packages to create new jobs, the elimination of Bush's numerous tax reliefs, easier access to higher education and further controls on finance capital. The era of the Obama administration now looks like a 'digestion phase' after Bush Jr.'s more hysterical rhetoric: the discourse of the war on terror and the invasions were replaced by conciliatory words and many more drone killings. In this view, Occupy appears as an important break in which the naturalness of neoliberal ideology was challenged and refused.

After decades of almost uncontested advance, neoliberalism suddenly met resistance in the form of the Occupy movement, and in such a way that the protests almost surpassed the anti-systemic resistance in the US in the late 1960s. Occupy was an explosive event in which many different voices came together to reject the inequality of neoliberal capitalism, and the movement very quickly expanded beyond being a white middle-class movement to becoming a broader alliance between blacks, whites, Latinos, etc. in which a discontent middle class joined forces with an impoverished working class and homeless people. Whereas the black resistance, which was the avant-garde of the protests in the 1960s, took almost ten years before it gave up its pacifist stance, it did not take many fights with the police before Occupy Oakland cast aside its rhetoric of non-violence. The bourgeois media is filled with contempt and condemnation of the violence that necessarily occurs when people fight for a new perspective. That the bourgeoisie itself has had to resort to violence when topping the feudal order is long forgotten, just as five hundred years of colonialism and wage slavery is the kind of structural violence the bourgeoisie does not recognize as violence. But it is no use insisting on pacifism when you are confronted with an assertive and brutal police power. The American state's heavy handed attempt to suppress the Occupy movement is in itself testimony to that fact. All over the country protesters were violently arrested by the police. Demonstrators have been pepper-sprayed, tear-gassed and beaten. More than once police drove cars or rode horses straight into protesters. The police

have made mass arrests and detained protesters for hours on end. They have surveyed peaceful demonstrations, infiltrated protests, arrested observers, made random nightly raids on peaceful tent camps and closed down public spaces. The repression was planned on a national level and coordinated with leading corporate firms that pressed for a crackdown on the protests. From the occupation of Zuccotti Park onwards the FBI and the Department for Homeland Security coordinated the campaign, advising states to crack down hard on the protests, which they considered to be “a potential criminal or terrorist threat”.²⁸ Neoliberal capitalism is defending itself with great power, and the state of exception that was introduced after 9/11 enables an intense repression that is used to suppress the occupation movement. The American bourgeoisie saw the danger straight away and the state tightened its grip.

STRIKES AND UNREST IN CHINA

The revolts in North Africa and the Middle East and the protests in different parts of Europe and in the US have perhaps provided the most visible and circulated images of the return of the old mole, but similar events are also occurring in other parts of the world. In ‘black’ Africa there have been riots and unrest in Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Gabon and the Ivory Coast, and in South Africa both poor people in the country and miners have launched massive protest actions in the last few years against deteriorated working conditions and growing poverty, and against the ANC’s neoliberal policy, which has only worsened the country’s enormous inequality and unemployment. The conflicts have so far culminated with the police shooting and killing forty-seven miners on the 16th of August 2012.

In Southeast Asia, workers have also started protesting. In Vietnam there have been illegal strikes more or less continuously since 2005, especially in the textile and electronic sectors. In Bangladesh textile workers have not only gone on strike for better working conditions and higher wages, but have also fought the police in violent clashes which have resulted in factories being burned to the ground. In South Korea workers in the automobile industry been engaged in a year long battle for better working conditions. In 2009, 1,700 workers in Pyeongtaek occupied a SsangYong Motors

28 Cf. Partnership for Civil Justice Fund: “The Crackdown on the Occupy Movement”, 2012, [HTTP://WWW.JUSTICEONLINE.ORG/OUR-WORK/OWS-FOIA.HTML](http://www.justiceonline.org/our-work/ows-foia.html)

plant for seventy-seven days despite repeated quasi-military assaults by the police.

However, it is primarily in China that a new workers' militancy has manifested itself. In China the number of protests and riots has grown significantly within the last years. In 1983 the Ministry for Public Security registered 8,700 "incidents". In 2005 the number was 87,000. In 2011 it had increased to 180,000 incidents, in which workers went on strike demanding better working conditions and a bigger paycheck, peasants demonstrated against forced migration and students protested against police brutality and corruption. Many of the 'incidents' have been massive and have often included fighting with the police.

As the crisis swept through the Western economies, they looked to China as the saviour of the capitalist economy. When consumption starts dropping in the US and Europe due to the austerity cuts, China is supposed to contribute and stimulate the global economy. That it is 'communist' China that is supposed to save global capitalism is of course somewhat ironic, but we should bear in mind that China has nothing whatsoever to do with communism, that it is a state capitalist country that has been implementing a neoliberal policy for several decades.²⁹ In 1978 China launched an extensive reform process that changed the country into a market economy with neoliberal features. At the same time the Communist Party of China retained power and continued the authoritarian political system that had been built up over the previous decades. It is this new economic policy – introduced in the late 1970s, when the Western economies were also going through substantial changes – that enabled the explosive growth China has experienced in the last decades. In the last ten to fifteen years, China has crashed onto the global economic scene and has become the world's second-largest economy, only surpassed by the US. In just ten years China's GDP has tripled, and its share of the world's industrial production has increased from 3% to 20%.

29 Bruno Astarian: *Luttes de classes dans la Chine des réformes (1978-2009)* (La Busière: Acratie, 2009); Sander: "Will China Save Capitalism?", *Internationalist Perspective*, no. 55, 2012, [HTTP://INTERNATIONALIST-PERSPECTIVE.ORG/IP/IP-ARCHIVE/IP_55_CHINA.HTML](http://internationalist-perspective.org/IP/IP-ARCHIVE/IP_55_CHINA.HTML)

That China was never communist was made clear early on, for instance by the Situationists: "The Explosion Point of Ideology in China", 1967, [HTTP://WWW.BOPSECRETS.ORG/SI/11.CHINA.HTM](http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/11.CHINA.HTM) and by Cajo Brendel: *Theses on the Chinese Revolution*, 1969, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/BRENDEL/1969/CHINESE-REVOLUTION.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/brendel/1969/CHINESE-REVOLUTION.HTM)

This massive growth has mainly been based on an enormous labour pool that has been mobilized to work for minimal wages. A seemingly limitless but impoverished rural population has flocked to the factories in Southern China as a consequence of the agricultural policy of the Communist Party, which for several decades has removed the conditions for sustainable agriculture, transforming rural workers into cheap labour producing goods for the world market. China's export and trade surplus skyrocketed and American and European consumers, whose real wages dropped, could continue consuming the cheap Chinese commodities which were paid for by money China lent to the US and European consumers. China used a large part of its trade surplus to buy American dollars and American debt and thereby kept the American economy going. In this way China kept the dollar afloat and postponed a possible American bankruptcy. Today we are in a situation in which it is 'communist' China and the military power of the US that guarantee the value of the dollar.

In a wider historical perspective, China and the US simply continued the policy that had already characterized the relationship between the US and Japan and the other pro-American countries in Southeast Asia during the Cold War, and which gave Japan and other countries privileged access to the American market as part of the containment of the communist threat (imagined or not). During the 1980s, 'communist' China adopted the same policy as Japan and the 'Asian Tigers' and effectively financed not only the American state's military adventures but also the continued consumption of the increasingly poor American middle class. Thus the Chinese and US economies have been tightly interwoven over the last twenty years. There's a huge number of American dollars in the Chinese Central Bank: it probably amounts to between one and two trillion dollars. During the last twenty years this heap of paper has been exchanged for goods produced through the exploitation of Chinese workers. Paper money which the US consumers, who have experienced a drop in real wages, have borrowed in order to be able to buy the commodities the Chinese workers produce. When Lehman Brothers collapsed, China was not only the biggest exporter to the US, but also its biggest creditor. In other words we are confronted with an intricate system whereby cheap Chinese goods have kept US inflation down while the Chinese state's continual purchase of American state bonds has kept the American interest rate down. All this helped to postpone the crisis which suddenly became a reality in 2008, but whose

conditions have in fact existed since the early 1970s. Explosive Chinese growth only delayed the crash.

Beyond the talk of China as the next hegemonic power and centre in a new regime of accumulation, the problem for China and the Chinese Communist Party is that they hold an enormous amount of dollars that they cannot bring into circulation, as this would devalue the dollar and thus pull the rug out from under the Chinese export industry's profit rate. Such a manoeuvre would also be a direct attack on China's own financial reserves. There is a real risk that the country's large trade surplus and hoard of American money may turn out to be fictive. They will only maintain their value if they stay in the bank. China's destiny is thus closely connected to the global economy and the US economy. What then of the idea of China as the motor of the world economy? The problem is that China cannot easily transform its export-based growth into growth based on domestic consumption, because that would mean removing the basis for the impressive growth and result in inflation and speculation. If China's money supply is used to transform a larger part of the country's impoverished masses into an affluent middle class, the country's most important competitive factor, the low wages, disappears. This solution is a risky one, although it's probably the one the Communist Party has opted for. The risk is that it will further accelerate the already massive depopulation of inner China.³⁰

The cheap Chinese workers have thus been a very important ingredient in the neoliberal restructuring that has taken place. The combination of low wages and modern technology did not just result in cheap commodities, but also large profits for Western investors. At the same time the cheap Chinese workforce functioned as a bogeyman for workers in the West ('your jobs can be outsourced'). By always pointing to the competition from the East it was possible to lower the wages in the West.

Nevertheless, within the last few years the Chinese working class has started becoming restless. The number of strikes and protests has almost exploded.³¹ Chinese migrant workers are demanding higher pay and are protesting against horrible working conditions that are

30 Cf. Hung Ho-Fung: "America's Head Servant? The PRC's Dilemma in the Global Crisis", *New Left Review*, no. 60, 2009, pp. 5-25.

31 Cf. *China Labour Bulletin: A Decade of Change: The Workers' Movement in China 2000-2010*, 2012, [HTTP://WWW.CLB.ORG.HK/EN/CONTENT/DECADE-CHANGE-WORKERS-MOVEMENT-CHINA-2000-2010](http://www.clb.org.hk/en/content/decade-change-workers-movement-china-2000-2010)

far worse than what Marx experienced in Manchester in the 1850s. The standard working conditions in China are twelve-hour shifts six days a week in exchange for very low pay. Most migrant workers – who are often far from their families and homes – are employed without a contract and are only paid once a year. As China Labour Bulletin writes, the background of the heightened unrest among the workers is the expansive neoliberalization of public companies that has been going on since the early 1990s, especially in the northeast of China. The neoliberal shock therapy has taken the form of privatizations, closures and mergers of unprofitable businesses. More than fifty million workers have lost their jobs due to this development, while managers have been busy looting the same companies and in many instances making huge profits on the restructuring; a development not unlike the one that took place in the former Eastern block after 1989.

The accelerated tempo of Chinese modernization has produced a series of interconnected problems. In the early 2000s the restructuring of the Chinese economy meant that state employed Chinese workers suddenly found themselves without a job, contrary to what they had been accustomed to. This unleashed many protests. The so-called ‘iron bowl’ – if you are employed by a state run enterprise you have an iron rice bowl, meaning guaranteed job security – proved to be very rusty, not to say non-existent. The closure of many state run enterprises forced large numbers of workers to seek employment in private companies, a process that started to highlight the divergent interests between workers on the floor and managers. At the same time as this privatization took place, demographic developments and the ever-growing demand for new workers caused a shortage of workers in the rapidly developing southeastern part of China. In addition, there was suddenly a lack of labour power in the areas where the dramatic economic development took place. In 2010 there was a shortage of two million workers in the Pearl River Delta alone. This of course – at least for a short period – gave the workers an advantage that they did not hesitate to take advantage of by demanding higher wages. These developments have resulted in the emergence of a more militant Chinese working class, which has been able to advance more offensive demands. There has been a development from more defensive protests and strikes, in which workers complained about poor working conditions and violations of rights, to protests in which

the workers are demanding better wages and conditions. In the present global situation, in which Western workers are struggling to keep their jobs, the Chinese workers have stood out by responding to the growing demand for their labour with classic money militancy.³²

After a lengthy period of protests of a more limited and local nature, something has happened in recent years. It seems as if working class resistance has finally freed itself from the legacy of the Tiananmen massacre, which has put a lid on social protests for twenty years.³³ Within the last few years, demoralization has been replaced by militancy. In July 2009, workers in the state owned Tonghua Iron and Steel Works in the Jilin province managed to prevent the privatization of the company after engaging in violent protests. Already in 2005, China's largest privately owned steel company Jianlong had purchased 36% of the company, laying off thousands of workers. When the news broke that Jianlong was to buy the remaining shares, the employees stopped working and blocked the railroad tracks to the plant. Almost 30,000 current and former steel workers participated in the action, which escalated into fights with the police in which hundreds were injured and one senior manager was beaten to death. The privatization was called off and the protests inspired other workers faced with privatization. In Linzhou steel workers locked up a representative of the local government for ninety hours and only agreed to let him go when the proposed privatization was postponed. The largest strike in China until now took place in May 2010 at a Honda plant in Foshan in the Guangdong province, when a group of workers demanded a pay rise and a restructuring of the local section of the state controlled union. In the beginning only about 100 workers participated in the strike, but when the management responded by laying off two of the most active workers in the protest, the strike spread to the rest of the plant and production stopped. The strike lasted for two weeks and the workers only resumed work when they were offered a 35% pay rise and had secured a 70% rise in the wages paid to apprentices. The demand for a reorganization of the union was not met, but the demand is in itself a sign of a new, more critical attitude to the official union, which on paper is supposed to represent the

32 Cf. Mouvement Communiste: "Workers' Autonomy Strikes in China", 2011, [HTTPS://LIBCOM.ORG/LIBRARY/WORKERS-AUTONOMY-STRIKES-CHINA-MOUVEMENT-COMMUNISTE](https://libcom.org/library/workers-autonomy-strikes-china-mouvement-communiste)

33 Cf. Au Loong-Yu and Bai Ruixue: "New Signs of Hope: Resistance in China Today", *International Viewpoint*, April 2012, [HTTP://WWW.INTERNATIONALVIEWPOINT.ORG/SPIP.PHP?ARTICLE2592](http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2592)

workers but which in reality is an instrument of the Communist Party.³⁴ Another remarkable strike took place at five Pepsi plants in November 2011 after the announcement of a merger between Pepsico and the Taiwanese-owned Tingyi-Asahi. Employees stopped working to protest the merger, which entailed a termination of their contracts and a negotiation of new contracts with Tingyi-Asahi. The scale of the strike and the coordination between five plants in five different cities was novel in a Chinese context. Another new feature was that the workers used the internet to mobilise support for the strike. The protest in China that has probably received most attention in recent years was the protest in Wukan in September 2011, in which villagers protested the sale of land by officials to real estate developers without compensating the villagers. 13,000 villagers participated, storming the town hall and local police station and forcing the local authorities, including the police and Communist Party leadership, to flee the village. The authorities responded by deploying riot police armed with tear gas and water cannons and allowing security agents to abduct leading protesters. However, the authorities were not able to take the village back, and more than 1,000 policemen finally laid siege to the village, preventing food and goods from entering it. In late December, local authorities and the villagers reached an agreement in which the authorities acknowledged the villagers' demands, apologized for selling the land and allowed a new election to the village council. The artist Ou Ning argues that the protests amount to a mini-revolution in a Chinese context.³⁵ And the protests are no doubt significant because they expand the workers' militancy to a broader resistance in which people are voicing a critique not only of local authorities but also of the Party in Beijing.

At a time when the US and Europe are trapped in a quagmire of debt and unemployment, speculators and economists are looking to the East to find the saviour of global capitalism. As Martin Wolf writes in the *Financial Times*, China is now responsible for the global economy.³⁶ But in Beijing they are less sure. The Communist Party knows that China is a colossus with feet of clay: the export economy

34 Cf. Chris King-Chi Chan and Elaine Sio-Ieng Hui: "The Dynamic and Dilemma of Workplace Trade Union Reform in China: The Case of the Honda Workers' Strike", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, no. 5, 2012, pp. 653-668.

35 Ou Ning: "What Wukan Means", 2012, [HTTP://WWW.ALTERNATIVEARCHIVE.COM/OUNING/ARTICLE.ASP?ID=864](http://www.alternativearchive.com/OUNING/ARTICLE.ASP?ID=864)

36 Martin Wolf: "How China Should Rule the World", *Financial Times*, March 22nd, 2011, [HTTP://WWW.FT.COM/INTL/CMS/s/o/9BA6D850-54C2-11E0-B1ED-00144FEAB49A.HTML#AXZZ373Z0XB4R](http://www.ft.com/INTL/CMS/s/o/9BA6D850-54C2-11E0-B1ED-00144FEAB49A.HTML#AXZZ373Z0XB4R)

is part of the neoliberal bubble, the local market is still very much insufficient, and the workers have started stirring. If the bubble bursts in China, things may really escalate. We are confronted with an explosive situation in which almost 200 million Chinese workers are making more and more demands; moreover, around one billion Chinese people have not yet been included in the modernization that has taken place during the last decades. China's implementation of a socialist market economy has no doubt improved the lives of a couple of hundred million, but now they want more and there is still a huge rural population that has been left out.

The Communist Party knows its history and is trying to learn from it. It wants to prevent a development like the one that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1980s and 1990s. One scenario would involve the Communist Party initiating a reform process whereby they would allow a *Solidarność*-like workers' movement to come into being, with which it could strike some kind of wage-productivity deal. The attempts to address the similarities between the strike at the Honda plant and the strike at the Gdansk shipyard point in that direction. The risk of such a process, which the Communist Party initiates itself, is that it would release forces that the Party might not be able to control, not only because a bourgeois revolution would threaten the power of the Communist Party, because the bureaucratic power structure of the Party is not easy to reconcile with a full integration into the capitalist world economy, but also because such a bourgeois revolution could develop into a proletarian revolution. By this I mean a process whereby the reforms launched by the Communist Party open the door to social developments that turn into a rebellion in which the peasants and workers of China rise up. The explosion in the number of strikes and protests points to this possibility.

A NEW SENSIBILITY

Despite substantial local differences, the many protests that broke out in 2011 were rooted in the worsening situation workers find themselves in. The neoliberal attrition of society has done its work more or less everywhere. The situation is of course very different from Oakland to Cairo, but precarity, pauperization and exclusion are found everywhere. The last thirty years of neoliberal globalization have been

one long economic catastrophe, a shakeout in slow motion. But something happened in 2011. Whereas the previous decades have been characterized by consensus, all of a sudden there was visible resistance against the neoliberal crisis management. 2011 was a break.

The resistance takes many different forms. While the Chinese workers are involved in an offensive venture in which they are demanding more, the European protest movements and the US Occupy movement are fighting against further reductions and cuts. But now at least large parts of the European youth are protesting and refusing to accept the neoliberal restructuring. In this way the M15 movement, Occupy and all the other protests in the centre constitute a shift after three decades of one-sided class war. The Chinese workers' militancy is still reformist and the Communist Party is doing all it can to keep it that way, including implementing a corporatist model with free unions, but as the crisis worsens and the big export economy starts to fade, protests will most likely accelerate in China. The Chinese workers' militancy will perhaps fuse with other protests and we might then see the realization of Marx's, Parvus' and Trotsky's ideas about the permanent revolution, which was not successful in 1848 and 1917: a reconciliation of all proletarians beyond the nation state. The Chinese workers are also keeping an eye on the developments in North Africa and the Middle East. The revolts there have already set out the coordinates and pointed beyond the existing structure of postcolonial capitalism. In North Africa and the Middle East, a major regional remaking is already underway, but it is also being derailed of course. Not only the US, but also Saudi Arabia and the Emirates are financing the counter-revolution in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, etc.

What, then, is the big picture? It is defensive protests in the old industrial countries, militant workers' resistance in China and South-east Asia, and a revolutionary break in the Middle East and North Africa. The proletariat in the West is in ruins after thirty-five years of neoliberal globalization that has effectively ended the post-war wage-productivity compromise, and the Western working class is fighting a desperate struggle to avoid exclusion and precarization. The proletariat in the growth countries, on the other hand, is engaged in militant struggles for better working conditions and higher wages. Unfortunately these struggles are seldom connected, which means that they tend to hang on to a reformist agenda and are being embedded in existing institutions, such as the mosque in the Middle East.

The revolutionary perspective is necessarily international, but as long as the struggles are being fought in isolation the odds are bad. This is also why the many references in 2011 between the protests from Cairo to New York to Athens are so important. Unfortunately the European and US movements have so far been unable to establish a persistent resistance in solidarity with the Arab masses. Instead, they have become trapped within established political structures – parties and unions – or have simply lost their wider initiative, with the activists focusing on more concrete problems as the struggle for daily survival becomes harsher.

In North Africa and the Middle East, the revolutionaries are still fighting. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists, the army and the security forces briefly formed an alliance supported by the US and the Wahhabi state in Saudi Arabia, but the army soon decided to get rid of the Brotherhood. The objective for parts of the ruling order, despite their differences, is to stop the revolutionary break and prevent it from spreading. If it is possible to isolate the revolts, the revolutionary energy will disappear and revolutionary enthusiasm will be replaced by despair. Another way of handling the revolutionary break is to instigate civil war, as has been the case in Libya, Syria and Bahrain, where the revolutionaries are being worn out by, and turned into, armed gangs that cannot avoid being trapped by ethnic and religious divisions. As has always been the case, revolutionary processes trigger massive shows of force, and interventions and killings are among the means used to destabilize the process. The state apparatus and the old power elite are still relatively intact in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. The police, army, courts, media and the old regimes' networks are still up and running. But in Egypt – the most important country – the army has difficulties controlling the situation, and the rebels are undeterred in their push for changes, contrary to the Western commentators who declared the revolution over after fourteen days and a failure after a year. The revolutionaries in Egypt have emphasized the uncertain nature of their endeavour from the start. But they keep going. In December 2013 Mahalla declared itself independent from Egypt. On the two year anniversary of the revolution of January 25th, an Egyptian black block appeared, and after the removal of Morsi the revolutionaries have rejected the false choice between the army and the mosque, insisting instead on the autonomy of the revolutionary process. In Tunisia religion has also functioned as a way of derailing

real change, making it possible for the old governing cliques and economic mafias to ally with the local Brotherhood. But there too the protesters keep protesting. In Yemen the old regime, which is more or less intact, continues to be challenged by revolutionary activists trying to open a flank on the Arab peninsula south of the reactionary citadel of the Saud family.

The counterrevolution is in full swing. The established order's determined attempt to crack down on unrest wherever it manifests itself – from the US to China to Egypt – is part of the explanation for this development. But nothing indicates that the crisis can be solved within the framework of the present regime of accumulation, and as the crisis worsens the resistance will become more radical. Whether it will acquire a communist form is of course uncertain, but the possibility is there: the protests themselves have communist traits and point towards a supersession of the nation state and the capitalist money economy. Thus, to paraphrase Marx, the protests are fractures and fissures in the dry crust of capitalist society. But beneath the apparently solid surface they betray oceans that only need to rise up to reduce continents of hard rock to fragments.³⁷

37 Karl Marx: "Speech at anniversary of The People's Paper", 1856, [HTTPS://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/MARX/WORKS/1856/04/14.HTM](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1856/04/14.htm)

BEYOND VANGUARDS, REFORMISM AND MULTITUDE

“The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.”¹

Karl Marx

WHAT IS TO BE DONE? LENIN’S ANSWER TO THE QUESTION (IN THE text with that title from 1902) is the creation of a social democratic vanguard party, composed of professional revolutionaries able to lead and steer the workers in the struggle against capitalism in order to realize socialism. Without a cadre of conscious revolutionaries Lenin is afraid that the spontaneous anticapitalism of the workers will amount to nothing. As he phrases it: “The political struggle of Social Democracy is far more extensive and complex than the economic struggle of the workers against the employers and the government. Similarly (indeed for that reason), the organization of the revolutionary Social Democratic Party must inevitably be of a kind different from the organization of the workers designed for this struggle. The workers’

1 Karl Marx: “Theses on Feuerbach”, 1845, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/MARX/WORKS/1845/THESES/THESES.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm)

organization must in the first place be a trade union organization; secondly, it must be as broad as possible; and thirdly, it must be as public [meneye konspirativnoy] as conditions will allow [...]. On the other hand, the organization of the revolutionaries must consist first and foremost of people who make revolutionary activity their profession. [...] Such an organization must perforce not be very extensive and must be as secret [konspirativnoy] as possible.”² Lenin’s model contrasts the workers’ organization and revolutionary organization and turns the latter into the brains of class struggle. He differentiates between the organization and the workers: the revolutionary organization is the keeper of proletarian ‘consciousness’. The workers are involved in an uncoordinated economic struggle that needs to be transformed into a purposive class struggle by the revolutionary organization, reserved for the select few who have the proper understanding of the situation. It is thus necessary to have a secret, organized and planned party that can redirect the trade-unionist tendencies of the workers. Lenin writes: “All those who talk about ‘overrating the importance of ideology’, about exaggerating the role of the conscious element, etc. imagine that the labour movement pure and simple can elaborate, and will elaborate, an independent ideology for itself, if only the workers ‘wrest their fate from the hands of the leaders’. But this is a profound mistake.”³ This will not happen, Lenin writes. The workers are not able to form an independent ideology, it is not the workers who have produced “the modern socialism”. It is “elements” from the bourgeois intelligentsia who have been able to work out an independent ideology and been able to pass it on to a group of selected and “more intellectually developed proletarians”. The workers are not capable of making the revolution themselves. As Lenin writes, quoting the German Social Democrat Karl Kautsky: “[S]ocialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without”.⁴ It does not crop up spontaneously, or by itself, and therefore a small cadre of revolutionaries is needed, revolutionaries who have understood the opponent, capitalism, properly; who know that revolutionary class struggle is the means to socialism, the goal.

Lenin was at this time still heavily influenced by German social democracy, which could still with a certain right – even after the

2 V.I. Lenin: *What is to be done? Burning Questions of our Movement*, 1902, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/LENIN/WORKS/1901/WITBD/](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/)

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

adoption of the Erfurt program, which scaled down revolutionary class struggle in favour of reformism – be considered an anti-systemic force (by the outbreak of the First World War that was over as a majority of the party voted for the war). Lenin's dream was to create a united social democratic party in Russia, a Russian SPD.⁵ But the situation in Russia was, of course, completely different from Germany as the Tsar's police did not allow any kind of political opposition. Therefore Lenin's Social Democracy had to be a secret organization outside the view of the police but nonetheless still a large and united organization. Lenin thus partly distanced himself from the then dominant idea of a revolutionary organization in Russia, that is to say the conspiracy model, where isolated and secret cells composed of a few revolutionaries carried out individual terror with a view to provoking political upheaval. Lenin was sceptical about the revolutionary potential of individual terror and wanted to create a united organization, a vanguard party. This was to form itself around the first nationwide socialist paper in Russia, *Iskra*, which Lenin founded in 1900 and published from Munich and later, when it became too risky for German printers to print it, from London. Lenin regarded the paper as a kind of forerunner for the revolutionary social democratic organization he wanted to create. The network that produced and distributed the paper was a well-nigh national organization of professional revolutionaries, with the editorial group as the executive committee and the local distributors as local committees.

The workers had a historic mission; they had the role of freeing Russia from the shameful rule of the Tsar, and of realizing the idea of socialism, but they were not able to do this on their own according to Lenin. It was thus necessary to introduce the idea of the professional revolutionary and the vanguard party. Lenin's response to the question – what is to be done? – is thus that the solution is an organization, the vanguard party. Lenin's pamphlet is paradoxically characterized by both an overwhelming trust in the working masses and their revolutionary potential – the pamphlet is a violent attack on contemporary revolutionary organizations, which are criticized for not being up to the militancy of the workers, according to Lenin it was necessary to move beyond individual terror as a way towards political upheaval

5 Lars T. Lih's monumental *Lenin rediscovered: What is to Be Done? In Context* (London: Haymarket Books, 2008) argues that Lenin's text should be understood as an intervention in a specific debate outlining Lenin's Kautskian ideas. The analysis does however not manage to 'save' Lenin from his vanguardist position.

– as well as an outright rejection of the very same workers’ ability to transcend their alienation and gain consciousness about the forms of dominance of capitalist society. Only a centralized party is capable of carrying out a revolution Lenin keeps repeating. He does not believe that the workers can gain a real, revolutionary consciousness, and it’s therefore the professional revolutionary steps in. In other words, as Paul Mattick writes, the workers have to be protected against themselves.⁶ In order to be able to organize the struggle of the workers the revolutionary organization not only has to be secret but also has to be hierarchically structured and democratic-centralist. Discipline and centralism are the key words for Lenin’s revolutionary organization; without these the party will not be effective.

It is of course important to contextualize Lenin’s response – the repression of the Tsar, a small working class amid an ocean of peasants hoping for a return to pre-capitalist relations of production – but Lenin’s response is not satisfactory. The development that took place in September and October 1917 clearly illustrates the problem with the vanguard model: when Lenin and the Bolsheviks took power from Kerensky they completely disregarded the councils in St Petersburg that had until then been the revolutionary workers’ own organizations. In accordance with Lenin’s statements in *What is to be done?* the Bolsheviks subordinated the practical activity of the workers’ to the party, they replaced the workers with the revolutionary organization. The Bolsheviks quickly eliminated the factory councils, as well as Makhno’s revolutionary peasant movement. The road to Soviet party dictatorship was thereby open and only a spreading proletarian revolution in the rest of Europe would have been able to stop the Bolshevik’s anti-communist project (which very quickly took the form of a nationalization of the factories and a Taylorization of labour). There is a direct line between the justification of the revolutionary organization to the dictatorship of party leadership, and onwards to the dictatorship of the party over the workers. The conscious revolutionary organization quickly becomes a party dictatorship leading the workers, who do not know what they are doing, or supposed to do. Lenin’s distrust of the possibility of a communist attitude of the class emerging from the dynamics of class struggle produces an authoritarian conception of communism.

6 Paul Mattick: “Spontaneity and Organisation”, 1949, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/MATTICK-PAUL/1949/SPONTANEITY.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/mattick-paul/1949/spontaneity.htm)

Lenin's vanguard model has tempted revolutionaries, confronted with an ever more consolidated capitalism and a working class with no interest in rebellion, throughout the 20th century. The idea of the self-sacrificing revolutionary hero – and of the mystical interior of the revolutionary organization, to which only the select few with the right capabilities have access – is appealing. But when it's really come down to it the idea has failed miserably and more often than not ended in pathetic self-overestimation. Every time the party has become a goal in itself along the way, the revolutionary organization has become more important than anything else too; everything has been about the self-preservation of the revolutionary organization, its reproduction.⁷ That was the case for both the communist parties behind the Iron Curtain and the Western European communist parties. And quite often during the 20th century the parties were overtaken by the discontent of workers who did not bother waiting for the self-proclaimed revolutionary organization, which more often than not was busy criticizing any kind of praxis that did not align itself with the schemes of the party. Lenin's idea of the vanguard party thus legitimized a problematic notion of the revolutionary organization that very often ended up being the most important thing in the anticapitalist struggle, dismissing the struggle that took place more or less continuously in everyday life, and making itself the pivotal point of revolutionary praxis, thereby effectively postponing the struggle in favour of building an organization that reproduced the gang dynamic of capitalist society of inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion.

Rosa Luxemburg pointed out the obvious contradictions in Lenin's model of organization straight away. She wrote that Lenin's revolutionary organization was authoritarian and subjected the actual class struggle to the party. For Luxemburg organization was always a result of the militancy of the workers and not a precondition of it as Lenin argued. According to Luxemburg, Lenin reproduced the discipline of the capitalist state; now it was the all-knowing central committee that had the baton and not the bourgeoisie. Luxemburg was very critical towards Lenin's position, writing that Lenin "glorified the educative influence of the factory [...] accustoming the proletariat to 'discipline and organization'".⁸ Luxemburg rejected Lenin's argument,

7 Jacques Camatte & Gianni Collu: "On Organisation", 1969, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/CAMATTE/CAPCOM/ON-ORG.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/camatte/capcom/on-org.htm)

8 Rosa Luxemburg: "Organisational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy", 1904, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/LUXEMBURG/1904/QUESTIONS-RSD/](http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1904/questions-rsd/)

characterizing it as “mechanistic”. “The discipline Lenin has in mind is being implanted in the working class not only by the factory but also by the military and the existing state bureaucracy – by the entire mechanism of the centralized bourgeois state.”⁹ Lenin ended up depriving the workers of agency while giving himself the role as leader. “Pirouetting on its head, it [the Russian revolutionary] once more proclaims itself to be the all-powerful director of history – this time with the title of His Excellency the Central Committee of the Social Democratic Party of Russia. The nimble acrobat fails to perceive that the only ‘subject’ which merits today the role of director is the collective ‘ego’ of the working class. The working class demands the right to make its mistakes and learn the dialectic of history. Let us speak plainly. Historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee.”¹⁰

LENIN AFTER LENIN

Slavoj Žižek, of course, wants to outdo Lenin. On several occasions Žižek has tried to propose Lenin’s answer to the question of revolutionary organization as the right strategy in the contemporary situation, characterized by crisis and the appearance of a new anticapitalist protest cycle. According to Žižek we need “a centralized Leninist party with a leader”.¹¹ It is, however, not the right answer to the question of ‘what is to be done’. It was already a wrong answer when Lenin proposed it and it is a much worse answer today. It does not help that Žižek has replaced or supplemented Lenin with Thatcher this time round. According to Žižek we need a new master able to “repeat the gesture of Thatcher in an opposite direction”. The Left in other words needs a communist Thatcher, a leader that can create an authentic opposition between those who want the new and those that just want to preserve what’s already established. Žižek advocates for an authoritarian leader and goes as far as calling for an elite that can raise the consciousness of the masses and decide in which direction it has to move. “Somebody must assume the simple and for that very reason

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Slavoj Žižek: “The Simple Courage of Decision: A Leftist Tribute to Thatcher”, *New Statesman*, April 17th, 2013, [HTTP://WWW.NEWSTATESMAN.COM/POLITICS/POLITICS/2013/04/SIMPLE-COURAGE-DECISION-LEFTIST-TRIBUTE-THATCHER](http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2013/04/simple-courage-decision-leftist-tribute-thatcher)

most difficult act of transposing this complex multitude into a simple 'Yes' or 'No'. We shall attack, we continue to wait."¹²

Žižek presents his idea of a master as an opposition to what he terms the Deleuzian idea of a leaderless multitude. He is opposed to the widespread tendency to glorify horizontality and the notion of a network based organization without leaders. Žižek sees this tendency in the Occupy movement and its general assembly. The long discussions are all very well, Žižek writes, but what is supposed to happen afterwards? The ecstatic party in the square or the long debates cannot last and we have to avoid the idea that they are revolutionary in themselves. Therefore Žižek wants a master with a capital M. A master able to take a decision and formulate a program. A strong leader that can take responsibility and throw herself into the event and be affirmative towards the contingency of the situation, thereby opening a new space beyond the already established political positions.

The critique of the idea of direct democracy and of networked counter-power is relevant, but Žižek has a problematic idea of the political subject as an individual and shows a remarkable lack of trust in the critical potential of the mass, as well as a complete disregard for history. As if neoliberalism was a choice Thatcher took consciously or unconsciously some time in the late 1970s. Neoliberalism cannot be reduced to a political project that has to do with leadership. When the development of capitalism moved towards a dismantling of the Keynesian wage-productivity-deal after the oil crisis in 1973 liberalism experienced a revival and equipped with the prefix 'neo', neoliberalism became the official ideology, legitimizing the privatizations and cuts that governments carried out all over the world. To simplify, you could say neoliberalism is the ideology that comes with the restructuring in the second part of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Neoliberalism is thus not the 'cause' of the shift. It was not possible to choose another capitalist political economy. This does not mean that Thatcher did not intend to pursue her policy, but it means that the shift did not take place because she was elected. Thatcher was elected because neoliberalism was the policy available at that moment in history. Even the socialist Mitterand was forced to change his course and accept a more liberal-capitalist and market oriented agenda two years after he was elected. The purpose of the restructuring was to reestablish the extraction of surplus value by expanding a surplus of labour

12 Ibid.

on a global scale. Žižek remains utterly indifferent to these structural constraints. He seriously underestimates the importance of historical circumstance, nor does he engage in a meaningful critique of political economy.

Žižek's defence of the strong leader and the creation of a Leftist authoritarian party ends up looking like an uncritical repetition of Lenin's vanguard model, and even a distorted repetition. Lenin understood that the revolutionary project was a collective project – he for instance left a number of important decisions to people who were elected (even in cases where Lenin considered them relatively incompetent) – but Žižek transforms centralism into an one-man project. In Žižek there's no form of collective praxis beyond a hierarchical structure with a high and mighty philosopher king capable of leading it. And this master does not only lead the masses he also tells it what it wants. The leader forms and gives expression to the desires of the mass, he tells it all its wants and needs. To an even greater extent than Lenin, Žižek thinks of the mass as a passive and drowsy entity, unconscious of its needs and thus in need of a master capable of setting the course and explaining what is to be done. "The large majority – me included – wants to be passive and rely on an efficient state apparatus to guarantee the smooth running of the entire social edifice", Žižek writes.¹³ One of Žižek's examples of the importance of a strong leader is Venezuela, where Hugo Chávez was the charismatic man telling the masses that they were repressed, but that they could fight back and create something different. Whether the Venezuelan mass was not aware of that before Chávez appeared and became the leader of *Movimiento Quinta República* is rather doubtful. Venezuela is one of the countries where large-scale protests against neoliberal globalization took place pretty early on. In February 1989 thousands of workers and unemployed reacted to rising prices on food, petrol and public transportation resulting in widespread protests where more than 3,000 people were killed in battles with the security forces.

Žižek's defense of an authoritarian state-capitalist-like socialism is problematic. Revolutionary consciousness does not come from outside, from a master, from Stalin, Tito, Mao etc., but arises in struggles against the system that is excluding or dominating people. It arises in everyday life. The mass does not have to be organized by an external leader, the necessary organization of happens in the struggle. Nobody

13 Ibid.

is going to organize other people, you organize yourself together with others. The old Leninist vanguard model, where the mass needs a leader in order to break free from the passivity of the capitalist spectacle, was never particularly useful. And Žižek's version is even worse, looking like a late defense of authoritarian state-capitalism, Tito-style.

REFORMISM BEYOND REFORMISM

Neither Lenin's democratic-centralism nor Žižek's leader-fetishizing authoritarianism gives us a good starting point for the organization of anticapitalist resistance today. But there are other positions available. Among the founding father of cultural studies Stuart Hall's last publications was a manifesto written together with his co-editors of the *Soundings* journal, the geographer Doreen Massey and the sociologist Michael Rustin, with the aim of helping to create "a new progressive Left politics". *After Neoliberalism: The Kilburn Manifesto* is a collectively authored text in twelve parts, first meant to be completed by the end of 2014.¹⁴ The manifesto is not finished yet and at the time of writing (in May 2014) Hall and his comrades have published the framing text and a couple of chapters setting out the intention of the manifesto. The inspiration for the new book is the *May Day Manifesto* Hall wrote in May 1967 together with E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams.¹⁵ The manifesto from 1967, which is being reissued in connection with *The Kilburn Manifesto*, was a critique of the then ruling Labour government, which was doing too little to turn British society towards socialism and it did not address the needs of a number of new social groups at all. According to Hall, Thompson and Williams it was thus necessary to develop a new socialist narrative that could both include all the different new subjects that did not fit the old Marxist class analysis, and still keep a continuous history of socialism. The manifesto was an attempt to build a bridge between the old and the new Left, between the organized working class movement and Labour and the new social movements. Hall, Thompson and Williams sought to point to a third way between Social democracy and Stalinism. Unfortunately the new manifesto is not much different.

14 Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey & Michael Rustin: *After Neoliberalism: The Kilburn Manifesto*, 2013-, [HTTP://WWW.LWBOOKS.CO.UK/JOURNALS/SOUNDINGS/MANIFESTO.HTML](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/manifesto.html)

15 Stuart Hall, E.P. Thompson & Raymond Williams: *May Day Manifesto*, 1967, [HTTP://WWW.LWBOOKS.CO.UK/EBOOKS/MAYDAY.PDF](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/mayday.pdf) .

There is of course a big difference between the two manifestoes: where the *May Day Manifesto* was offensive – the New Left was carried forth by strong economic growth and an explosive youth culture – the new manifesto is much more muted. Hall, Massey and Rustin write that the focus of the new manifesto is primarily on analyzing neoliberal capitalism and the decline of the Left during the last four decades. In accordance with Hall's cultural studies' approach, and in continuation of his own previous analyses of Thatcher, the analysis of neoliberalism does not only focus on neoliberalism as an economic phenomenon but also accounts for neoliberalism as a cultural, ideological and political phenomenon. The influence of Gramsci is obvious, and Hall and his comrades are heavily indebted to the vocabulary of the Italian philosopher. Hall gives an account of the 'ideological' success of neoliberalism: even though the financial crisis seemed at first to make the inequality of the neoliberal accumulation regime visible, neoliberalism is still hegemonic. Pretty much all the different spheres of society are still being conceptualized as markets. Hall and co want to engage in an ideology critique of neoliberalism that can demystify this idea and the subsequent individualization that has taken place in more or less all social relationships.

So far so good, an ideology critique of neoliberalism is for sure relevant, but it is not enough on its own. And unfortunately Hall and his associates do not connect this ideology critique with a critique of political economy and they are therefore forced to explain the historical development as a question of hegemony, as if neoliberal ideology is the 'cause' of the development. That capital will necessarily experience moments of crisis and will therefore continuously destroy capital seems to escape Hall. In this way, Hall's and Žižek's analyses resemble each other. They are an expression of a problematic emphasis on culture in analyses of the current period, where everything is turned into a question of discourse and ideology and where class struggle is translated into a battle between interest groups fighting for state power and cultural hegemony.

Hall, Massey and Rustin set forth an idea of collectivity as a response to the neoliberal idea of individuality. But it seems rather an old one, as most of their examples are taken from a working class culture reminiscent of the 1950s. Unfortunately, this is characteristic of *After Neoliberalism: The Kilburn Manifesto*. It remains a project for reviving a nation-based reformist socialism. A more adequate title

for the manifesto would be: *Before Neoliberalism*. Hall is trying to defend the working class against the ruling order that, through neoliberalism, has destroyed the balance that existed in Western Europe in the period after the Second World War until the late 1970s. Hall, Massey and Rustin want to save the Left and the remains of a residual Western working class culture. We thus end up with yet another attempt to breathe life into the worker organizations of the Western national democracies that already years ago stopped having any kind of progressive significance for the supersession of anything, least of all itself. There is little of the self-critical dimension Marx found in the proletariat. Preservation and not negation. Reform then, and not revolution. The abolition of capitalism is postponed in favour of the workers' controlling the means of production, in charge, in other words, of their own exploitation. The project is not the abolition of capitalism but merely to mend the damage it's done.

Hall et al. try, then, to resurrect the British working class. Communism has always been the opposite of this, namely the negation of the classes of capitalist society in a proletarian revolution including the self-negation of the working class. We are very far from questioning the basic conditions of capitalist society. It is a reformist project Hall is proposing, which contrary to its intention does not go to the root of anything, but remains focused on political and cultural relations. There is thus no critique of the capitalist money economy. Hall, Massey and Rustin are focused on winning the political and cultural struggle about the right to plan the capitalist mode of production. As they phrase it: "For us, this is not a question of restoring the tried remedies of the post-war welfare-state settlement. Of course, that would not be an altogether bad place to start. But that compromise, for all its attempt to achieve a different balance of values and power from that dictated by markets, nevertheless accepted that the market sectors should still be left essentially free to generate profits, while a public system managed by elected governments would merely be allowed to redistribute some of the ensuing resources, and provide for some social needs which markets would otherwise neglect."¹⁶ Hall, Massey and Rustin do advance a critique of the post-war welfare society, but it is a very weak critique aimed at the scope of that project more than anything else. This is not a fundamental critique of the capitalist economy but a critique of the market,

16 Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey & Michael Rustin: *After Neoliberalism: The Kilburn Manifesto*, p. 21.

which according to the three authors was allowed to expand in post-war welfare society. Now the market has expanded even further and commodified even more parts of human life. The solution is to force the market to pull back Hall, Massey and Rustin argue. To argue to return to the post-war welfare society and finally build it. But it is always necessary to remember the global structure in which the post-war welfare society was embedded, where two thirds of the world was cut off from what modernization took place. The expansion of welfare society is not a radical rejection of neoliberal capitalism. Placing oneself to the left of Wilson does not really change anything. It's just humanizing the maximization of profit, creating stability through reforms, building democratic state capitalism. Hall forgets that the post war boom was not a result of good planning and a healthy relationship between the classes: the Keynesian wage productivity deal occurred on the basis of the enormous destruction of means of production and labour in the period from 1914 to 1945. The basic contradiction in the manifesto is between neoliberalism and the welfare society. Neoliberalism has destroyed the welfare state and replaced the idea of collectivity with market-based individualism. By making this the primary opposition Hall avoids a genuine critique of capital's hiding of the contradictory relationship between capital and labour. The critique of neoliberalism is precisely that it destabilises and turns everything into a market, that it creates a contradiction between world capital and world proletariat and therefore does not leave any space for the peaceful survival of the national working class and the Keynesian compromise. In other words it is a kind of state-capitalism with a human face that Hall, Massey and Rustin make themselves spokespeople for. They thus show a surprising lack of understanding when it comes to the question of profit maximization and capitalist rivalry.

There's a problematic identification with the nation state in *The Kilburn Manifesto*. It is significant that when Hall and the others write about the need for a radical critique of neoliberalism it takes place within the framework of an already established national political public sphere in which they want to put pressure on Labour. They even argue for the need of a new government, as if that would make a difference. In the manifesto there is no critique of parliamentary national democracy. In that sense Hall is not even at eye-level with the protesters in Spain, Greece, Egypt, etc. who are busy critiquing nation state democracy, labelling it a spectacle or a fraud. We are witnessing a

break between those who are affirmative towards the nation state and those who want to abolish it. Hall and his associates are firmly in the first group. In parts of both *Occupy* and *los indignados* there has been a move beyond politics as a separate sphere, embedded in a nation state. But the writers of *The Kilburn Manifesto* remain attached to the idea of national democracy.

It is a nostalgic project Hall, Massey and Rustin are engaged in, in which the rethinking necessary in the present situation does not occur. And it is also difficult to see how such a reformist project is at all possible in the present situation, where capital is going through a radical devaluation that first and foremost hits workers, who are thus left with no power to press for a new compromise between capital and labour. Workers are excluded – or if they are lucky enough to get a job – are trapped in extremely precarious work relations and burdened with indefinite debt. One could perhaps argue that China and India could engage in such national welfare projects, but the ongoing destruction of the climate of course puts the idea of such a modernization and the raising of billions into a middle class into question.

Besides it is always very important to remember the global structure the post-war Western welfare societies were embedded in, where two-thirds of the world was cut from access to the modernization taking place. Stuart Hall for one should know that. The living conditions of the Western working class were materially ameliorated significantly during the post-war period, but the rest of humanity was by and large trapped in colonial or postcolonial conditions. What made the welfare state possible, in Great Britain for instance, with its social benefits, public pension and a national cultural policy, was the geopolitically privileged position of the Western countries. The rest of the world was left in poverty. We always have to take these facts into consideration when talking about the welfare state.

THE COUNTER-REVOLUTION OF THE MULTITUDE

Hall and Žižek try to breathe new life into the reformist project and bet on a state capitalist solution, they want the state to set barriers to capital's maximization of profit as well as evening out the inequality that capital necessarily creates. In so doing they cut the connection to Marx's anti-political communist project, which has to do with the abolition of the capitalist money economy and the dissolution of the

nation state. Unfortunately, there is not much left of this project in Hall and Žižek. There is a little bit more of it in Hardt and Negri's pamphlet *Declaration*, a reading of the movement of squares in North Africa, Southern Europe and the US in 2011. Hardt and Negri start out by analyzing the protests as a rejection of neoliberal capitalism and the modes of subjection that characterize neoliberalism: debt, media, security and political representation. But they continue, of course, beyond such a reading and see the protests as an expression of the constant challenging of capital by the multitude. The analysis of neoliberal capitalism is thus anchored in the opposition between capital and multitude. Even though Hardt and Negri use a more restrained rhetoric in this book, the key is still an inflated optimism. Just as in *Empire*, *Multitude* and *Commonwealth* the scale of the resistance is exaggerated and leaves the impression of a sure victory. The relationship between capital and labour is characterized by labour's ability not only to react to capital's exploitation and the new forms of subjection but also make capital superfluous. The multitude always creates something new and is thus the name of something completely new, a kind of limitless creativity. This is what happens in the squares. As they write: "Movements of revolt and rebellion [...] provide us the means not only to refuse the repressive regimes under which these subjective figures suffer but also to invert these subjectivities in figures of power."¹⁷

The Occupy movement, the M15 movement in Spain and the rebellious subjects in Northern Africa are all examples of a rejection – and a creative conversion of – neoliberalism Hardt and Negri argue. In the protests the subjective figures of neoliberal capitalism are rejected in favor of continuous experimentation with new social forms that are not mediated by money and debt, but open instead an inclusive, democratic space where new ways of being are made possible beyond debt, the mass media, surveillance and parliamentary democracy. The rebellious masses are an expression of an ordinary resistance to capitalism. They are the multitude that not only challenge capital but conquer it. The occupation of squares such as Tahrir, Puerta del Sol and Zucotti Park is not just a rejection of the present crisis-regime of neoliberal capitalism but is also an active creation of new relations that point beyond present capitalist society

17 Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri: *Declaration* (New York: Argo Navis Author Service, 2012), p. 7.

and thus constitute new ways of life in themselves. As Hardt and Negri write: "Rebellion and revolt set in motion not only a refusal but also a creative process."¹⁸

Hardt and Negri thus present an analysis that brings together the protests and underlines the connections between them. This is important. It is necessary to move beyond a focus on the national context, and Hardt and Negri apply a global perspective. Unfortunately when it comes down to it they analyze the protests primarily as an expression of the multitude and its ability to challenge capital. The declining rate of profit and the long neoliberal crash landing, in which more and more workers are excluded and production is outsourced does not play a big part in their analysis. We are left with the usual stratospheric history of the battle between capital and multitude.

As Hardt and Negri phrase it, combining Foucault and Marx, the multitude is original, its resistance comes first, capital needs it and cannot create value without it. But by substituting the proletariat with the multitude Hardt and Negri ends up with a highly creative, self-constituting subject that is always able to reject capital, although it has not been able to do so just yet. But communism is already present and will conquer sooner or later. It is present in the new work relations and it is present in the occupied squares. It is almost as if Hardt and Negri have turned Tronti's idea of the primacy of the working class on its head, making it appear as if communism will materialize automatically. The multitude does not negate itself as the other part of the capital-labour relationship, exploitation is automatically replaced by creativity. Where Tronti wrote about the violent rejection of capital by the workers Hardt and Negri write about the already accomplished supersession of capital in immaterial labour and in the squares. It is almost as if it is no longer necessary for the proletariat to negate itself as a class. Active self-negation is unnecessary.

But the premise does not hold, the idea of valorization beyond wage labour is problematic. No doubt a spreading out of valorization has occurred in the last three decades, and yes, it has become more collective, but it does not take place automatically in the social body, as Hardt and Negri seem to think. It can be difficult to map the individual wage-labourer's contribution to valorization, but this does not mean that it is society as a coherent quasi-organic movement that valorizes capital. Hardt and Negri go too far in their vitalism and seem

18 Ibid., p. 104.

almost to argue that labour has disappeared. That, of course, is not the case, it has merely changed form and become global. Hardt and Negri apparently forgot about the wage labourers in Asia, Latin America and South Africa in sheer excitement over the immanent bliss of immaterial labour. They forgot that immaterial labour, network capitalism, debt and outsourcing go together.

We will probably advance further if we analyze the transformations that have happened in recent decades as a result of both workers' militancy and the inner contradictions of capital. The working class or the multitude is not an independent subject that is somehow independent of value production. Capital is not an opposition but class contradiction, and the dependence creating structures of capital do not magically disappear because of new relations of production. But that is the impression one is left with in Hardt and Negri. The revolution has already happened, or is happening by itself, which makes it rather difficult to distinguish it from the counter-revolution. If everything is read as an expression of resistance and creativity the distinction between resistance and crisis, revolution and counter-revolution tends to disappear.

CRISIS AND REVOLUTION

Hardt and Negri's analysis of the present protest cycle is unfortunately disconnected from any historical dimension. They have fled into the future and disregard the present powerlessness of the proletariat. After several decades during which the idea of revolution almost disappeared – or was turned into individual conformism in step with the demands of the market – we have to take into account the scattered nature of the protests and start with the crisis. We have to begin with an account of the long destruction that has taken place. But with Hardt and Negri the protests come off looking like a revolution accomplished. There is no doubt that a break occurred in 2011, that the protests were a rejection of the austerity politics that were introduced after the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2007/8. The protests are very important but unfortunately they are not a reason for the optimism expressed by Hardt and Negri.

Where are we then? The new cycle of protests takes place against a background of four decades of destruction. In the longer historical perspective, the neoliberal epoch now appears to be one long crash

landing after the explosive economic development of the post-war period, and the epoch has been characterized by repeated crises (1973-1975, 1980-1982, 1990-1991, 2001-2002, 2007-). Since the beginning of the 1970s capitalism has tried to reconstruct itself by saving on social reproduction through debt, technological development and the outsourcing of production. Capital has depended more and more on cheap labour from Asia and Eastern Europe, all the while closing down big industry in the West.

An assessment of the present situation has to start with the recognition that the last four decades has been one long defeat for the proletariat. The present crisis is just the last phase in a long lasting crisis regime that has its origin in the reconstruction that took place in the 1970s. As a response to the drop in the rate of profit an extensive shift occurred where national and regional limits to the movement of capital were abolished, where wage labour was expanded in Asia, Latin America, as well as in both Northern and sub-Saharan Africa and where larger and larger parts of capital was invested in the financial sector. The result of the changes have been disastrous for the proletariat, who have been expelled from the scene of history. This has at least been the development in the US and in Europe. That's why the American and European protests are so defensive and why the most important protests take place outside the centre.

In the West the working class has been dissolved and replaced by proletarianized wage-dependent individuals who do not constitute any kind of united front. The working class has been transformed from a collective subject to a collection of proletarianized individuals. Therefore the class struggle is no longer a collective phenomenon but has been reduced to an individual choice.¹⁹ All conflicts remain isolated and disconnected, in that sense the class struggle is over. Following Adorno we can call this condition the false classless society or the classless class society.²⁰ The working class movement has been dissolved and replaced by white national interest organisations that fight for their monopoly of the labour market. There is no opposition, the working class movement has fused with the system and does no longer exist as an antagonistic, or critical, organization. It is no longer a

19 For an account of this shift through a close reading of the pension reform strike in France in 2010, see Louis Martin: *'Je lutte des classes'. Le mouvement contre la réforme des retraites en France, Automne 2010* (Marseilles: Senonevero, 2012).

20 Adorno in conversation with Horkheimer in 1953 in Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer: *Towards a New Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 33.

social partner able to force the hand of capital and the state. That's why the protests in Greece, Spain and Portugal are so desperate. They take place against a background of dissolution and are forced to ask questions about all the inherited forms available. The youth in Southern Europe know this. This means that the confrontation is more 'clean' or clear cut now that the reformist position is in ruins, but this of course also means that the exclusion takes place quicker and quicker, more and more are thrown out of wage labour and are forced to leave their homes. The classless class society is falling apart on the other side of the Alps and the solution of the dominant order seems to be a continuation of the repressive anti-rebellion regime tested during the war on terror. Now the defence of the capitalist system requires that the counter-revolution is organized. The methods have included the direct integration of finance capital into the state, as in Italy and Greece, or the shooting of demonstrators like in South Africa. Security and terrorist anti-terror is the other side of austerity.

In Southern Europe the crisis has resulted in the most widespread class struggles since the 1930s and large parts of the masses in Spain and Greece are abandoning national democracy. We are nowhere near this far in Northern Europe, where the joining together of disciplined wage labour and protestant morals has prevented any disposition to something new – or a grand politics in Nietzsche's sense – so far, as well as preventing any kind of solidarity with the rebellious masses in the South. Here freedom of speech and Islamophobia are two sides of the same coin.²¹ The most important thing is to stand firm: not unlike the aristocracy at the beginning of the 20th century, the working class of Northern Europe refuses to share its wealth with anyone, including the workers in Southern Europe. The Euro crisis is staged as a result of local conditions. Racist prejudice is rampant again. Insisting on and believing in the naturalness of ones own wealth and welfare – and slum for the rest of the world – seems to be the historical destiny of the protestant countries. It looks as if it is impossible to break free from the iron cage Weber identified in the protestant, social democratic northern part of Europe. The racist representation of the

21 For an account of the recent history of state racism in Scandinavia, see Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen: "On the Turn towards Liberal State Racism in Denmark", *e-flux journal*, no. 22, 2011, [HTTP://WWW.E-FLUX.COM/JOURNAL/ON-THE-TURN-TOWARDS-LIBERAL-STATE-RACISM-IN-DENMARK/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-the-turn-towards-liberal-state-racism-in-denmark/) and idem: "Xenophobia and Fascism in the Outskirts of Northern Europe", *Left Curve*, no. 36, 2012, [HTTP://WWW.LEFTCURVE.ORG/LC36WEBPAGES/XENOPHOBIA%20AND%20FASCISM.PDF](http://www.leftcurve.org/LC36WEBPAGES/XENOPHOBIA%20AND%20FASCISM.PDF)

Euro crisis illustrates only too well that the Northern European public sphere runs on a particular mixture of control and intensity.

In North Africa and the Middle East the situation is completely different, there we see a regular class war. Food riots threatens to turn the whole region upside down. The explosive events in January 2011 where Ben Ali and Mubarak were forced out were just the beginning. Since then local despots have been made to resign, have been killed or are fighting to avoid being dethroned. A fresh wind blows from the region. In 2011 the revolts spread from country to country and demonstrators challenged the local regimes and the world order they are part of. These were not just protests for democracy, in which the Arab masses wanted the democracy of the West, but class struggle. The media have sought to represent the protests as an expression of local conflicts, but the class perspective is difficult to hide. The protests have just continued. The ruling order has a lot to attend to. In both Egypt and Tunisia the protests haven't really stopped and are still taking place. Strikes and demos keep appearing; an end to the conflict is nowhere in sight. The new strong alliance in Egypt between the army and the mosque only lasted a year: in June 2013 the army got rid of the Muslim Brotherhood. The generals, the Brotherhood and bourgeois politicians are trying to take advantage of the chaotic situation, create division and make themselves indispensable. The most important thing is to prevent the revolution continuing. Now the mosque and the military are fighting for the small amount of surplus value that can be created in the crisis. The response of local capital has been repression all along. But the protests continue.

International capital has not been slow in responding either. There have been interventions all along that sought to prevent the process – still ongoing – that is destabilising the postcolonial world. The invasion of Iraq is just the most obvious example of such an intervention, which was not just about Iraqi oil but also about smashing Baghdad and thereby destabilising the centre of the region. Throughout the post-war period Western powers have been present in the region in a continuous series of interventions and wars. The occupation of Palestine and the actions of the Israeli military in Lebanon has served the same purpose as the imperialist wars and interventions: to create division, stir up religious conflict and prevent Arab autonomy. If the revolts are allowed to spread Israel will end looking like the cold war apartheid state it is.

The revolts in Tunisia and Egypt took the Western powers by

surprise, but since then they have not been slow in responding, trying to derail the revolutionary process. The recipe was ready when the protests jumped to Libya: civil war and military intervention muddled the conflict and resulted in the chaos of different armed groups. The goal is always to drain the revolutionaries of energy. That's also the case with Syria. Here the *plat du jour* is civil war and economic and military support for the different groups that fight the regime. Every time the revolution can be transformed into religious and ethnic conflict it's perfect. The revolutions have to be isolated, it is very important that they do not spread. The intervention in Mali had this function; it was support to Morocco and Algeria. The Tunisian spring must not be allowed to spread to the other Maghreb countries. Like in 1917 where the Western powers intervened in Poland and the Caucasus it's about blocking the revolutionary take off.

The counter-revolution is up and running and new temporary measures intended to block the revolutionary process, and make sure that the present world order is not further destabilised, are introduced continuously. But things are moving very fast right now. Turkey, which in 2011 and 2012 was put forward as the model for combining Islamic parliamentarism and economic policy (read: neoliberalism) to be followed by the new regimes in Tunisia and Egypt all of a sudden experienced widespread protests in 2013. In June that year thousands of people started protesting against Recep Erdogan's AKP party in Istanbul and forty-eight other Turkish cities. Led by Erdogan, Turkey had been the perfect ally for the West, and the country had managed to combine liberal democracy, piety and authoritarianism. Erdogan's intense neoliberalization of Turkish society – exemplified by the gentrification of Gezi park and the area around Taksim square, which sparked the protests – had resulted in impressive growth rates of around 10%, the envy of the other European countries. The combination of a big industrial sector and export economy has left Turkey in a much better position than, for instance, Egypt. When the AKP took power in 2002 Turkey owed the IMF twenty-three and a half billion dollars, in May 2013 it paid off its last debt to the IMF. Erdogan's AKP has continued the neoliberalization of the country that Turgut Özal had already launched in the 1980s, to the benefit of the local bourgeoisie that has therefore backed AKP. The protests on Taksim square are an expression of an incipient rebellion against the local bourgeoisie. The AKP represents the local forms of capitalism that

the young protesters are rejecting. The protests in Turkey put to death once and for all the idea of the Arab revolts as a question of parliamentary democracy. They already have that in Turkey. On the other hand the anticapitalist nature of the protests is difficult to hide.

China is not, of course, the solution to the crisis. Their export-oriented economy is folded into Western capitalism's problems and cannot disconnect itself all by itself. The Communist Party of China put a brave face on things and put their faith in continuous growth, and since the crisis exploded have flooded the system with an enormous amount of credit in order to keep investments and productivity going. In doing so it has created a huge bubble that risks exploding, triggering an even worse crisis, if not the downfall of capitalism. In other words the Communist Party of China is playing with fire. And it doesn't really help that the 300 million wage labourers along the coast are starting to get critical, demanding a bigger paycheck and better working conditions. It is a genuine problem that their export success is based to such a large extent on the over-exploitation of these workers. At the same time there is still the question of the 800 million who have not been included in the modernization. What is going to happen with them? The Communist Party is forced to change its export economy and thereby radically alter society. It must continue its bourgeois revolution of China, including destroying the precapitalist relations in the countryside. But such a move might very well launch a process the Communist Party is unable to control, ultimately setting in motion a proletarian revolution.

Capitalism is going through a severe crisis. A crisis that has lasted three decades. The economic crisis that broke out in 2008 is just the latest phase of a much longer process of ruin in which a continuous destruction of capital occurs. Part of this slow shake out – which has been going on for more than three decades – has been the exclusion of more and more workers, who are forced to survive on the outside of capitalist exploitation. The formalized labour of the post war era has been replaced to a large extent by precarious and informal labour, and the number of people living in slum conditions has grown exponentially the last decades, resulting in more than one billion people living in different kinds of slum in the world today. The last thirty years almost look like one long flight to credit and new technology excluding ever more workers. But even though capital is apparently trying to rid itself of living labour we are unfortunately not confronted with

the death throes of capitalism, in which capital finally self-destructs. Right now the crisis means further suffering and more pain for the proletarians of the world. This will continue to be the scenario unless capitalism is actively abolished.

THE COMMUNIST ACTION PROGRAM BEYOND THE LEFT AND THE WORKERS' MOVEMENT

When, as has been the case for the last couple of decades, capital stops buying labour power, work under capitalism tends to lose its meaning. In that moment a space beyond exploitation, beyond the labour-capital relationship opens up. A crisis is as such always also a possibility for creating something else, something new. This is what the young barricaders in Cairo, Homs and Istanbul sense. Not that this necessarily happens, that another world will materialize, but the possibility of contesting and changing the world is there. The breakdown of the wage form is a possibility. Because capitalism is dependent on the labour power of the proletariat the proletariat has the possibility of subverting the commodity economy. The ones who create the world on a daily basis can also stop doing it. The workers can stop working (and become the proletariat in Marx's sense). A proletarian revolution can create a new kind of social interaction where people and things are not measured and quantified in order to be produced and circulated. In such a situation money and the commodity economy could be replaced with something different, and things could be produced and circulated without being reduced to a quantity comparable with everything else. There is nothing automatic about such a process however. The working class has an evident interest in preserving capitalist production, developing the means of production and even fighting for the right to wage labour and exploitation. Workers are forced to sell their labour power in order to reproduce themselves. The history of the Western working class is testimony to this dimension of the existence of the working class, its consolidating function for capitalism, what Jacques Camatte uncomplainingly described as the domestication of the proletariat, in which it becomes a part of the community of capital.²² In other words we are confronted with a contradiction: capital versus the working class, or proletariat, where the working

22 Jacques Camatte: "Against Domestication", 1973, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/CAMATTE/AGDOM.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/camatte/agdom.htm)

class/proletariat is both capable of reproducing a capitalist economy – and in fact is necessary for the creation of surplus value – but where the proletariat would also be able of negating the capitalist economy and producing something different.

It is the class that will abolish all classes, Marx writes; the proletariat is the negation of capitalism. It is thus not a sociological or economic category, but is the subject of the communist revolution. It is only insofar as one talks about the communist revolution that it makes sense to talk about the proletariat. The proletarians are the ones who have no reserves, who have nothing to lose, the ones with many children. As Gilles Dauvé writes, the proletariat are thus not the working class but the class-negating non-class rejecting wage labour. The proletariat is the ones “who have nothing to lose but their chains; those who are nothing, have nothing, and cannot liberate themselves without destroying the whole social order. The proletariat is the dissolution of present society, because this society deprives it of nearly all its positive aspects. Thus the proletariat is also its own destruction. All theories (either bourgeois, fascist, Stalinist, left wing or ‘gauchistes’) which in any way glorify and praise the proletariat as it is and claim for it the positive role of defending values and regenerating society, are counter-revolutionary”.²³ The proletariat is the negation of established society. Capital forces the proletarians together, organizing themselves with a view to destroying class society. The mission of the proletariat is thus not to become the dominant class – like the bourgeoisie did in its time – but to dissolve capitalist society and its dependency creating and impenetrable structures.

The communist revolution is thus in the first place less the development of new social relations and more the destruction of capitalist society. The abolition of the nation state and the removal of the money economy are the two joint goals of proletarian revolutionary praxis. Marx and Engels already outlined this program in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848: The abolition of private property and internationalism. As they write: “[T]he Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. In all these movements, they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question [...]. Finally, they labour everywhere for the union and agreement of the democratic

23 Jean Barrot (Gilles Dauvé): “Capitalism and Communism”, 1972, [HTTP://LIB-COM.ORG/LIBRARY/CAPITALISM-COMMUNISM-GILLES-DAUVE](http://lib-com.org/library/capitalism-communism-gilles-dauve)

parties of all countries.”²⁴ As is well known Marx continued working on this double task. Internationalism found expression in the founding of the First International in London in 1864 as an association of socialist and communist groups and unions dedicated to class struggle. The question of property was a matter Marx devoted a great deal of energy to analyzing from *The Paris Manuscripts* to *Capital*. Both elements were unfortunately totally misunderstood and distorted during the 20th century. The internationalist perspective to a large extent disappeared with Stalin’s notion of ‘socialism in one country’, which rapidly went from being a necessity to becoming a state ideology that transformed the Soviet Union into a nation state, competing with the US for world power. Internationalism only survived in a limited form – as anti-imperialism after World War II – but most often as a scarcely hidden support for the Soviet state capitalist regime. As for the question of property things did not go much better. Even though Marx wrote thousands of pages about private property and capital it was actually only in “Critique of the Gotha Programme” that he wrote anything about the transition from the revolution to a socialist distribution of goods and onwards to communism.²⁵ In accordance with his definition of capital as money generating money he focuses on the role of the money form in capitalist society. In socialist society, or what Amadeo Bordiga called “the lower stage of communism”, money will be replaced with work time calculations Marx writes. In the lower stage of communism the economy is subjected to certain restrictions (i.e. degrowth). It will thus not be a growth economy but an economy that ‘repairs’ the capitalist economy’s product-perverted market directedness by focusing the economy on the relation of ability-need (“from each according to his ability, to each according to his need”). There also occurs a deinvestment, where social wealth is not put into more, or new, means of production, but to the satisfaction of needs. This is a transitional economy, what Marx termed socialism. This is so because there is both a judgment of capability and a judgment of need in the idea of “from each according to his ability to each according to his needs.” In other words the economy is still very individualized. It is only the distribution of goods that is

24 Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels: *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. 1848, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/MARX/WORKS/1848/COMMUNIST-MANIFESTO/CHO4.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/cho4.htm)

25 Karl Marx: “Critique of the Gotha Programme”, 1875, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/MARX/WORKS/1875/GOTHA/INDEX.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/index.htm)

socialized at this stage. The transformation of production takes place in parallel, but is not directed by anything else than the satisfaction of the judged needs. It is a transitional economy because the apparatus is still the capitalist production apparatus, which the socialists take over and use. The abolition of the money economy is also the disappearance of capitalist property rights according to which an individual can sell his property without consuming it; in socialist society this is replaced with a dissipative organization of the use of the means of production and the distribution of the means of consumption. In that way socialism prevents money from generating money, it blocks the self-enhancement of value. The important thing about a socialist society is thus, according to Marx, that the economy is demonetarised, that money as means of distribution is replaced with work time allocations, or a kind of voucher system where everybody is rewarded for their contribution to the creation of a common wealth. Marx thus emphasizes the abolition of the money form, the abolition of capitalism requires that money is abolished because the money price form conceals the transformation of human labour into surplus labour and surplus value. This never took place in the Soviet Union or in any other society that called itself socialist in the 20th century. Capital was never abolished in the Soviet Union. What happened was that the state expropriated most of the capital, creating a centralized, state-run, planned economy. But that's neither socialism nor communism.

The transition to communism requires the negation of all the basic forms of a capitalist economy. The product of work would no longer appear as a commodity with a price that can be exchanged for money. And the purpose of production would no longer be exchange but consumption. Wage labour would be abolished, people would be working in order to produce the necessities of life and not in order to acquire means to get access to necessities of life. Production would only be understood as consumption of work time and the products of nature. Production would no longer have a meaning in itself (as the self-expansion of value) but would be a means to consumption. The purpose of communist production would thus be to produce the most favourable consumption by using the least possible work and through the least destructive use of nature.

Marx's communist action programme highlights the capital-negating perspective of the proletariat. The complementarity between labour and capital has carried social reproduction so far, meaning that

the maintenance of the institutions of society was also the maintenance of capital as surplus value and accumulation. This identity between labour and capital has only existed in the Western economies, but here too it has gone into serious crisis. Thus the revolution cannot be the expropriation of the means of production; rather, the revolution is the destruction of the self-reproducing relation where workers are – and produce themselves as – wage labour. As Marx and Engels stressed in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, the proletariat is the class that destroys all classes, abolishing wage labour, money and the state. “The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation. They have nothing of their own to secure and to fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property”.²⁶ The proletariat is its own destruction because it can only liberate itself by destroying the whole of society, including itself. As Bordiga phrases it: “In the field of daily economics as in general world politics, the proletariat has nothing to lose and therefore nothing to defend, and its only task is to attack.”²⁷

The communist revolution is in this regard not a programme to be realized. There is no worker identity to liberate, the task is not to create institutions within which the proletariat can develop and come into its own, whether it's through the party, the union, the council or the self-organized work place. The communist revolution is not the taking over of state power and the means of production, a ‘liberation of work’. It is not a reappropriation of the wealth of society, it is the abolition of value. It is important to question and negate the capitalist mode of production and not just critique the bourgeoisie's control of it. The revolution is not fighting the bourgeoisie over the ownership of the means of production, destroying its state in order to create a workers' state. That project is in ruins, Žižek and Hall are not only fighting for a wrong cause but for a lost one. The Western working class is dead. We are situated after the breakdown of that programme, a break has occurred in the theory of revolution.²⁸ The communist revolution is not a

26 Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels: *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/MARX/WORKS/1848/COMMUNIST-MANIFESTO/](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/)

27 Amadeo Bordiga: “Fundamental Theses of the Party”, 1951, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/BORDIGA/WORKS/1951/FUNDAMENTAL-THESES.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1951/fundamental-theses.htm)

28 François Danel (ed.): *Rupture dans la théorie de la révolution* (Marseilles:

battle for state power and a different organization of the capitalist money economy, it is the dissolution of the state, wage labour, the property form and money. As *Théorie Communiste* writes, the revolution is not the self-affirmation of the working class.²⁹ The proletariat destroys itself and thereby destroys capital; it stops the reproduction of the class relationship and thereby opens the door for a different handling of the things we create. Means and ends cannot be separated, the revolution is not two phases, first we take power and then we change society. The communist perspective shows itself right away as the immediate transformation of all social relationships. Money, wage labour, production for profit, private property, the state and its many forms of mediation and the distinction between learning and doing are immediately replaced by new forms of life that go beyond money and the state. There is thus no phase of transition between capitalism and communism. If the negation of capitalism is not present from the very beginning of the revolution the capitalist mode of production will continue to function. This is the lesson of the so-called socialist states. It's not about creating the conditions for a communist society but about creating communism; when the revolution happens the process of communization must start right away.

BETWEEN BREAKDOWN AND REVOLUTION

What are we left with then? As a consequence of the neoliberal restructuring and the exclusion of more and more people from wage labour, the working class has been going through a radical process of fragmentation that at one and the same time seems to obliterate any kind of working class resistance as well as force the working class to become the proletariat and attack capital. The development of new productive forces has made millions of workers obsolete. As in a kind of schizophrenia capital tries to create value without including living labour. As a consequence of this we are faced with rampant unemployment and disintegration. Wage labour is so precarious for many people today that it is difficult to effect any kind of 'class composition', produce any kind of solidarity. Stagnating accumulation manifests itself as depression and impotence, not class consciousness.

Senonevero, 2003).

29 Roland Simon: *Fondements critiques d'une théorie de la révolution. Au-delà de l'affirmation du prolétariat* (Paris: Senonevero, 2001).

Former identities are being dissolved and there does not seem to be a ground for collective protests.

The new protest cycle illustrates this condition of dissolution and liquidation. Reformist solutions are lacking. And there is no positive programme. Only the really destructive gesture of the proletariat seems to be able of changing the course. As Anton Pannekoek writes in his text about capitalism's crises from 1934: "The self-emancipation of the proletariat is the collapse of capitalism."³⁰ Capitalism is characterized by internal contradictions but only the proletariat is capable of abolishing it. There is thus no historical logic at hand according to which capitalism will necessarily end.

But capitalism feeds from crises whether it is slow and covered by credit – as was the case in the West in the period after the neoliberal restructuring in the late 1970s, until the financial crisis – or swift and brutal as it's been since 2008 in the West (it has been brutal in the rest of the world more or less throughout the period), so if the present misery it to end the proletariat must create a real crisis that can abort the continuous destruction and exclusion with all its force. In other words, the proletariat has to create a real state of emergency.³¹ In one and the same movement the proletariat must gather and demolish itself and thereby bring capitalism to an end. A joint transformation of circumstances and human activity that can break the rampage we are entangled in. The ruins keep piling up and only the revolutionary class can carry through the decisive attack on capitalism.

30 Anton Pannekoek: "The Theory of the Collapse of Capitalism", 1934, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/ARCHIVE/PANNEKOE/1934/COLLAPSE.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1934/collapse.htm)

31 "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'emergency situation' in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history which corresponds to this. Then it will become clear that the task before us is the introduction of a real state of emergency." Walter Benjamin: "Theses on the Concept of History", 1939, [HTTP://WWW.MARXISTS.ORG/REFERENCE/ARCHIVE/BENJAMIN/1940/HISTORY.HTM](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm)

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