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What ‘capitalism’ is, what it means to be against it, and what it takes to end it: Some remarks to prevent a renewal of blind alleys¹

The certainties of the post-modern moment of history are in full retreat. Instead of a broadly shared scepticism concerning any kind of claim of talking about the ‘real thing’ we are struggling against, a vague feeling seems to make itself felt at various corners of social, cultural and political life that this real thing is becoming quite visible again: The intuition seems to come back that it is somehow *capitalism* we have to deal with, in order to open up a real future for ourselves. Almost like in the 1960s, when unrequited love has routinely been explained by the dire workings of ‘the system’. And, again, real insights are to be gained from inquiring how capitalist exploitation conditions and permeates our unhappy lives.

Yet the confusion accompanying such a generalised feeling, such a *Zeitstimmung* may be enormous, and it is to be feared that it will be strategically disastrous – like economicist or class reductionism, reification of ‘the industrial working class’ into ‘the subject of history’, tending to enclose left wing politics in sectarianism, or, probably more wide-spread, like their mere, uncritical opposites, i.e. culturalism, identity politics, reification of the newest ‘social movements’, which tend to preclude the building of the needed alliances with the producing classes.² It is, hopefully, still time to share some useful philosophical distinctions which may help the on-going debates to avoid some of those pitfalls.

With this aim, I shall address two broad issues: the question of what is the historical reality we have to cope with, and the problem of the kind of subject required for really changing it.

A. The present historical reality

We, as human beings, have good reasons now for being afraid. Since the end of the last boom and the bursting of the last bubble in 2007 the economic world constellation which is the result of our post-cold-war history our economies seem to be heading towards a great depression, comparable to the ones of the 1850s, 1870s and 1930s. The crisis of really existing ‘financial capitalism’ is certainly no more limited to the financial system where nation states are stepping in to save defaulting banks, and bigger nation states ‘saving’ smaller ones with a view again of avoid the default of the banking system. This crisis has begun to deepen the general economic recession which was already under way. Public attendance and government action tend to concentrate on this economic crisis which is articulating accumulated problems – bubble economies, over-capacities, under-consumption, surfeit of capital, impending scarcity of materials and energy sources – in the economic field. into one larger crisis, looking for a comprehensive solution in a re-articulation of economic processes on a global scale. Such a historical search process – the successful completion of which

¹ This essay has been originally written in 2007-2008, in the context of discussions with Ariel Salleh from *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, and after having been given up as such, published in the Web in 2009 (for example, under <www.attac.de/aktuell/kapitalismuskongress/diskussion/wolf/> and <http://www.oegpw.at/tagung09/papers/AG4a_wolf.pdf>). I am happy to present a shortened, concentrated and consolidated version of it now in a paper publication.

² As can be seen again to some degree in Germany or in Arab countries, an unenlightened anti-capitalism can even be used to feed right wing extremism and anti-Semitism – with which emancipatory politics or struggles can have no truck. On the theoretical level, this correlates with an anti-capitalism restricted to opposing the paying of ‘interest on capital’.

cannot be taken to be guaranteed in advance – can be expected, judging by historical precedent, to go on for decades.

1. ‘Capitalism’, the ‘capitalist mode of production’ and the ‘modern bourgeois societies’

Marx has very rarely referred to anything called ‘capitalism’.³ Apparently, he reserved this expression for two occasions only: for a journalistic reference to the present enemy (and state of affairs) the labour movement was confronted with, and for looking back to this present state of affairs from the anticipated point of view of a liberated society.

The central theoretical concept he has elaborated should be clearly distinguished from this ‘journalistic’ or ‘historically retrospective’ concept: When in the opening phrase of *Das Kapital* Marx refers to the general object of his inquiry he uses the expression of the ‘capitalist mode of production’ and puts it in a relation of ‘domination’ with regard to some ‘societies’ – as we know from other formulations by Marx, he is here talking about ‘modern bourgeois societies’: “Within the *societies* dominated by the *capitalist mode of production*” [emphasis FOW]. This concept of the *capitalist mode of production* – and not the older Marxian concepts of *relations of production* (Produktionsverhältnisse) and *productive forces* (Produktivkräfte) – constitutes Marx’s theoretical articulation of the specific object of inquiry analysed and reconstructed in *Capital*.⁴

Marx is not only talking about the c.m.p. in this general, dialectical (or systematic) way⁵, he is also relating it to its specific other – modern bourgeois societies – as well as to its unspecific other – pre-modern societies. The relation of domination (*Herrschaftsverhältnis*) the c.m.p. is exercising within modern societies is absent from pre-modern societies.

This *relation of domination* calls for some more theoretical discussion – as Marx in *Capital* only starts from it, but never has managed to come back to it, articulating how it is bound up within and consequent of the concluding theoretical reconstruction (cf. Krätke 2002 and 2003, Elbe 2008) of the ‘superficial manifestation’ (*erscheinende Oberfläche*) of the c.m.p.

I think it would be a confusion to equate this relation of domination with the role of the infrastructure (*Basis*) determining the suprastructure (*Überbau*) – in the last instance.⁶ My argument for this is twofold: On the one hand, it would be definitely awkward to neglect the problematic of an articulation of modes of production in talking about the economic basis of any given society, in which it is to be specifically determined if the c.m.p. is constituting this

³ In the German CD comprising most of Marx’s and Engels’s works, as published in *Marx Engels Werke* „Kapitalismus“ occurs in less than 20 instances.

⁴ I take the Althusserian elaboration of this concept to be an elementary theoretical discovery of something already present in Marx’s construction of *Capital* as being about something as difficult to grasp as an ‘ideal average’ or a ‘general concept’. The attempts to retro-project and to banalize this concept of a mode of capitalist production by adopting a philosophy of history centred on the ‘necessary sequence of modes of production’ (as in theoretical Stalinism) or by defining a mode of production by the combination of ‘Produktivkräfte’ and ‘Produktionsverhältnisse’ have generally hampered our understanding of Marx’s theoretical discoveries.

⁵ In Wolf 2004 and 2006, I have proposed an analysis of this specifically systematic character of Marx’s ‘dialectical exposition’, with special emphasis on its specific presuppositions and, accordingly, limits. Acknowledging this has the implication of a rather strict usage of the expression ‘systematic’ in a Marxian context – with the implication, I’d propose, of limiting the expression *system* to entities susceptible of being systematically articulated in such a way, all other comprehensive entities being referred to as ‘constellations’ or as ‘articulated wholes’, referring to the degree of contingency or articulation involved in the case of each entity.

⁶ Althusser’s useful discussion of the ‘hour of the last instance’ – which never tolls – has mislead some into simply disregarding the processes and struggles of the ‘economic bases’.

basis all on its own, and to relegate such elementary material processes as child-rearing or house-keeping to the superstructure of societies; on the other hand, the very idea of an economic infrastructure constituted by the c.m.p. all on its own, pushes aside the elementary intuition of Rosa Luxemburg, that the accumulation of capital needs some relation to the *other* of capital, in order to function at all.⁷

This domination of the c.m.p. which is being continuously imposed within the infrastructure of all societies “dominated by the c.m.p.” can be analysed with the help of a distinction Marx himself has developed in his *Grundrisse* – the distinction between a *formal* and a *real subsumption of labour under capital* – which should neither be understood as a simple binary opposition allowing for no intermediate positions, nor as a mere continuum allowing no qualitative leaps. *Real subsumption* would then mean, in such a generalised theoretical perspective, that the own way of working of such a mode of production distinct from the c.m.p. is eliminated and replaced by that of the c.m.p. itself, i.e. by turning its specific object into a commodity and the process producing it into wage labour under capital. The opposite end of this spectrum of historical forms would then be held by a merely formal subsumption – in the sense of the c.m.p. making use of the results achieved by the own way of working of the other mode of production under analysis in order to facilitate or reinforce the accumulation of capital – as in the case of early European plundering of the ‘discovered countries’. In both cases we have ‘subsumption’ – in the sense of a clear distinction between a ‘dominant’ mode of production and ‘subalternate’ ones – but we have a qualitative leap between them, which is constituted by the internal transformation of the subalternate ones – with their total integration into the c.m.p. as their last extreme case. There are, obviously, intermediate cases of such a transformation – i.e. cases in which the transformation is not effecting the dissolution of the subalternate mode of production into the c.m.p., but reproducing it as a distinct c.m.p. which has been structurally transformed in order to make its complicity with the requirements of the c.m.p. more salient – as in the case of slavery in the 19th and 20th centuries or in the case of the second serfdom in Prussia in the 17th and 18th centuries.

In the *Communist Manifesto* we find Marx and Engels still extremely ‘optimistic’ about these kinds of transformation processes: Real subsumption under the c.m.p. is imminent everywhere for them – and, consequently, the dissolution of all pre-capitalist bonds⁸, and with this dissolution the transition to a situation of proletarian world-revolution. Later on, Marx seems to have become far more reticent in this respect. It is even plausible, that the large theoretico-historical detour he has undertaken in his last years into the underwoods of grounded property have been occasioned by the recalcitrance of this category of private property to ‘dissolve’ into capitalist property relations.

Within *Capital*, we can find some clues indicating that this perspective of an imminent real subsumption of all reproduction processes of societies (as well as of all processes of human ‘metabolism’ with nature) is not realistic, even within the most advanced modern societies.⁹

⁷ It is to be granted, that Luxemburg is guilty of a *fallacy of misplaced concreteness* by identifying this other to geographical spaces and societies still to be conquered by imperialism – but once liberated from this misunderstanding, her intuition is a forceful help in understanding the unique kind of domination exercised by the c.m.p.

⁸ Even the very slow dissolution of that upper layer of patriarchal gender relations in the ‘point d’honneur’, which has made Ferdinand Lassalle getting himself killed for asserting his ‘possession of a woman’ and which is now still present in our societies in the form of murdering women ‘for the sake of honour’ or ‘out of jealousy’, has not been an automatic process, but had to be conquered by long-term struggles of different generations of women’s movements.

⁹ This is the elementary truth which has been elaborated e.g. by Kovel (2002) or by Harribey/Löwy 2003.

Looking at the very core of the capital relation – at the offer of labour power as a commodity to be bought on the labour market, with a certain expectation of ‘applying’ it within a capitalist process of production – we find an often overlooked discrepancy between Marx’s theoretical construction of labour power as a commodity (in which the entirety of ‘necessary labour’ is being defined by the value of commodities to be acquired for the sake of its reproduction, implying a ‘production of this commodity exclusively by commodities’, and his historical exemplification of the transition to the production of relative surplus value in the struggle for the normal working day, where the wage of the wage earner is not only to pay for the commodities needed for reproducing the labour power of the wage earner, but also for the livelihood of his wife and family. Comparably, when Marx has written the manuscripts used by Engels to construct the second volume of *Capital*, Marx still thought it possible to neglect the own cycle of ‘metamorphoses of labour power’, concentrating on the one of capital itself in its accumulation process, and relegating the cycle of labour power – in which household and child-rearing work and their respective historical forms were a key item – to the ‘book on wage labour’¹⁰ planned for later on.

Feminist critics have argued – quite pertinently¹¹, although there has been some undeserved confusion between Marx’s lack of explicitness on these issues and the massive Victorian blind spot introduced by Engels into ‘Marxist’ theorizing of gender relations¹² – that there is no sufficient basis for a materialist analysis of gender relations within Marxist theory. I take it that they have made it clear by their critique that Marx’s critique of classical political economy is in fact still very much bound to its specific object – the c.m.p. which is at once specifically ‘gender-blind’ superficially, while at the same time using the existing gender structures strategically to its advantage¹³ and even transforming it historically in order to strengthen their pro-capitalist complicity¹⁴. If we take Marx’s theoretical work to be a finite scientific theory¹⁵, however, exploring a specific object of knowledge – the c.m.p. – and not another one like the kind of domination operative within gender relations, we do not have any difficulty in admitting that there are other such objects to be analysed within historical reproduction processes of the internal structures of societies and their external constellations.

Distinguishing the concepts of ‘capitalism’ as a comprehensive socio-historical formation (and constellation of such formations)¹⁶ and the c.m.p. as a specific concept referring to a

¹⁰ Since the 1980s, to my knowledge, only two attempts at reconstructing this unwritten work of Marx have been made: Heinelt (1980) makes a conceptual jump from the specific forms and metamorphoses of the reproduction process of labour-power-as-a-commodity to the more general forms of law and the state, Lebowitz (1992) sidesteps the issue of forms by making an immediate transition to a perspective of class struggle. Instead, I would insist on specifically reconstructing the ‘changes of form’ implied by the working of this cycle, and on the multiple interfaces they present to issues of gender and of ecology.

¹¹ The classical, although – undeservedly – much reviled, text in German is Claudia von Werlhofs breath-taking piece (1983). Cf. my analysis (2007) of the ‘missed rendezvous’ between ecofeminism and critical Marxism in the 1980s.

¹² Cf. the pioneering analysis of this problematique by Danga Vileisis (cf. her retrospective summary in Vileisis 2008).

¹³ By taking in the unpaid work of household members as a source for economizing on variable capital, because of its reductive effect on the value of labour power (cf. Werlhof 1983).

¹⁴ Especially by the transformation of family structures in the emergence of the ‘wage dependent nuclear family’ and the creation of the figure of the ‘modern housewife’ as a central subject of ‘consumerism’.

¹⁵ This implies that we have to reduce ‘historical materialism’ (cf. Küttler et al. 200#) to a philosophy of history, on the one hand, producing no more, in a positive vein, than a general heuristic and instance of critical reflection for real historical research, while remaining forever inconclusive, if not aporetic, and to a gigantic ‘production site’, on the other, comprising all historical research being undertaken on this kind of materialist lines.

¹⁶ This is also the proper context for the use of the plural of ‘capitalisms’ (as ‘varieties of capitalism’ – Albert 19##, cf. the balance sheet of the debate in Lehndorff 200#): There are neither geographical nor historical variants of the c.m.p. as a general structure, neither ‘stages’ nor ‘models’, but there are, of course historical and

determinate theoretical object would lead us to seeing the possibility of conceiving the dominance of the c.m.p. within modern bourgeois societies as something to be studied specifically – and not just to be read off from Marx’s “illustrations” of his general theory in *Capital*. To insist on using the broader notion of ‘capitalism’, when referring to this complex historical reality, and not just the concept of the c.m.p. alone, is, therefore, not unduly legislating on language, but carefully listening to it.

If ‘capitalism’ means, in a loose, and yet unmistakable way, our present state of history, we have to admit its complexity: It is clearly composed by at least four irreducible elements: (1) the c.m.p., with the way it dominates within given ‘modern bourgeois societies’, (2) the historical forms of human metabolism with nature, which can be referred to under the concept of capitalist industrialism, (3) modern patriarchal gender relations and (4) modern imperialist international relations, which are, all of them ‘dominated’ by the c.m.p. in specific ways.¹⁷

2. The others of capital: What can be learnt from the example of ground rent

Our inquiry into the limitations of the systematic exposition of the concept of ‘capital in general’ has unearthed a limitation based on the existence of the theoretical figure of a ‘continuous external basis’ (*fortwährende Grundlage*) of capitalist accumulation (cf. Wolf 2004 and 2006). Although this figure has only been used explicitly by Marx in his analysis of ground rent which reveals a specific historical relation of men to the soil (and more generally to the biosphere inhabited by human ecologies) as its ‘continuous external basis’ which capitalist accumulation is incapable of reproducing as such, we can also develop this argument to extend to the other ‘originary source of wealth’ (*Springquelle des Reichtums*) the c.m.p. is so busy in destroying in the long run: i.e. to living human labour, as being reproduced in a gendered process within the historical gender relations of modern patriarchy. As the present crisis has, once again, made explicit, also the geographically distinct existence of states as relatively autonomous power structures in a hierarchical order has to be analysed as such a ‘continuous external basis’ for the very functioning of the accumulation of capital.

Using this figure of a continuous external basis we may theoretically reconstruct an extended notion of what is constitutive of capitalism. i.e. of those ‘modern bourgeois societies dominated by the c.m.p.’: It is their being dominated by the c.m.p., as well as their being determined by these continuous external bases, i.e. by a historical form of personal ownership of bits of the biosphere, mediated by *personal appropriation of the soil*,¹⁸ in contradistinction to *common property*), by a historical form of gender relations – which I take to be *modern patriarchy* in contradistinction to traditional patriarchy as a form of personal domination or to something like a spontaneous gender polymorphy as a form of liberation¹⁹), and by *modern imperialism* in contradistinction to traditional empires, as well as to a non-hierarchical

geographical differences in the way its domination is incorporated by specific socio-historical formations, with an enormous potential of varying in time and space.

¹⁷ At this point of our argument it is sufficient to underline that this enumeration has no need of being complete – ideology, culture, law, the state, all these instances also come in to determine what the ‘capitalism’ were are talking about actually is and can come to be – as well as e.g. what is unearthed by foucauldian analyses of specific techniques of discipline and control.

¹⁸ Marx has used the term *Grundherrenschaft* for referring to this elementary relation. This should not be confused with with the term of ‘*Grundherrschaft*’ used by some to refer to a historical aspect of feudal domination (cf. Rösener 1989).

¹⁹ This is, of course, a very tricky notion. As it stands, it helps to avoid any sexist or biological reductionism, and it may be taken as a hint that relatively ‘emancipated sexualities’ are not necessarily reserved to ‘end-states’ of history.

international order.

It can be argued that two of these four figures have something very important in common – the c.m.p. and patriarchy²⁰ do constitute, at once, modes of production and modes of domination, whereas the *personal appropriation of the soil* is a mere mode of domination, utterly indifferent to the ways in which production is effectively organised²¹, except that it is specifically fixed to the ‘piece of the biosphere’ which constitutes the object of this domination.²² This is rather clear in the case of the other modes of production loosely mentioned by Marx – the Asian, the Antique, the Feudal m.p. – where the actual organization of production and the extraction of surplus produce are attributable to different moments and functions of their reproductive arrangements as whole societies.

The c.m.p. introduces a decisive historical innovation by intimately linking domination and production: Almost paradoxically, by the formal liberation of labour²³ the emergence of the c.m.p. brings about, it succeeds in linking the domination of capital over labour to the way capital organises production. Whereas in older modes of production based on some kind of *Grundherrenschaft*, especially those centred on feudal relations of production, the action of extorting surplus produce had remained clearly divided from the way actual production took place: The violence of lords and overlords did not contribute in any way to a rational conception, planning or organisation of production – quite to the contrary, it tended to disrupt its relatively time proved routines. The despotism exercised by capital over labour within the capitalist production process is, by contrast, an essential factor of its continuous rational reorganization, which in turn constitutes the condition of entry for technology – in the sense of a systematic application of scientific knowledge on production processes – into the development of capitalist production as reproduction of, i.e. accumulation of, capital. Therefore two dimensions which had remained separate in earlier societies, are continuously merged within societies dominated by the c.m.p.: The control exercised by capital over the production process and the (re)organisation of this production process itself.

If we look at the real history of humankind we shall certainly find a lot of significant continuities – from patterns of reproduction preceding *Grundherrenschaft* to the reproduced patterns of primary human metabolistic activities stretching from early human history into the ‘implicit knowledge’ of workers even under the most advanced forms of capitalist production (cf. Wainwright 1994). The systematic point to be observed here lies in the qualitative difference introduced by the continuous capitalist ‘improvement’ of the production process, by which domination and market exchanges are merged into the one process of the subsumption of the reproduction process of modern bourgeois societies under capital – which

²⁰ The isolated aspect of the mode of domination has been articulated specifically by the concept of ‘male domination’. The question in which way in the present constellation there still is a full fledged patriarchal ‘mode of production’ underlying modern ‘consumerism’ is a complicated and open one (cf. Fraad 1994 and Wolff 200#).

²¹ It has therefore been, quite rightfully, used by Samir Amin (1988) as the starting point for his concept of the tributary mode of production overarching a variety of specific ‘relations of production’ – like slavery, bondsmanship or primitive, pre-capitalist ‘wage labour’. I should propose to go a lot further in dissolving the engelsian-kautskyan-stalinist problematic, by distinguishing the *modes of domination* from the *modes of production*.

²² In a broadly similar way modern imperialism is building on the basis of the double-bind of territorial sovereignty over (larger) slices of the biosphere and the statist form of politics which puts hypostatized power resources into the hands of governments.

²³ The capitalist wage labourer is constituted as a historical figure central to the c.m.p. by his formal liberation from all directly personal forms of domination, which are substituted in this pvery process by – potentially even harsher forms of indirect domination mediated by the free sale and buying of labour power as a commodity, as “sachlich vermittelte Herrschaft”.

as a mere accumulation process of capital remains structurally blind to the requirements of a comprehensive reproduction of the societies submitted to it.

This kind of capitalist reorganisation of societies' production processes which tends to coincide with their being dominated by capital has, certainly, very important repercussions on the way in which this 'continuous external basis' is being reproduced. In the case of agrarian production (which is explicitly discussed by Marx as an exemplary case of the more general primary human metabolistic activities) this retroaction takes the form of an industrialisation, a properly capitalist reorganisation of production giving rise to the kind of differential rent analysed by Ricardo. In the case of the network of activities, institutions, and agencies involved in the process of gendered reproduction (which always is biological as well as cultural, and vice versa) the rise of prostitution and the sex industry may be seen as a comparable development, creating a kind of sexual labour directly exploited by capital, and immediately profitable as such. As in the case of landed property this does not eliminate the existence of a continuing sphere of direct patriarchal domination only indirectly used for its profit by capital.

Now, what is constitutive of the 'proper materiality and contradictions' of this independent sphere of reproduction of patriarchal gender relations as such? And in which sense do domination and production coincide in it?

The first thing to get clear is that – as Marx himself has made explicit concerning landed property – nothing can be expected in this respect from his theory of the c.m.p. It simply lies outside of its remit. What we do and can know about it, comes from the work of feminists who have specifically analysed and reconstructed this field of scientific study as well as of strategic practice.

We may however accept a negative lesson from an understanding of Marxism as finite theory (cf. Althusser 1977): We should be wary of too easy analogies with the c.m.p., when trying to understand the proper process of patriarchal gender relations (and, likewise, of too easy analogies with state domination, e.g. when talking about the 'law of the father' – cf. Lecourt on Lacan, 1982). So the transfer of the category of 'subsistence labour' from classical political economy, as operated by Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Maria Mies, and Claudia von Werlhof (1983), calls for some additional conceptual clarifications. # to be specified# Likewise, the use of the category of rent for the analysis of structures of exploitations within patriarchal gender relations (cf. Werlhof 19##) deserves some additional amplification. At least at first sight, such transfers do not conduce to an understanding of what is proper to patriarchal gender relations, but rather to an understanding of the ways in which they are being instrumentalized, as it were, 'colonized'²⁴, by the dominance of the c.m.p..

Some have tried to explain the strong asymmetries existing in this field by the phenomena of male violence. This however, seems to be considerably besides the point – in a way comparable to anarchist explanations of capitalist dominance by capitalist violent repression, which is real too, from the police intervening against striking workers to private thugs aggressing recalcitrant workers, no doubt. But this kind of repression happens at the weak borders of capitalist dominance, not in the fields of its functioning core. Likewise, male violence is certainly an additional supporting factor of patriarchal domination, and it may even become rather central in certain critical or marginal situations of its structural weakness, but it does not explain the very facts of patriarchal domination as such. An approach relying

²⁴ Cf. the subtitle of Bennholdt-Thomsen et al. 1983: "Women - the last colony".

on Girard's (1978) analysis of the fragile, yet decisive transposition of physical into symbolic violence will certainly help to produce more pertinent and more interesting findings on the structures commanding the reproduction of gender relations, but it will not really help to address the key question of such an analysis – the problem of the grounds and reasons for the high degree of 'female complicity'²⁵ with patriarchal domination structures.

Neither is it of much help in achieving such a specific understanding of patriarchal gender relations as such to try to apply to them a general, non-specific perspective of the division of labour (as used in political philosophy and social theory from Rousseau to Durkheim via Ferguson and the young Marx²⁶): No doubt, this division of labour is uneven and gender-hierarchical – but in which form and by which processes is this achieved and continuously reproduced? And how are male and female – and other kinds of – subjects specifically constituted as to demand, to impose, to legitimize, respectively to accept, to practice and to hand on this inequitable distribution of labour?

There seems to be no way around trying to understand the specifics of the 'labours of love' – which are in no way all resolvable into specific kinds of 'work'²⁷. And, even more specifically, how assent and acceptance is continuously being generated (or fails to be generated) within relations of love.

Certain aspects of gender relations seem to be determined by the observation that there is "a sex that is not one" – i.e. subalternate to the sex that is one (###)²⁸. It is, however, not really possible to distribute this 'not one-ness'²⁹ clearly on gender lines: In so far male sexuality is not phallic, it seems to partake of this not being one, while phallic female sexuality clearly seems to partake of this 'being one'. It should be clearly seen, moreover, that this kind of 'being one' opposed to being 'split' or to being 'multiple', which is a rather simple property of an object, should be distinguished from 'identity' (or even 'self-identity') which are complex relations between a multiplicity of subjective positions. And although it seems evident that the 'perversity' ascribed by Freud to primary human sexual polymorphy, we do not really know what it would mean to open human sexuality for this polymorphy, while maintaining an idea of responsibility and – how ever remote – self-control.³⁰

Which brings us to a last important conclusion of this part of our argument: That the continuing foundations of the c.m.p., landed property and patriarchal gender relations as such, although certainly historical in the sense of having had a beginning within human history and, at least potentially, offering a perspective also of coming to an end within it, do cover a far more important time span than that of their existence under the domination of the c.m.p.. Their beginning seems to date back to the transition towards late palaeolithic societies (often misnamed the 'neolithic revolution') which has brought about structured human societies going beyond spontaneous groupings, alongside with the most elementary forms of

²⁵ Cf. the complex debate on the double role of victim and agent imposed upon women and taken up by them (retrospective summary of the German debate initiated by Frigga Haug in: Löw 2005).

²⁶ Cf. Medieck 198# for a first, still superficial overview.

²⁷ In this respect, e.g. the labours of birth-giving, should certainly not be seen within the perspective of an uneven and inequitable gendered 'division of labour'.

²⁸ The equation of the Phallus with 'oneness' presupposes that the female sex is conceived negatively, as a lack – which is certainly a very debatable assumption with little argument behind it. Cf. ###

²⁹ Luce Irigaray's concept is certainly a subtle and a difficult one. Yet I do not doubt that it may be sharpened to just one central point: ###

³⁰ Starting from the effects of state politics on human subjects I have been carried to postulating a liberating pluralization of human sexualities (Wolf 1983, ###), but I still must confess that I do not know what this can or can not mean in terms of actual human sexual practice.

domination and exploitation. It is even plausible that the patriarchal revolution, leading to gender relations permeated by the domination of human beings over other human beings, has been the *matrix* of all later forms of human domination.³¹ This conclusion seems to refute all attempts to criticize the concept of subsistence labour by simply pointing to its large extension over times and places – it definitely refers to something co-extensive with the patriarchal form of gender relations which functions at once as a mode of production and as a mode of domination: It certainly cannot be restricted to certain dominant modes of production³² or to certain lines of ‘culture’, as it has been mistakenly argued (e.g. by Behr 1983).

We may debate on the need to chose a better ‘name’ for such a concept³³, but there seems to be no reasonable doubt about the existence of the theoretical object it refers to, although this is to be conceived as being modulated differently in the situations before, during and after the domination of the c.m.p..

These presupposed dimensions limiting the possibilities of self-reproduction of the c.m.p. certainly are not ‘modes of production’ in the sense of a sequence of historical modes of production following one upon the other. On the other hand they certainly constitute specific and important ‘historical forms’ organising production as well as domination.³⁴ We may see them as something even more elementary, more basic, than mere ‘modes of production’.

3. Theoretical reconstruction and historical processes

What my understanding of Marx’s critique of political economy as a critical reconstruction of the capitalist mode of production in its general structure does in fact imply, is a strict distinction between theory and history – i.e. between concepts and theoretical propositions referring to general structures, on the one hand, and empirical descriptions or historical narratives referring to particular processes involving singular entities (properly denoted by proper names, not by concepts) on the other.³⁵ Marx’s critical theory of the c.m.p. is definitely not related to history as an abbreviated recounting of historical events; by consequence there can be no ‘stages’ of the

³¹ Mainly this makes me refrain from following Richard D. Wolff (2006) in seeing the present household economy merely a continuation of the *oikos*-economy central to the modes of production of antiquity or the middle ages – I simply think they are structurally going a lot further back in their development. The other problem, that they are not ‘modes of production’ in the sense supposed by the idea of a sequence of such modes of production could be sorted out by differentiating our terminology (cf. below). Re-reading Rudolf Bahro (19##) could produce some very useful insights in this respect.

³² The idea that the notion of distinctive modes of production alone may provide an elegant solution to the difficult task of historical periodization by postulating some simple sequence of historical epochs characterised by the dominance of one such mode of production after the other has certainly not been borne out by real historical research – with the plurality of lines of history in a world-wide perspective and with the impossibility of a deterministic understanding of the transitions between such modes of production having turned out to be the major stumbling blocks.

³³ The concept of ‘meta-industrial labour’ proposed by Ariel Salleh certainly would constitute a major improvement – although I still have some qualms both about the understanding of ‘industry’ this seems to presuppose (as a technique of capitalist exploitation only, neglecting the possibilities of ‘alliance-technologies’ reaching beyond ‘capitalism’), and about the prefix of ‘meta-’ which I take to combine something that comes after and something which looks back reflectively, neglecting the continuous presence of this dimension as a ‘continuous external basis’.

³⁴ Or, in the case of *Grundherrenschaft*, of combining the existing organization of production with a tributary extortion based upon mere domination.

³⁵ This does in no way imply that the really existing object of such a theoretical construction is itself a-historical: the c.m.p. has emerged in historical time, and it will vanish again in historical time. Once established, it will, however, function on the basis of the real mechanisms reconstructed by theory.

development of the c.m.p..

This does not make it a closed system – e.g. additional theoretical mediations (like in Marx’s analysis of the corporation based on shares publicly noted at the stock exchange as a socialized version of the capitalist firm) may always be introduced into the theoretical development, or – if there is such a thing – monopoly capital may be introduced as a systematic development of the form of capital. This does not give rise, however, to an internal historicization of the c.m.p. as an object of theoretical reconstruction: There is no ground for defending the stages theory of capitalism, because there certainly is no such thing as a Marxian theory referring to the stage of ‘competition capitalism’, to be substituted for later stages by a Leninist theory of ‘monopoly capitalism’, by a Stalinist theory of ‘state monopoly capitalism’, or by a critical theory of ‘late capitalism’ (Mandel) etc., etc.³⁶

History has indeed taken place, but not within the general structure of the c.m.p. as such, but within the concrete ‘modern bourgeois societies’ and their global constellations³⁷, challenging us to find adequate periodizations for this real history. The systematic critical theory constructed by Marx to explain the very structure of the c.m.p. does not generate such periodizations – these have to be based upon historical research into the changing plural constellations of global and national histories and not upon simple short-cuts derived from this general critical theory, as in the stage theories of capitalism³⁸ or in theories based on theoretical sequences like ‘formal’ and ‘real’ subsumption or even ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ surplus value. Furthermore, the c.m.p. as such has introduced a decisive historical innovation³⁹ by intimately linking domination and production: Almost paradoxically, by its very constitutive liberation of the wage labourer from all personal bonds of domination, substituting them by its unique form of indirect domination mediated by the free sale and buying of labour power as a commodity, it succeeds in structurally linking the primary domination of capital over labour to the way capital organises production. Whereas in older modes of production based on some kind of *personal appropriation of the soil*, especially those centred on feudal relations of production⁴⁰, the action of extorting surplus produce had remained clearly divided from the way actual production took place: The violence of lords and overlords did not contribute in any way to a rational conception, planning or organisation of production – quite to the contrary, it tended to disrupt its relatively time proved routines.⁴¹ The control (Marx’s telling term is *despotism*) exercised by capital over labour within the

³⁶ This certainly is a major weakness of Hardt and Negri’s theoretical arguments in ‘Empire’ that they remain enthralled by the false evidences of the stage theories of capitalist development – depriving themselves of any real access to the systematic sharpness of Marx’s theoretical reconstruction of the c.m.p..

³⁷ Cf. Alexis Petrioli’s (2006) careful and differentiated summary and analysis of the debate about the ‘logical’ vs. the ‘historical’ in *Capital*.

³⁸ The regulation school has started from such real historico-statistical studies of long-term developments, allowing to profile historical periods in the history of specific socio-historical formations like the USA or France. Only in later debates it has occasionally lapsed into a talk about models like ‘fordism’ which come dangerously close to a stage theory of capitalist development.

³⁹ Which has been characteristically neglected by economicist theories which tend to use ‘capital’ in the unspecific sense of a real stock, saved up or to be invested in something – i.e. neglecting its constitutive relation to wage labour which it has to exploit in order *to be* capital. The otherwise useful analyses of the long term historical developments e.g. produced by A. G. Frank et al. (200#) are vitiated by this kind of economicism which fails to see the quite real incision in the historical process operated by the ascent of the c.m.p. The real point it makes is, however, that there has been history before and besides this domination of the c.m.p..

⁴⁰ Whereas slave labour has served as a basis of a deep transformation of agricultural practices, based upon economies of scale, as in the case of the Roman *latifundia*.

⁴¹ It is tempting to imagine that this may be traced back to the early forms of patriarchy the echoes of which we can find in the Homeric epics, with their warrior-robbers acting as heads of families and households. But what should we make then of the tenacious loyalty of Penelope as the emblematic ‘housewife’ or of the no less decided loyalty of Telemachos to his absent father as the ‘lord of the manor’?

capitalist production process is, by contrast, an essential factor of its continuous rational reorganization, which in turn constitutes the condition of entry for technology – in the sense of a systematic application of scientific knowledge on production processes – into the development of capitalist production as reproduction of, i.e. accumulation of, capital. Therefore two dimensions which had remained separate so far, are continuously merged within the c.m.p.: The control exercised by capital over the production process and the (re)organisation of this production process itself⁴².

This kind of capitalist reorganisation of societies' production processes which tends to coincide with their being dominated by capital has, certainly, very important repercussions on the way in which this 'continuous external basis' is being reproduced. In the case of agrarian production (which is explicitly discussed by Marx as an exemplary case of the more general primary human metabolistic activities) this retroaction takes the form of an industrialisation, a properly capitalist reorganisation of production giving rise to the kind of differential rent analysed by Ricardo. In the case of the network of activities, institutions, and agencies involved in the process of gendered reproduction (which always is biological as well as cultural, and vice versa) the rise of prostitution⁴³ and the sex industry⁴⁴ may be seen as a comparable development, creating a kind of sexual labour directly exploited by capital, and immediately profitable as such, while serving the specific historical 'needs' of the patriarchal male subjects.. As in the case of landed property this does not eliminate the existence of a continuing sphere of direct modern patriarchal domination only indirectly used for its profit by capital.⁴⁵

Again, history is about singularities – which can be pointed to, singled out, and described, or narrated as a sequence in time.⁴⁶ Social and historical theory is about explaining what happens in terms of the existence and change of such singularities⁴⁷. That this is not an easy thing with regard to history has been the object of vivid debates – on the idiographic vs. the nomothetic moment in 'historical science' (since the late 19th century in the context of a rather successful philosophical battle against a first version of historical materialism (formulated by the young Werner Sombart and Franz Mehring, and taken up, with some reluctance, by the late Engels, and more enthusiastically by Kautsky) within historiography (cf. Petrioli 2005)⁴⁸, as well on

⁴² Jacques Bidet's idea (2006) that it is necessary to separate the two poles of 'organisation' and 'market' within the analysis and reconstruction of the c.m.p., certainly has the merit of explicitly addressing this problematic. It misses, however, the salient point of the c.m.p. which consists in this continuous merger of both dimensions.

⁴³ The historical rise of prostitution as an affair of the 'free market' is historically linked with the externalization of the doublet mistress (of the household)/concubine (of the lord) out of the internal hierarchy of the greater family household into a situation where the duality of freely chosen marriage based upon love and the commodified services of 'venal women' constitute the libidinal reality of the patriarchal nuclear family. In this transition process the quasi-markets of the courts – with their reinterpretation of the same doublet as *official mistress/occasional cocotte* – seem to have played a role of moral and motivational transition (cf. e.g. Choderlos de Laclos's *Liaisons dangereuses*).

⁴⁴ The sex industry is certainly intimately linked to a process of 'commodification' of an important part of real gender relations, even though it seems to remain centred on the level of the imaginary, including make-believe practices.

⁴⁵ The strength of this analogy seems have motivated Claudia von Werlhof to an attempt at analysing gender domination in terms of rent extraction which does not convince me, however.

⁴⁶ This has been forcefully argued by Deleuze/Guattari (19##) and strongly been reinforced by Badiou (###)

⁴⁷ Such a richer view of scientific explanation has been advanced and deepened within the debates of Critical realism, as initiated by Roy Bhaskar (###).

⁴⁸ This debate has been hampered to an astonishingly small degree by the disregard of the then contemporary revolution in logic and linguistics – i.e. with regard to the (normative, constructive and the descriptive, reconstructive) sciences of 'making sense' in human practices, as they have been operated by Gottlob Frege and Ferdinand de Saussure.

the respective places of narrative vs. theory within historical debates on class, race, gender and national identities (in the ‘post-modern moment’ of social criticism since the 1980s).⁴⁹ At this point of the argument, it is useful to remember a piece from the older, geographical tradition lines of historical materialism, which has – in parts, undeservedly – fallen into disrepute. I am referring to the idea of climatic determinism, prominent in European philosophies of history since Thukydides and Aristotle, and again, in modernity, since Montesquieu. Its Eurocentric explanations of the historical differences between Orient and Occident, or between ‘human races’ from ‘moderate’ or ‘hot’ climates, have rightfully been discarded by later scientific debates, especially by the critiques of the ‘social darwinism’ of the imperialist age (cf. Arendt 1951; Hawkins 1997) and by the more recent critique of eurocentrism elaborated against the ideological foundations of neo-colonialism.

However, there is another element in this geographical materialism (cf. ###) which remains valid. Namely, that there is not one ‘human ecology’ (cf. Lipietz 1999), but a considerable number of different ones – and that some of these differences are at least occasioned by geographically distributed differences in the chemico-physical and biospheric conditions of human livelihoods, including, e.g., the existing flora and fauna (with regard to plants to be cultivated or animals to be domesticated) or existing constellations and developments of viruses and bacteria.⁵⁰ Without falling into the error of postulating a linear relation between challenges from material conditions and ways of coping with them – which is no more than the explanatory inversion of the illusion of traditional engineering that there is always ‘one best way’ – we have to take on board that the geographical variety of ecological situations is no less a factor of human history than their variability over time.

As it has been shown by analyses of very long-term historical processes in a renewed, non-reductionist materialist perspective (as e.g. by Diamond (2005), Harris (1979/2001) or Sperling/Tjaden-Steinhauer (2003))⁵¹ a whole world of differences and contingencies opens up before our eyes, once we begin to look at changing and varying human gender relations or at human ecologies and their specific biospheric conditions in time and space. Eurasian, (sub-saharan) African, American, and Australian lines and patterns of human development could be differentiated, which were only gradually unified again – to some degree – since the 14th century, by the overriding dynamics of the capitalist transformation of key production processes, reaching their high points in the imperialisms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well in the wave of capitalist globalization that started in the 1980s.

This new, extended awareness does not invalidate the older, still recent awareness – embodied in the development of ‘culture studies’ in the Anglo-Saxon world⁵², and in the ‘cultural turn’ of the human and social sciences within continental Europe⁵³ – that ideologies, the state and its apparatuses, as well as the retroaction of law on societal realities are not just present in the

⁴⁹ In the meantime, a ‘materialist turn’ seems to be on its way, which would again change the framework of the debate deeply (cf. Alaimo/Hekman 2008).

⁵⁰ The availability of fossile resources has only very recently been focused as an important factor (cf. Altwater 2006). The central importance of the energy systems for economic reproduction throughout human history had, however, already been focused by Debeir/Deléage/Hémery 1989.

⁵¹ The extensions operated in these inquiries on more traditional forms – Marxist and non-Marxist – of historical materialism by making use of more recent ecological, epidemiological, ‘anthropological’, and gender research are certainly to be welcomed without any reservation. Criticism and critical wariness should set in, however, wherever these new insights are being instrumentalized for marginalising or excluding the real insights of the Marxist critique of the c.m.p. from serious scientific and political discourse.

⁵² A critical overview can be found in ###

⁵³ Terry Eagleton has succeeded in summarizing much of these developments, although mainly from a British perspective. Especially for France ### provides a useful complement. The Germanophone developments (especially strong in Austria) become visible e.g. in reading ###.

historical, empirical reality of such infrastructures as the c.m.p., but presupposed by them at decisive points of their workings – like state-made law in the struggle for the normal working day as a moment of enforcing the production of relative surplus value within the c.m.p., officialised marriage (‘wedlock’) in the case of patriarchal gender relations, or the simple protection and sanctioning of property rights as such in the case of landed property. And that their variegated ways of coping with such challenges make for an almost infinite variety of concrete structures of domination and their respective domination processes. The new awareness just makes us realize, how deeply anchored these differences are – reaching down to the most elementary levels of material reproduction – and how unavoidable the resulting complexity of processes and constellations must be.

B. The historical subject of transformation

My generation has matured on the distant echo of the idea that ‘science had proven that the course of history would bring about socialism’, i.e. on some version of the Kautskyan-Stalinist variant of historical materialism. This idea implied that the real agency within history, executing this predetermined necessity by applying scientific insight, was the proletarian party as the privileged instance capable of bringing capitalism to an end. Some, who have been more privileged intellectually, were convinced that the real basis of this insight consisted in proletarian class consciousness (the finally conquered ‘self-consciousness of the commodity of labour power’, as Georg Lukács had once (1923) put it. This refinement has been ‘rediscovered’ in the early 1960s⁵⁴, in my generation. But it did not attack the underlying problem of the incompatibility of historical determinism and political activism.

This kind of paradoxical certainty has then been disproved by history. The societies dominated by Stalinism or one of its later variants, like Maoism, have openly returned to paths of development dominated by the c.m.p.⁵⁵ It is not sufficient to discard the grave theoretical errors surrounding the ideas of ‘socialism’ as well as of ‘communism’ which had become dominant within theoretical Stalinism in all of its variants. We shall have to rethink not only where we try to go, but also where we stand and where we have to start any politics of societal transformation – and who ‘we’ can be to presume ‘ourselves’ capable of such a structural transformation of societies.

The anti-stalinist, and yet communist Italian line of thought of ‘*autonomia operaria*’ (cf. Wright 200#) had combined a most radical ‘workerism’ with a lucid sensitivity for subjective moods and historical initiatives.⁵⁶ Hardt and Negri’s recent rediscovery – in fact, it had been present in modern political philosophy from Thomas Smith via Hobbes and Spinoza to Hegel (cf. Wolf 2004) – of the category of the ‘multitude’ as a ‘constituting’ agency can be read as a move to continue and to expand this lucid sensitivity of this tradition, while shedding its workerism (cf. Wolf 2005). This move presupposes an idea of the present situation as being characterised by the unbounded fluidity of what they call *Empire* (cf. Gintis/Panitch 2002).

⁵⁴ A high moment of this rediscovery can be studied in Rudi Dutschke’s long letter to Lukács written in 1967 (published 2001), cf. Wolf 2008.

⁵⁵ In the cases of China, Vietnam or Cuba the question seems no more to be, whether they have definitely overcome the domination of the c.m.p., starting a path of ‘socialist transition’, but rather how well they succeed in politically modulating the workings of the dominant capitalist constellation – a *problematique* which is not radically distinct from the problematic of e.g. the Scandinavian societies under the hegemony of social democratic politics.

⁵⁶ A mixture which turned out to be disastrous for any dialogue with feminists – to a degree which seems to have structuralised to a deplorable degree as e.g. in von Werlhof’s (2007) brusque refusal of my offer of an open and critical dialogue (Wolf 2007).

If, however; we take ‘capitalism’, as it is, in its real complexity, as our starting point – with its underlying articulation of the domination of the c.m.p. with the subaltern, and yet ‘autonomous’ efficacy of both patriarchy and *Personal appropriation of the soil* – we have to see that this very idea of the multitude is related to the dissolving effects of the c.m.p. on all personal relations of dependency with the quite real limitations we have seen. It is not by accident, that the modern notion of the multitude – as distinguished from ‘the many’ (hoi polloi) of Greek antiquity or the plebeian ‘mass’ of Roman antiquity – has apparently been introduced by the proto-liberal Thomas Smith, for whom a commonwealth is composed by “a multitude of free men” – i.e. by male white heads of households as owners of private property claiming to be one subject of political constitutive agency (cf. Wood 19##). Within ‘capitalism’, however, this situation is neither automatically, nor ever completely, universalised to the class of exploited labourers relating to capital, nor to the social categories of women or of people under direct *Personal appropriation of the soil*, i.e. small and dependent peasants. Hardt and Negri seem to partake of this liberal illusion – in a similar way as Marx and Engels in their *Manifesto* – in presupposing that the dissolution has proceeded to the point of setting each and everybody free to take part in the agency of the multitude. In order to achieve a historical capacity to act in a direction of societal transformation, such a constitutive multitude has to be constructed – not by simply trying to ‘organize the working class’, but by combining a politics of organization with a politics of alliance between different real interests and perspectives – and by avoiding the dangers of the constitutive multitude under construction being ‘sucked back’ into the constituted forms of domination characteristic of the modern state and its state apparatuses with their ever renewed effects of splitting, separating and ‘including by excluding’.⁵⁷ The argument that we are living in a phase of historical transition – either between different historical ‘Gestalten’ of ‘capitalism’ or of a possible transition beyond the renewed domination of the c.m.p. – gives special relevance to the emergence of new ‘anti-systemic’ movements’ (cf. Wallerstein 2004).

Such ‘anti-systemic movements’, however, as they will emerge spontaneously, will not be sufficient to overcome ‘capitalism’. If we really want to overcome our present ‘capitalism’ in its real complexity, being at once the exploiter of labour power (cf. e.g. Callinicos 200#), the oppressor of women, the perpetrator of ruthless ‘fossilism’ (Altvater 2006) and, more generally, the ‘enemy of nature’ (Kovel 2003), this complex kind of radical politics – which cannot avoid also addressing the thorny questions of the ‘party form’⁵⁸ – seems to be the only way to do so: combining autonomous organization and struggles of dominated classes and social categories in a multi-dimensional politics of organization, struggles and alliances, while avoiding the pitfalls of the state⁵⁹, without abstaining from interventions into its workings⁶⁰.

This perspective of a plural, though converging agency, which does no more postulate ‘unification’ and ‘homogenization’ as a prerequisite for any common capacity to act should be clearly distinguished from Gramscian conceptions of strategic hegemony, which have just limited themselves to exercising acceptable forms of *dominance* over others. Instead, new strategic ideas about a common capacity to act – like ‘acting conjointly’ (Arendt) or ‘becoming minority’ (Deleuze), or ‘how to change society, without taking power’ (Holloway) – should be explored.

⁵⁷ This constitutes the specific arena of racism and xenophobia which are intimately linked to the ways in which citizenship is being handled by the modern state, with effects also permeating all infrastructures of modern bourgeois societies.

⁵⁸ Here I do recommend a re-reading of some pieces by Althusser (1978) on the ‘liberty of a communist’.

⁵⁹ Quite impressively described and to some point analysed by John Holloway (2004).

⁶⁰ Cf. Stanley Aronowitz’s cogent argumentary for an organised political intervention which cannot avoid raising the problem of ‘party building’, although working for our being able to raise it ‘in a new key’.

And there is a third element within the present situation of humanity which really should shock us wide awake: There is not yet any kind of human agency, visible or to be anticipated, which would seem capable of coping with the challenges posed by these combined crises. The dream of the 19th century that there would be ‘the international’ which would successfully fight for effectively human solutions has turned into the nightmares of the night of the 20th century and then effectively dissolved. The new beginnings of the world-wide 1960s rebellion which went well beyond the idea of proletarian revolution to bring to life international feminist, anti-colonial and ecological movements has not been capable of overcoming the triple ‘establishment’ it has been revolting against – ‘fordism’, ‘state socialism’, and ‘neo-colonialism’ – and been absorbed by national ‘political cultures’. A ‘crisis of agency’ is clearly visible, globally, in its cultural, social and political dimensions, leaving a dangerous void which is partly being filled by racist, chauvinist, and fundamentalist ideologies. The global ‘initiatives from below’ of the late 1990s now seem to have reached (or even overstepped) a culminating point at which it clearly becomes visible that they will not be capable of developing into the kind of global common and co-ordinated political agency that seems to be required to find workable and acceptable solutions to the aggregated major crises and to avoid their merging into one big crisis of humanity.

1. Overcoming the crisis of agency

In order to overcome our fears and anxiety, there seems to be no other way than to build and expand our reasons for hope. In this respect, I shall concentrate here upon this ‘crisis of agency’.

First, there are a number of legends around which are hampering our capability of understanding what the present situation is, and what we are doing (and what we are capable of doing) ourselves – and thereby constitute a major blockade to our capability to act as human beings on the levels required by the constellation of crises. Taking stock of these and resuming the critical ways of de-constructing them which have already been found is an urgent task today.

Second, there are a number of new initiatives and emerging practices to be found now, which could serve as stepping stones in building an alternative political strategy which would be capable of overcoming the domination of our socio-historical formations by the capitalist mode of production, while at the same time significantly addressing and overcoming the destructive processes directed at our ‘internal’ and ‘external’ nature, and constructively rearticulating our interests and identities, so as to create new figures of cultural, social, and political agency effectively capable of coping with the emerging ‘big crisis’ at hand. Taking stock of these and understanding their potential for producing effective political subjects is another urgent task today.

Third, we can begin to look back critically, and constructively, upon a number of initiatives for the reconstruction of an integrative theoretical project capable of providing a reliable common framework for the debates required for the construction of the kind of ‘grand global alliance’ required for overcoming the emerging big crisis in a non-catastrophic way. Distinguishing what is an element of a possible solution from what is still part of the problem within (or even reinforcing it) such theoretico-political initiatives will be very difficult – but without such critical distinctions there will be no advance towards overcoming the crisis in a reasonably acceptable way.

It is possible, I think, to group the major legends which are blocking our sight on the actual reality and the real potential of the present situation into three major groups. These are

- the liberal legend, which postulates the actual liberty of each and every individual to choose otherwise as a sufficient basis for the capacity to act, irrespective of concrete situations, constellation and circumstances;
- the legend of 'objective interests', based upon postulating a structural definition of given interests, defined by 'societal positions', as a sufficient basis for common political action, again without referring to concrete situations, constellation and circumstances;
- the identitarian legend, hinging upon postulating some (pre-given, as in essentialist variants, or invented, as in constructivist variants) collective identity, assumed or ascribed, as the key determinant of agency, in its consequent forms pointing to some ultimate identity – class, nation, race or gender – as 'the subject of history' or as, at least 'the subject of liberation';
- the multitudinarian legend, based upon avoiding the totalising closure inherent in the identitarian and 'objective interest' identity legends by reverting to the liberal principle of the actual liberty of each and every individual to choose otherwise.

Instead of remaining captive to those legends obstructing the development of critical initiatives and common and co-ordinated collective action as well as of forms of radical organising capable of 'learning from experience' and of 'adapting to new challenges' we should open our eyes to the effective facts of the situation – i.e. of understanding the complex ways in which effective individual liberty, the construction of collective identities and real interests and the constitutive powers of the multitude are mutually dependent upon each other – and in no way require the kind of pre-existing 'essentialist' subjectivities, while they are quite capable to constitute effective organisational and institutional structures establishing a capacity to act capable of enduring beyond the fleeting moment of a multitudinarian 'uprising'.

2. Elements for an alternative political strategy

There are a number of elements for an alternative political strategy which have emerged in the last 30 years. The underlying deep change can be seen by looking at the attempts at proposing a workable slogan to be opposed to the 'TINA'-principle ('There is no alternative!') of the neo-liberals: While in the 1980s the British left has still attempted to oppose the slogan BEHOGA ('Behold our grand alternative!') to the TINA-Principle, it seems to be common today to point to the principle of TAMARA ('There are many and real alternatives!') in order to oppose the adherents of TINA. According to the degree, however, in which the multiplicity of concurring crisis processes which will make it impossible 'always simply to continue' – which 'is the catastrophe', according to Walter Benjamin's insight – in the most variegated fields of historical reality will tend to merge into the unity of a comprehensive 'big crisis' a new unity of the real alternatives will be called for – to be expressed in a new principle which could be called, somewhat less contemplative and less totalising than BEHOGA 'Join our struggles for our common alternative', i.e. JOSFOCA.

Such struggles for a common alternative are not necessarily just one, it is largely sufficient that they should be compatible and convergent. This internal pluralism allows for recognising substantial and strategic differences between practices and for conceiving of their co-ordination without asking for their abolition as different practices. Without any reductionism, two aspects can be found and distinguished in all critical practices within society, i.e. within all practices of social subjects not just busy in and committed to the reproduction of the status quo as it is, or in an enlarged and increased form: they are all referring to some specific dimension of societal reality, and they are all asking for a certain degree of change. In modern societies, as they are dominated by the capitalist mode of production are therefore

‘dynamized’ by the unending (although certainly neither stable nor continuous) process of capital accumulation, change is an important moment of the reproduction of the socio-historical formations concerned. This complicates the issues of politics as a merely conservative stance becomes unrealistic with the advance of the domination of modern bourgeois societies by the capitalist mode of production – there cannot be any ‘party of the existing order’ any more, only ‘parties of movement’⁶¹ can give a realistic response to the challenges of the ‘revolutionary changes’ inherent in the very process of reproduction of the capitalist mode of production and its domination within these socio-historical formations.⁶² This generalised requirement of defending and promoting change does not only exclude truly conservative parties from the realm of realistic politics, it also creates the possibility of true centre parties which are much more than the classical ‘swamp’ (*marais*) of classical French politics incoherently swaying between defending change and defending conservation: Between the parties defending the kinds of change conducive to (or compatible with) the reproduction of existing structures of domination and the parties striving for changes leading to processes of overcoming them (to some degree), a real political space can be opened for modulating the changes driven by capitalist accumulation in a way that is compatible with maintaining the balances of power underlying the uneven reproduction of the existing structures of domination as well as the existing countervailing powers which have acquired some degree of reality within these societies. This political space of the centre – in contradistinction to the old ‘swamp’ – is not ‘naturally’ dissolving into the two extremes. Quite to the contrary, this new centre becomes capable of exercising a considerable force of attraction on the moderate elements of the left as well as on those of the right wing. This deep change of the very nature of the political spectrum into a spectrum of ‘parties of change’ only, with real space opening for the existence and actions of relatively coherent centre parties has often been overlooked. Any attempt at analysing the left wing will have to take this into account: In really modern political systems there is neither a general spontaneous tendency towards the decomposition of the centre, nor towards a political polarization privileging the extremes.

This has to be kept in mind, when using the three dimensions of classification which I am proposing here, beyond the left wing – right wing divide duly reinterpreted in terms of affirming viz. criticizing domination. On the one hand, the specific structures of domination which are being criticized and opposed allow for a classification of political practices and organizations in terms of their specific material content, as anti-capitalist, feminist, ecological or anti-colonial organisations.⁶³ On the other hand, there are different forms of organization and institutionalization taken up by or imposed upon such practices and movements, such as initiatives and networks, social movements, civil society organizations and trade unions, political organisations and political parties, as well as established institutions and state apparatuses. And, thirdly, such movements should be distinguished according to the scope

⁶¹ This classical distinction refers back to the *parti de l'ordre* and the *parti du mouvement* of post-revolutionary French politics, which have historically established the divide between a right wing politics affirmative of human domination over other human beings and a left wing politics critical of such a domination. With the successful establishment of modern ‘bourgeois societies’ this divide has undergone a deep change: After the practical elimination of the nostalgic defenders of the *Ancien Régime* the right wing position has been taken over by the defenders of the established *structures* of domination, irrespective of the existing *status quo*. In many societies this has process of replacement of the right wing by a right wing ‘party of change’ has been going on well into the 20th century and in some cases into the very present.

⁶² On the side of ‘right wing’ politics such parties of movement tend to differentiate themselves into moderates and extremes, postulating a politics of controlling change or a politics of ‘passive revolution’, respectively, by which they aim to reproduce the established structures of domination, and not any more to conserve the existing *status quo* of these societies which is due to change anyway.

⁶³ This is not a complete list of the structures of domination as they exist within modern bourgeois societies. The list is continuously enlarged with the further development of complexity, and new struggles of liberation emerging, like the queer movement against heterosexual normativity most recently.

and depth of the change they are reclaiming – most conveniently between mere ‘meliorists’, claiming for some real improvements enlarging the capacity to act of categories of individuals or social groups, ‘reformists’ demanding structural reforms dismantling important fetters to enhancing individual and collective capacities to act, and ‘revolutionaries’ struggling for structural transformations which will bring about the dismantling and overcoming of existing structures of domination.

3. Transformative Agency

Overcoming world-wide ‘capitalism’ seems to require a world-revolution. Likewise the present ecological crisis seems to require a global transformation. Overcoming war as an instrument of political power does not seem feasible either without a world-wide perspective of enduring peace. It is less evident that the crises of gender and generation relations do require world-wide change. Likewise, anti-racist and anti-colonial or queer struggles seem to be effectively possible without a clearly developed global or international dimension of struggle. At the same time, movements and organizations tend to address specific areas of societal reality, whereas the accelerating processes of crisis tend to interact and – to some degree at least – to merge into one comprehensive constellation of crises.

The really existing as well as the newly emerging forms of ‘agency from below’ seem systematically to lag behind such developments of crises – they tend to be invested and, as it were, captured by national forms of politics, regional or local constellations of problems and capabilities to act, and they tend to be bound by patterns of perception and action which limit its capacity for addressing comprehensive crisis processes.

This kind of mismatch seems to be unavoidable. However, thinking that this would destroy all possibility and hope for effectively coping with such situations of crisis is unjustified:

Strategic action need not be symmetrical to the problem dimensions to be addressed nor to the capacity to act of the opposite side. It would be perfectly sufficient to be capable of striking effectively at a sufficient number of vital elements of the established structures of domination in order to prevail in a confrontation of forces.

For example, it is not required for effective trans-national trade-union action within a trans-national corporation to build a trade-union (or shop-steward) organisation mirroring the organisation of the corporation itself; it is amply sufficient to build a readiness for solidarity among the workers of different locations and departments – and to establish a minimal network of communication sufficient for activating this solidarity in the case of some labour conflict. Likewise, it is not required for effectively regulating trans-national capital flows to establish an international regulating institution; it is quite sufficient to re-establish national capital controls, as they have existed until the 1980s – without thereby relapsing into trade protectionism, as some neo-liberal defenders of de-regulation like to argue. This does not eliminate the challenges of common and co-ordinated action to cope with the trans-national dimensions of crisis processes.

Likewise, the scope of trade union action seems to be limited by its constitutive focus on wage labour. This need not be a total impediment to addressing other issues: e.g. the history of anti-apartheid struggle shows some memorable actions by harbour workers and their trade unions contributing to the implementation of the boycott of apartheid South Africa. Or, in the recent history of peace movements some relevant contribution of trade unions can be found – even including some ambitious plans for the conversion of the arms industry to socially useful production.

In the light of such experiences, it seems to be possible to overcome the present mismatch

between the social and political forces which are still locally based and sectorally focussed while nationally organised – in the face of trans-national, increasingly global processes of crisis.

There are three types of reasons for rejecting the idea of constituting just one ‘grand subject’ of ecological, feminist and anti-colonial human liberation:

- this idea has been shown to be unrealistic – it simply cannot be done, in the face of the variety and asynchronicity of the concrete processes and struggles taking place even in the face of all the simplifications and unifications brought about by concurring crisis processes;
- there has been a strong tendency in the past towards trying to overcome the difficulties of constituting such a ‘grand subject’ by having recourse to more or less violent forms of repression – thereby compromising the aims of liberation politics no less than the actual trajectories of liberation;
- the recourse to repressive violence has, in fact, often been justified by the singling out of one type of political subjectivity as the ‘true subject of liberation’ and by endowing it with an ideology assumed to be the final word in the history of ideology, so that the required alliances are conceived and implemented as relations of hierarchical subordination.

The post-modern moment in recent history has therefore been rejecting any kind of alliance-building based upon identifying a common cause - inspired by these figures of historical experience. In a perspective of transformation it will be difficult to keep up such a rejection: without common causes there will only be tactical alliances of an *ad hoc* character. Strategic alliances over a period of protracted struggles will not be possible without finding solid common ground. It may be argued that the distinction to be observed here does not run between objectively existing common causes on the one and the merely subjective everyone’s own causes on the other, but between an essentialist and substitutionalist understanding of such common causes - to be pursued in an ‘objectively valid’ manner by the ‘true subject’ which is not bound to hear or heed any first person voices – and a realist perspective which sees common causes as a real construction in the articulation of our practices which is indissolubly subjective and objective at once.

In the face of the ‘simplification’ and ‘unification’ of problems produced as an unavoidable result of the convergence of different processes of crisis there is a mounting need for a corresponding ‘simplification’ and ‘unification’ of the alternative responses advocated by the forces which are critical of the established status quo. This need will still be reinforced by the strategic dilemma resulting from the circumstance that without such a convergence of transformation perspectives any deep structural transformation will be almost impossible, so that a refusal of any such strategic alliance-building is tantamount to renouncing all deep structural transformation. In the face of this dilemma the post-modern attitude of ‘de-constructing’ the domination of the capitalist mode of production into just one other variant of ideological submission (or its neglect of the kind of political domination inherent in the very structure of the modern sovereign state) assumes a very specific significance – that of preferring some limited and selective improvements on one’s own field of struggle which can be had without deeper structural transformations to the travails of an alliance building which does not neglect the very structures of capitalist domination in the field of economic reproduction. Accepting the need to conceive of the structural character of the domination exercised by the capitalist mode of production as a required item to be addressed by any strategy of deep transformation will, therefore, be an unavoidable step in overcoming the strategic dilemma of post-modernism, i.e. of a pluralism combined with a strategic opportunism leaving real strategic decisions to the other side – to those who affirm and

legitimize structures and practices of domination.

This step towards a new radical politics of anti-domination alliances which can give anti-capitalism an unambiguous emancipatory gist has never really been possible on the basis of an essentialist and substitutionalist politics of class and political party. In the mainstream tradition of Marxism, it has been thought unavoidable to introduce the *problematique* of a revolutionary transformation by trying to substitute the figure of a 'revolutionary political organisation', i.e. in traditional terms a revolutionary political party, for the actually existing political subjects – or, for those not prepared to pay such a high price, to exclude the very figure of the revolutionary organisation from the area of legitimate politics. Instead we should think of the revolutionary initiative of individuals and the political practice of groups, which is producing and reproducing a distinct organisation for the sake of this practice, in terms of an additional element. I.e. instead of thinking in terms of the substitutionalist 'either-or', we should think in terms of an inclusive 'and/or' which would be based on the co-existence and potential combination of different kinds of practice.

The problem to be solved is to find and to build forms of political organization capable of coping with electoral challenges within institutionalised politics, while at the same time providing openings for and answering to initiatives 'from below'. Very probably this challenge cannot be met by one organization or one kind of organization alone.

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