

Past Decline and Beyond – an Introduction

You must be ready to abandon all convictions as soon as they do not anymore correspond to the given experiences (Karl Korsch)

Marx did not produce any specific theory of crisis. However, the phenomenon of crisis is one immanent moment of his general theoretical-practical project on *capitalism and its overthrow*. In relation to this a specific theory of crisis would be a contradiction in terms. What Marx, as a *revolutionary* and a *critic*, intended to show was that and how capitalism was a historically transitory social system, with a *logical* ending with communism as a *possibility*, and how this possibility of revolution/transcendence lies within this very capitalist system, in the proletariat. Viewed abstractly, however, you can *focus on* and *emphasize one aspect* of capitalism as a social mode of reproduction, that could provide us with a theory of crisis. But with the fetish character of such a theory, we must stress that »crisis is not economic, but it present itself as such« (Holloway, *Open Marxism*, Vol. II); what it expresses is the instability of capitalism as an antagonistic relation of classes. What we in the following intend to do is to criticize the hitherto theories of crisis and collapse in the workers' movement by trying to derive their limits and errors from the times, the social historical contexts, for which they were the dominating theoretical expressions. However, their limitations was primarily not, as you may sometimes be lead to believe, that these theorists were intellectual weak, malicious or anything else on the level of ideas. They are rather the theoretical expressions of the limits of an era, a cycle of class struggle, and by so socially and historically conditioned (including by way of ideas). Thus, the level of ideas is not autonomous from the material conditions that produce these ideas. By this also ideas and consciousness are active moments of the production of those state of affairs usually considered as objective. This is how subjective errors today may lead to objective facts tomorrow, and thereby the need for revolutionary theory. The dialectical relation between subject and object, theory and praxis, thus mean that you start from the point of view of totality. And since these poles are not externally related but mutually affect each other internally in an intricate interaction, you must seriously consider the issue of production of theory and consciousness, because we can not separate the subject from the object and vice versa. No theory can explain the *real* state of affairs or give us *the* fundamental and invariable »theory of crisis« that will explain everything. Since society is the product of social relations, in continuous movement, the only permanence is human praxis. The *raison d'être* of communists, however, is not to interpret but to change the world; that is why the aim of communist theory is the fact that it describes that it actually are we – the proletariat – that through our constitutive praxis who are producing the totality of capitalism and that it is this fact that makes it appear as beyond our reach, but at the same time and therefore possible for us to transcend.

Marx was no new political economist, but was producing a radical – i.e. he derived the problems he aimed to solve to their roots, »man himself« – *critique* of political economy *qua* economy. The bourgeois economy starts from, and thereby takes for granted, what is to be explained, that is the human alienating praxis. The categories of the bourgeois economy are those categories expressing the »deranged forms« of the process of production in capitalism. However, these are not just any produced categories to deliberately obscure the capitalist process of production as a process of exploitation, but »objective forms of thought«, i. e. expressing something that really is happening, for this process.

The theory of decline or the decline of theory?

The main part of this issue is the text »Decadence: The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory?«, which we have translated from the UK journal *Aufheben*. This text is important, not because it gives closed answers on how to interpret the world, but because it forces us to question a whole line of ingrained theoretical perspectives.

Aufheben criticize in the opening part all those theories that give the working class a passive or merely reactive role in the transition from capitalism to socialism/communism. *Aufheben* trace the theory of the natural decline of capitalism to Engels and the orthodoxy of the 2nd International. In the International one tendency stood for a theory of capitalism almost by itself – thanks to a growing organic composition of capital and increased planning – should grow into socialism. The role of the workers' parties was therefore merely to take over the state apparatuses to, when the time was ripe, finish the transition.

Against this stood a tendency that meant that capitalism, again due to its own immanent development, would be hit by crisis. At this moment the working class would act, forced by an objective necessity, and socialism be introduced. The common denominator of the two perspectives was that the working class was not given any active role in the development of capital. The movement of capital and the class struggle was seen as two separate things, only forced together in the very

moment of transition.

For those revolutionaries that around WWI broke with the reformism of the 2nd International it became a dogma that capitalism saw itself in its period of decline and that its final crisis was near at hand. Obviously the communist lefts were different from the Leninists by giving the working class an autonomous and driving role in the revolution, but neither of them saw the connection between the acts of the working class and the capitalist crisis.

During the long lasting post-WWII boom the theories of decline faced their own crisis, since it became absurd to stress the objective decline of capitalism in an era when the reality gave proof of the opposite. At the same time these theories appeared passivating since the class struggle was not given any decisive role during periods of upswing.

Aufheben stresses the importance of groups such as *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, *the Situationist International* and first and foremost *the Operaist/Autonomist current* in the break with the orthodox perspectives and to once again stress class struggle as the central issue both for the understanding of capitalism and the possibility to beat it. Especially Autonomist Marxism stressed the working class as the motor of the development of capital and produced a theory where the crisis was seen as a result of the struggle of the working class. This current also showed that technology and the labour process was everything but neutral, as results of class struggle.

However, there were some problems also with this perspective. How could you explain a period such as the present, when the struggle of the working class obviously is at a very low level, at the same time as capital has forced through a whole series of restructuring of the organization of labour, technology, transport and the organization of the world market, labour laws and the relations to state apparatuses, and so on? Also the Autonomist perspective seems reductionist.

Aufheben shows that *S ou B*, *the Situationists* and *Autonomist Marxism* were necessary antecedents for going beyond the objectivist notion of capital of the orthodoxy, but also show the weaknesses of these groups. The article raises a number of issues: How to interpret the relation between labour and capital, between subject and object? How to interpret the movements and crisis of capital and class struggle? How can a transition to communism become possible? The article provides no immediate answers, but has inspired us to an intense discussion on these issues, that has lead us to try to formulate a provisional answer:

Capital is labour is capital

In one and the same process alienation and reification is produced, the worker as worker and capital as capital. Capital is fundamentally labour¹: passed *alienated* labour that has been turned against the worker in the form of means of production and goods, and living labour that produce new alienated labour. At one and the same time the worker exists as one part of capital, as Marx stresses in the *Grundrisse*,

It is clear ... that the worker cannot become *rich* in this exchange, since, in exchange for his labour capacity as a fixed, available magnitude, he surrenders its *creative power*, like Esau his birthright for a mess of pottage. Rather, he necessarily impoverishes himself ... because the creative power of his labour establishes itself as the power of capital, as an *alien power* confronting him. He *divests* himself of labour as the force productive of wealth; capital appropriates it, as such. The separation between labour and property in the product of labour, between labour and wealth, is thus posited in this act of exchange itself. What appears paradoxical as *result* is already contained in the presupposition. ... Thus the productivity of his labour, his labour in general, in so far as it is not a *capacity* but a motion, *real labour*, *comes* to confront the worker as an *alien power*; capital, inversely, realizes itself through the *appropriation of alien labour*. ... Therefore, those who demonstrate that the productive force ascribed to capital is a *displacement*, a *transposition of the productive force* of labour, forget precisely that capital itself is essentially this *displacement*, this *transposition*, and that wage labour as such presupposes capital, so that, from its standpoint as well, capital is this *transubstantiation*; the necessary process of positing its own powers as *alien* to the worker.²

Thus the relation of labour and capital is not external. It is not about a war between two parties, who can conquer new areas from each other. On the contrary, the essence of capital is the relation between labour and capital, which means that capital in itself is class struggle.

For the worker the process of production means alienation. The worker is separated from the use-value of her own creative capacity, just as from the fruits of her labour. Instead, labour for the worker becomes a commodity, whose usefulness is only its exchange-value. Through alienation capital at the same time appears as an external power, a separate object, a »sensuous super-sensuous thing», with its own natural logic. Also the produced goods appear as things with no relation to the human relations by which they have been produced.

¹ C. f. just for the sake of clarity Marx in the *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth 1973) p. 257ff where he is arguing against an unhistorical notion of labour, labour per se, and stresses the historical specific and determined form (alienated labour, wage labour) »without which it is not capital».

² *Ibid*, p. 307f

For the worker, dead labour becomes an alien power in a twofold way. On the one hand the worker produces the means of production and continuously refine them and thus produces her own insubordination and exploitation, on the other hand the worker produces the means of subsistence, the exchange-values, in a growing amount and variation, and thus impose labour on herself (by way of the need for use-values increases). Both alienation and the reified world, where capital appear as of objective nature and the goods as extra-human things, has its origin in the moment of production, only then to cross the capitalist society as a whole.

If class struggle can be traced back to the very essence of capitalism, it becomes obvious that class struggle can not be anything external in relation to a capital that is following its own laws independently. At the same time it becomes obvious that capital is not something that is passively reacting upon the struggles of the workers. Capital, the relation of capital, i. e. the antagonistic relation of classes, is thus a »contradiction-in-process».

Competition between different capitals forces every individual capital to continuously valorise itself to survive. Competition forces the capitalist to change production to the disadvantage of the working class, reduce variable capital, increase the rate of exploitation, gain market shares and so on. Every capital thus fights its own workers, not only reactively but from self-interest, which forces the workers to respond. Through competition, and the following class struggle, capital changes its own composition and thus the class composition.

From the point of view of the working class a continuous struggle is at the same time fought, consciously or unconsciously, to reduce work, to get as much as possible from the created values and, as endurable as possible, a fair situation during work. This struggle, at the centre of valorisation, obviously forces capital to act. The individual capitalist can not give in to the demands of the working class if he is to survive. The struggle of the working class changes in this way both its own composition and that of capital, and thus in turn the class composition. Both the working class and capital are at the same time active and reactive.

The key is to view competition between different capitals as the main mediation between the »objective» laws of capital and the struggle it wage against the working class. It is mainly through the individual capitals that changes in technology and the organisation of labour are brought about, the technical class composition changes and efforts to increase intensity and exploitation are made. However, this is obviously not the only mediation, and capital also act collectively through pressure groups, states and so on, and can have well enough worked through strategies on this level. However, these are never fundamentally stabile and capital is never totally united – since these efforts to secure the survival of total capital (both against the working class and the competition between different capitals) often contradict the interests of individual capitals. Capital can never produce a stable world structure, since »all that is solid melts into air», even the very monuments of capital itself.

The capitalist crisis must be understood as a dialectic relation between class struggle and competition between capitals. Both factors are always inter-connected. On the one hand the struggle of the workers may halt the valorisation of capital at the same time as the costs of variable capital increases (if productivity decreases due to resistance from the workers and that wages increases). Obviously this leads to a form of crisis for the individual capital which one way or the other must act. If a wave of struggles affects capital as a whole this also leads to affects on the fall of the rate of profit, with problems for capital in general.

On the other hand capital must check on a fall in the rate of profit due to competition between capitals through an increase in productivity, i.e. the rate of exploitation, and keep wages down (to reduce the variable capital part and increase surplus-value). If the working class through its struggles succeeds in sabotage such efforts, the fall of the rate of profit fastens, and thereby the crisis.

However, there is no reason to believe that capitalism will face its total crisis or absolute decline. Even when some parts of the system are in crisis others have shown to be well off, and after a massive destruction of capital – eventually including large scale war – the deepest depression has been turned into a period of growth.

Transcendence, or transition problems

Another issue that is not obvious either is the link between crisis, the end of capitalism and the transition to communism. As *Aufheben* show the revolutionaries of the 20th Century saw crisis as a precondition for socialism, and many expected capitalism to enter some form of final crisis. In »Whither the world» (by *Troploin*) that we published in our last issue, Dauvé & Nesic reverse this perspective and say instead that the preconditions for revolution are best during the upswing of a well-being capitalism . Their idea is that if the possibilities of reforms are tried, but capitalism still can not fulfil the needs of people, the force to abandon the system is greater.

In history we have seen revolutionary movements both in situations of crisis: post-wars, the collapse of state apparatuses, and so on, and in relatively well-being periods such as France in 1968 and Italy in 1969 as typical examples. The way we see it, there is no need to categorically tie oneself neither to upswing nor decline. For us, the central issue is that communism is not the goal for capitalism, it is not naturally following the development of capitalism, but is a radical brake with capitalism.

Communism is a possibility that demands human activity, and nothing that emerges automatically.

The contradiction of capital is at one and the same time the contradiction of the workers, since they are at the same time labour-power and working class – class-in-itself, for-itself, and *against-itself*! As labour-power the workers are part of capital, with the interest of something/someone to sell their labour-power to, with interests to defend within the process of labour (job-security, better conditions, higher wages, etc.) and with institutions such as parties and unions – the labour/workers' movement – to defend these interests. As labour-power the worker has an interest in keeping capital, that labour is done within fair forms, that wages are paid with regularity. As working class, however, there is the interest to abolish alienation, escape the role as alienated labour-power and to stop being a worker. These tendencies are often present at the same time, in the same struggles. The revolutionary process is not the affirmation of the worker, but the negation of the entire labour/capital relation.

Practical reflexivity

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism ... is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively (Marx, *Thesis on Feuerbach*)

Marx's theory, and our, has no object. We do not stand outside and reflect upon some object, but are situated *in this* »object«. Our theoretical project, *riff-raff*, is our »*practical reflexivity*«, to use a phrase from Gunn in *Open Marxism* Vol. II, within the social context we are situated and take practical part in, i. e. the class struggle of the 21st Century capitalist society. For us theory and praxis are two moments of the same social, i. e. human, process, of the same dialectical continuum. In other words, we do not sit in an ivory tower and contemplate over the struggle that is waged on the ground below, we are in the middle of this struggle and are thereby forced to reflect and theorize over it. This we do not do *for* the imbecile working class that – we are told – can not develop anything but a trade-unionist consciousness (Lenin/Kautsky) and therefore are left to educated men from the intellectual middle class to get injected revolutionary consciousness. We do this *for ourselves*, as parts of the struggling existence of this very proletariat, i. e. the »real movement«, the »historical movement going on under our very eyes«, but, with this, it is also valid for others in the same situation. We want to inspire others just like we are being inspired.

However, class consciousness is nothing that is produced homogenously or automatically; the working class can not mechanically grow into a communist consciousness. Since it is the working class that is, and makes possible, capital, a communist consciousness can only emerge when the working class is questioning itself (as *workers*, i. e. as commodities) and thereby capital. Different groups of workers thus obtain, depending on both subjective and objective factors, different »levels« of consciousness, but since the objective circumstances produced by the workers, and which they are products of, always are capitalist circumstances (products of a specific form of subjectivity; that of »labour-power«) class consciousness means that this struggle tries to destroy and weaken what is producing this objectivity. In this struggle the working class may realize its situation as a class and its revolutionary potentials. Class struggle thus produce a form of subjectivity that affect the objective factors; that is why theory and ideology production is everything but a contemplative and »intellectual« business that merely observes the world; quite the opposite it is part of the practical attempts of the revolutionary movements to tumble capitalism over. The objective circumstances are those circumstances that try to reduce the class in struggle to variable capital, i. e. labour-power, but the struggle against capitalism thus gives the working class the possibility to realize that is precisely this subject that may extinguish the capitalist objectivity. The production of communist consciousness thus is not autonomous vis à vis the struggles of the working class; the theoretical critique of work by the *Situationists* in the 60's was only formally separated from those millions of workers that practically fought work. The revolutionary minority thus may already today provide its theoretical tools adequate for the practical class struggle if these tools are the products of praxis. Francois Martin wrote in his text »The Class Struggle and its Most Characteristic Aspects in Recent Years« about the organic and dialectic connection between theory and praxis,

Today revolutionaries will be forced to oppose capital *practically*. This is why new theoretical tasks are necessary. It is not enough to agree on the level of ideas: one must take positive action, and first of all intervene in present struggles to support one's views. Communists do not to build a separate party from the one which asserts itself in practice in our society; yet they will increasingly have to support their positions so that the real movement does not waste its time in useless and false struggles. Organic links (theoretical work for practical activity) will have to be established among those who think we are moving towards a conflict between the proletariat and capital.³

³ Barrot/Martin, *The Eclipse and the Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*, Antagonism Press, p. 44

Despite the fact that communists are active parts of the class struggle it would be false and immediately harmful to see revolutionaries as the leaders of the class struggle or its substitutes; if communism did not exist as a material movement, communist theory would not be worth more than metaphysics. Class struggle is a material movement, a product of capitalism; revolutionaries thus can not voluntarily produce class struggle or discontent, our task must be to try to radicalize and develop those struggles and that discontent we ourselves are parts of. Theory thus must be seen as an attempt to action, an analytical tool and not merely a neutral picture of reality. Communists are never alone, but feel just as all other proletarians the practical need to stop being proletarian, and may just like all other workers become a living and struggling part of the real movement. Gilles Dauvé (Jean Barrot) wrote with this in mind in the opening of his »Capitalism and Communism»,

Communism is not a programme one puts into practice or makes other put into practice, but a social movement. Those who develop and defend theoretical communism do not have any advantages over others except a clearer understanding and a more rigorous expression; like all others who are not especially concerned by theory, they feel the practical need for communism. They have no privileges whatsoever; they do not carry the knowledge that will set the revolution in motion; but, on the other hand, they have no fear of becoming »leaders» by explaining their positions. The communist revolution, like all other revolution, is the product of real needs and living conditions. The problem is to shed light on an existing historical movement.⁴

The fact that the revolutionary minority is isolated from other proletarians during non-revolutionary circumstances, however, is quite normal considering capitalism itself as division between intellectual and manual labour, theory and praxis, and different fields of knowledge. The revolutionary movement must therefore try to make this division of labour weaker, and for the theory to reach others it must be the product of circumstances others can relate to. The isolation and separation of the revolutionaries, however, may be made weaker during an upswing in class struggle, and if the revolutionary minority succeeds in realizing its philosophy it can become a material force in the struggle against this class society.

Capitalist language *vs* an adequate

This theoretical moment must often be elusive. The bourgeois abstract language is not – thank heavens – part of our everyday vocabulary and can *at best* only suggest what we are looking for; thus we are always obliged to »decipher» it. In our last issue we – via Dauvé/Nesic – wrote about this: »All those vocabularies [from economy, philosophy, sociology] (and the visions of the world they convey) belong to specialized fields of knowledge, all of them inadequate for human emancipation, and therefore to be superseded. Until then, we have to compose a »unitary» critique from them and against them» (*To work or not to work? Is that the question?*). However, we do our best to make ourselves as clear as we are capable of and the subject matter allows us. But, we are writing primarily, except for ourselves, for those who are willing to learn something new, that is who also wants to think for themselves.

In relation to this »Decadence» bloc we publish for the first time in Swedish two contributions to the polemic within the communist left in Europe in the 30's on the crisis and decline of capitalism; Karl Korsch's »On some principal preconditions for a materialist discussion on the theory of crisis» and Anton Pannekoek's »The theory of the collapse of capitalism», from *Proletarier* in 1933 and *Rätekorrespondenz* in 1934.

We also have two book reviews that to a great extent connect to our theme from #3–4 on the concept of class composition. The first review is on our German comrades in *Kolinko* and their workers' inquiry from call centres, *Hotlines*, where we are emphasizing their positive example of workers' inquiry in practice. However we observe their somehow »interventionist» position vis à vis the »ordinary» workers at the call centres, that brings the risk of re-establishing some sort of a neo-Leninist vanguardism.

The second review is on the American sociologist B. J. Silver's book *Forces of Labor* whose underlying thesis, based on the workers' struggle database World Labour Group, is the relation between the development, restructuring and relocation of capital and the development of the struggle and composition of the working class.

Finally we introduce a new Marx/Engels series with more or less relevant texts not before translated and published in Swedish. For our foreign readers we may explain that there has never been a »Complete Works of Marx and Engels» in Swedish, but more or less only (Moscow) selections. This time we publish M&E's short *Preface to the 2nd Russian edition of the Manifesto* from 1882, where the two old beards stresses the communist potential of the Russian peasant commune even without the consolidation of a capitalist mode of production on Russian soil. Thrilling thoughts, indeed, and further proof of these gentlemen not being academic economists but revolutionary communists.

riff-raff, May 2004

⁴ Ibid, p. 17