

# The age of egoism

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## Introduction: Fifty years of solitude<sup>1</sup>

In the last half-century the intellectual universe of the international left has undergone a tremendous process of change. In place of the progressively increasing domination of Marxism over the left and even over intellectual life in general for longer than a period of 120 years, that is to say from 1848 to 1968, if we take the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* as our point of departure, postmodernism has now taken front stage, with its peculiar idiom, its muddle of disjointed ideas, its unmistakable type of narrative, and its idiosyncratic style in the arts, literature, film, and architecture.

The intellectual life of the left-wing movement in each country was subjected to the assault of postmodernism at a different moment and through a different trajectory. France experienced this wave in the wake of 1968. The general public in other European countries and the United States had to wait for the 1980s to get a taste of the new *lingua franca* of the universe of left-wing thinking. As for countries subordinated to imperialism, including our own country Turkey, these were first intro-

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally written in Turkish for Special Issue No. 50 of our Turkish-language journal, *Devrimci Marksizm*, focusing on the confrontation between Marxism and postmodernism. It has been translated into English by the author himself. Apart from the omission of details that would be of no interest to an international audience, only stylistic changes have been made to the text. As for footnotes we omitted many of them, especially those that made side remarks and those that referred to Turkish-language sources, for an economy of time. We would like to thank at the outset the members of the Editorial Board of *Revolutionary Marxism* for having made very useful comments on a first draft of this article. Thanks to them we have, we believe, ameliorated some of the sections of this article considerably.

duced to left-wing liberalism in the 1980s, postmodernism following suit a bit later.

The impact was earth-shaking. In every country where postmodernism made its appearance, Marxism may be said to have survived at a dose that may befit an aperitif taken at a cocktail party and even that was a quasi-Marxism that proudly wore the insignia of anti-Leninism as a trade mark. But *revolutionary* Marxism became utterly marginal in the world of the intelligentsia. Marxism has been wading across the intellectual world in profound solitude for decades now. In Turkey this was felt for the first time after the military coup of 1980. However, as we and the socialists/communists of other countries were still talking in the idiom of Marxism that befitted the furious class struggles of the 1970s, the jargon of postmodernism had already taken over in France and, somewhat later, elsewhere. That is why the solitude adds up to half a century.

The purpose of this article is not to provide a theoretical/philosophical critique of postmodernism and schools of thought that are, in one way or another, affiliated to it, such as left-wing liberalism, post-Marxism, post-Fordism, globalism and others. Our aim here is to try to understand how it came about that postmodernism and company have replaced Marxism as the dominant mode of thinking in the world of the left intelligentsia. Nothing that goes on in the world of ideas is the product exclusively of that world itself. Each current of thought, literature or art, each theory, each philosophical school is a response to practical developments in the material world. Not only a response, in fact, but also a product of those developments grasped through the ideological filter of certain classes, strata, groups, political currents etc. When one is discussing postmodernism and currents affiliated to it, it would be folly to attribute their domination over the intellectual life of the left to the genius of the main representatives of this thinking (Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, Richard Rorty, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray among many others). Some of these, for instance Foucault, Deleuze, Negri or Laclau, may be considered to be truly profound thinkers even if entirely misguided in their outlook. Some, on the contrary, are straightforward *charlatans*. It would be undeserved praise for people like Baudrillard or Lyotard or their lesser co-thinkers in other countries and unjustified disdain for the intelligence of humanity at large to contend that these thinkers are the real *moving force* behind the intellectual spasms, convulsions and pangs experienced by the international intelligentsia within the last half-century. They should only be treated as *symptoms*. The real historical factors that have thrown even these charlatans to the front stage should be sought in the practical developments in the material world.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Our characterisation of some postmodernists as “charlatans”, a term that has become specialised in the history of science and ideas precisely for people who deliberately try to benefit from muddling issues for the purpose of gaining an audience and becoming famous, may disturb some of our friends who have been to a certain extent influenced by postmodernism. We would like to mention a small episode in this context. Louis Althusser, who was an admirer of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan for decades, attacked him and called him a “magnificent clown” late in his life. See Taner Timur, *Marksizm, İnsan ve Toplum. Balibar, Sève, Althusser, Bourdieu*, İstanbul: Yordam, 2015, s. 162.

What we will be looking into in this article are the socio-economic and political developments that lie behind this enormous landslide. While trying to explain the background of the tremor that has shaken the world of the left intelligentsia, we will have to answer many different questions. It would be useful to mention some of these at the outset lest we lose our path when confronted with such a labyrinthine question.

In the course of discussing the phenomenon of postmodernism, the present article will attempt to answer the following questions: (1) What do the spokespeople for postmodernism and affiliated schools of thinking say and represent, not from the point of view of philosophical arguments, but that of their concrete approach to the problems of the world we live in? (2) What routes have the spreading and popularisation of these ideas taken and what stages did these processes go through? (3) Why is it that this development occurred in the aftermath of 1968, seemingly a period of momentous revolutionary ascendancy? (4) Why did these ideas not remain peculiar to that specific period but, on the contrary, characterised an entire historical period, a whole half-century so far? (5) What kind of political developments accompanied this tremor in the sphere of ideas? At the opposite end of the effects of political life on ideological trends, how did this radical turn in ideology affect political life itself?

Finally, we would like to underline at the outset with utmost care the following point: most of our readers are aware that postmodern thought stands in a one-to-one relationship with so-called identity politics. Behind currents such as multiculturalism, feminism, LGBTQI+ stand postmodernist and similar thinking and the former receive their intellectual nourishment from the latter. The critique we will level at identity politics below *by no means* implies a refusal to admit the crucial nature of the social and political questions that form the material background to these (the oppression of nations and religious minorities, the manifold forms of inequality and humiliation created in the imperialist epoch, in particular by colonialism, forms that still haunt even what today are formally independent entities, the oppression of women, the multiplicity of forms in which those whose sexual orientation departs from heterosexual norms etc.). The revolutionary Marxist tradition that we come from has in general been careful when dealing with such oppression, albeit not always equally consistent on every question. The world has not had to wait for postmodernism in order to wage a fight around at least some of these questions (the most important instances being the struggle for the self-determination of nations and the emancipation of women). Our difference regarding these forms of oppression and the struggle to eliminate them lies only in the method to be used.

## 1. Postmodernism: the opium of the intellectuals

Raymond Aron, perhaps the doyen of bourgeois liberal thinking in France's intellectual life of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, published a much-discussed book in 1955 on the influence of Marxism on the French intelligentsia, titled *L'opium des intellectuels*, "the opium of the intellectuals". A title no doubt conceived intelligently, turning Marx's famous dictum "religion is the opium of the people" against Marxism itself. Yet it has now become clear, though Aron did not live to see it, that the opium of the

intellectuals is not Marxism but postmodernism, especially in France, where it was born, but also around the world. With its language that renders life an incomprehensible enigma, obscurantist to the core, postmodernism is *truly an obstacle* in the way of the intellectual in his or her effort to understand society or indeed the entire universe. It also acts as a thick curtain that hampers the light shed on the world by Marxism. Perhaps the last great representative of the *lumières* in its home country France, Aron, we think, would simply concede this point, despite his bourgeois prejudices against Marxism, easily comprehensible in a most hysteric period of the Cold War.

As we said in the introductory section, we are not going to undertake a theoretical critique of postmodernism and other currents affiliated to it. Our aim is different: it is to explain the success this school of thought has had through historical materialist analysis. But in order to make this explanation more readily comprehensible, we need to briefly take up the fundamental characteristics of this school in a critical manner. We cannot expect all of our readers to be comfortably familiar with these traits; moreover, not everything we will take up here is treated in such a stark manner in works that strive to present postmodernist thinking critically. What we wish to do is in a certain manner to present the reader with the *outward surface* of postmodernism, the manner in which it intervenes in the material world, the way in which it functions as the “opium of the intellectuals”.

Let us then present in summary form the main characteristics of the school from this point of view:

- Postmodernism is a crusade against reason and science. The relativism of Nietzsche, one of the main sources of inspiration of postmodernism, which in its turn flows from his extreme scepticism,<sup>3</sup> leads to a sharp critique of what the postmodernists themselves call the “instrumentalist reason” of the Enlightenment and of the scientific establishment, which bears its mark.<sup>4</sup>
- As a consequence and facilitator of this, postmodernism writes and speaks in an idiom that is extremely convoluted and even incomprehensible to mortals who are not its adepts. Aphorisms, play on words, vivisection and transplantation of concepts, and other literary tricks are legion, especially in Jacques Lacan,<sup>5</sup> a psychoanalyst who is one of the sources of inspiration of the school, but from Derrida to Baudrillard and Lyotard “language games” are a basic element of

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3 This is what is called “perspectivism” in Nietzschean philosophy. Nietzsche held that it would be wrong to assume the existence of an objective truth and that ideas should be assessed by taking into consideration varying circumstances and the position of those who emit them as a fundamental philosophical principle.

4 Two physicists, Alan Sokal, an American, and Jean Bricmont, a Belgian, submitted an article that was full of nonsensical formulations and had it successfully admitted and published in a well-established postmodern journal, *Social Text*, and later publicised this whole episode in book form. See their *Fashionable Nonsense. Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*, Pittsburgh: Picador, 1999.

5 The most important ideas of Lacan are often expressed in terms of play on words. They are really even impossible to make intelligible to those who do not speak French because they are variations created by cutting words halfway and adding them onto others. Elizabeth Roudinesco, writing with sympathy on Lacan's work, admits so much. Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Her Şeye ve Herkese Karşı Lacan*, translated [into Turkish] by Nami Başer, İstanbul: Metis, 2012, p. 21.

the intellectual universe of postmodernism. Sokal and Bricmont, two critics of postmodernism say, “if they sound incomprehensible to you, it is for the good reason that there is no sense in what they are saying”.<sup>6</sup> To those who complain that the language she uses in *Gender Trouble* (1990), the book where she puts forward the fundamentals of “queer theory”, probably her most original intellectual feat, Judith Butler has no qualms in replying that they speak this way because they are not aware how grave are the lived experiences of queers.<sup>7</sup> It might be in order to point out that intellectual work is done precisely to enlighten the uninitiated and to transmit the knowledge necessary to make it possible for others to understand what they have not had a chance to learn earlier. In addition, it would not be out of place to point out that Butler’s reply creates the impression that she believes only queers are ferociously oppressed in this world, which is a direct confirmation of the title given to this article (“The age of egoism”)!

- Although postmodernism, as a current of thought born in the aftermath of 1968, does talk of revolution quite frequently in the initial stages of its development, the concept of revolution is in fact converted into an impossibility. Both Foucault and the pair Deleuze-Guattari contend that expecting total emancipation is itself a kind of capitulation to the system and demanding power in the post-revolutionary phase ends up destroying the revolution.<sup>8</sup> In subsequent generations of postmodernist thinkers, the very concept of revolution undergoes erosion to gradually evaporate fully.
- Postmodernism involves a stand against taking society as a totality and trying to change it in wholesale manner. It refuses completely systems of thought such as the Enlightenment, Hegelianism and of course Marxism, all of which it designates as “grand narratives” or “meta narratives”. For postmodern thinkers, “difference” is the key concept. Society is always taken up from the point of view of groups that are in a specific position. Whereas in the 1970s the centre of attention was marginalised groups such as psychiatric patients, prisoners, high school students under repression etc., the current turned its face from the 1980s on towards the movements of women, the LGBTQI+, ethnic and nationalist groups under the appellation of “New Social Movements”.
- Postmodernism is unflinchingly hostile to Marxism and communism. At the beginning, this took an insidious form of a war of attrition, since Marxism enjoyed great prestige thanks to the revolutionary wave that existed not only in France but around the world. However, the banner of opposition to Marxism was raised unmistakably in the second half of the 1970s. (The form that this

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by François Cusset, *French Theory. Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze et Cie. et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux Etats-Unis*, Paris: La Découverte, 2005, s. 13. Our translation from the French.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York/London: Routledge, Second Edition, 1999, “Preface”, p. 20-22.

<sup>8</sup> *Aspettando la rivoluzione*, Milano: Res Gestae, 2015, section containing interview with Michel Foucault, p. 34-35; op. cit. and section containing interview with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, p. 121; Ian Buchanan, *Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus*, London/New York: Continuum, 2008, p. 21.

change took place and the dynamics behind such developments will be taken up in section 6 below.)

- At least at the beginning, postmodernism focused on the relations of “micro power” in the different institutions of society (the lunatic asylum, the prison, the clinic, the school, the factory etc.) Foucault’s work is the decisive source of the postmodern approach in this area. In our opinion, this approach of Foucault’s was conceived as a strategy of struggle against the emphasis Marxism lays on the conquest of state power by the proletariat. In other words, Foucault and others are fighting the influence of *The State and Revolution*. (We will return to this point further on in the relevant context.)
- Postmodern theory is nourished substantially by psychoanalysis and in particular by Jacques Lacan’s interpretation of Freudian theory. There is also an alternative approach, that of Deleuze and Guattari. Their two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* develops an alternative method to Freud’s that tries to explain capitalism through “schizo-analysis”. Within this context, under the influence of Deleuze and Guattari’s work, concepts such as “desire”, “pleasure”, “libido”, and “sublimation” play a great part in the postmodern discourse. This results in the prominence of the world of the individual in the study and comprehension of the social. Besides controversial yet serious works in which this method is used, this has been a source of abuse in the case of clownish figures such as Lyotard, who cracks a completely unsubtle joke about Marx in the form of “what did he do with his left hand while writing *Capital*?”<sup>9</sup>
- As is well-known, the series of traits that we have been talking about are usually grounded, at least for the hard-core postmodernists, in a proposition to the effect that a new stage of history has opened up called the “postmodern” age. The social and cultural characteristics of “postmodernity”, in their turn, are attributed to certain economic novelties that may be observed in capitalism. In other words, postmodernism is really grasped as the social and cultural expression of what alternative theories have characterised as the transition to “postmodernity” or “post-industrial society” or “flexibilisation” or the growing over into a “post-Fordist” stage and of “globalisation.” We will come back to this briefly in the concluding section.
- To sum up, as one can see from what has been said, all the gains that Marxism had been accumulating as a guide to changing the world for the 120 years until 1968 have come under the blows of postmodernism and its affiliates over the last half-century. What we are going through should, without a shred of doubt, be characterised as an *ideological counter revolution*.

## 2. The trajectory of postmodernism

If we are to delve into this ideological counter revolution not only in its theoretical ramifications or, more broadly, in terms of its manifestation in the arts, literature,

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<sup>9</sup> Jules Ferry/Alain Renaut, *La pensée 68. Essai sur l’anti-humanisme contemporain*, Paris: Gallimard, 1988, p. 57-58. Our translation from the French original.

architecture, academia etc., but also from the point of view of its material socio-economic and political dynamics, tracing the early concrete trajectory through which it spread around the world will give us important hints.

The structuralist school of thinking that marked the post-World War II period seems to be the right point to start the story. The source of structuralism is the *Cours de linguistique générale* of Ferdinand de Saussure, who should be considered to be a 19<sup>th</sup> century thinker. The book was prepared on the basis of the course notes compiled by two students of Saussure in 1916 and although it did attract attention in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it left its mark on philosophy and other disciplines of the social sciences (anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis etc.) only after World War II.<sup>10</sup> Saussure makes a distinction between language and speech, stresses the social character of language and points out that the relationship between signifiers and the signified is completely arbitrary. To put this last point differently, there is no necessary connection between a word and the object or the concept that that word signifies.

In this analysis of language, the structure is everything. Conversely, there is no **subject**, no active agency. The success this approach enjoyed in linguistics resulted in the spread of the approach based on “process without a subject” to other scientific fields of inquiry. In anthropology, a whole school of thinking was built around the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss in different areas such as kinship relations and myths. Georges Dumézil, a mentor of Foucault, was a prominent figure of this school. In psychoanalysis, Lacan with his special interpretation of Freud’s thinking and, in Marxist philosophy, Althusser with his conception of history as “a process without a subject” were other important figures. Although they were all French, they all had worldwide impact with their peculiar method of thinking.

So, it was structuralism that marked the 1950s and the 1960s. However, from the 1960s on came along several thinkers who were considered to be *post*-structuralists, first and foremost Foucault, Derrida and the pair Deleuze and Guattari. In contrast to the structuralists, who worked within the overall framework of the Enlightenment (and of Marxism in the case of Althusser and his co-thinkers), the newcomers took another road under the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche (sometimes seen as a source of inspiration for Nazism) and Martin Heidegger (who was practically involved in Nazi activities). However, despite this radical difference, they were called post-structuralists because they shared the predilection of the structuralists for processes without subjects. In our opinion, the decisive aspect of the new school being a revolt against the Enlightenment, a refusal of totality and dialectics, and their anti-Marxism, to characterise them as somehow a continuation of structuralism is, to take just one example, an injustice done to Althusser (although we are of the opinion that the latter’s Marxism is entirely misguided).

This was the dawn of postmodernism. We see, then, that postmodernism was born in France in the 1960s. ***One of the basic theses of this article is that postmod-***

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<sup>10</sup> The *Cours* was translated into English for the first time in 1959, in other words 43 years after it came out in French. This is an indication that Saussure’s impact really took off in the second half the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*ernism is the product of the contradictory nature of the French 1968*. This point will be taken up in detail in the next section. Postmodernism left its mark on French intellectual life throughout the 1970s, most of all in the form of the works of the authors called post-structuralists. In the memorable words of Perry Anderson, who has offered the most complete Marxist critique of postmodernism, “Paris today [in 1983-ss] is the capital of European intellectual reaction.”<sup>11</sup> That the impact of this school on the intellectual life of other countries in the same period should not be neglected is attested to by the flow of books and articles written in the Anglo-saxon world that criticised and rebutted postmodernism.<sup>12</sup>

However, the real leap towards the internationalisation of the impact of post-modernism came in the 1980s, when all the favoured thinkers of this school were received with great attention, even fanfare, in the United States and the main bulk of their work was swiftly translated into English. The first step forward came very early on, in 1966, at a colloquium on post-structuralism at one of the foremost universities of the United States, Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, to which many of the French “celebrities” were invited. This was followed by the establishment of visiting positions for these French thinkers not only at Johns Hopkins but at Cornell and Yale as well, followed by a general tendency at American universities to show closer interest to this school of thinking. In time, each university instituted a “Cultural Studies” department and later these departments became the breeding ground for new departments, first of “Women’s Studies” and later of “Gender Studies”, and eventually departments that focussed on race and ethnic studies and “Post-Colonial Studies”. The name of the postmodernist school thus became “French Theory” in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

The reason why the United States was the second country postmodernism conquered after France we will explore in the next section, when we delve into the relationship between postmodernism and 1968. Let us simply say this much at this stage: thanks to its hegemonic position in the capitalist world in the post-World War II period, the United States had in time become the centre of intellectual life in the same capitalist world as well. One significant example is the shift in the visual arts. Whereas Paris was the cultural centre for painting and sculpture from the dawn of the capitalist era until the 1950s, the city to which the talent of all other countries went on pilgrimage, from that turning point on New York gradually took over the place of Paris as the new centre. The same may be said to have gradually happened

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11 Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 32.

12 Most importantly: Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration. Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory*, London: Verso, 1979; Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism, A Marxist Critique*, London: Polity Press, 1981; Perry Anderson. op. cit., 1984. As for other countries, Italy seems to have some priority. In the preface he wrote for a book that brings together the interviews conducted by the Italian journalist Duccio Trombadori, R.J. Goldstein notes that Foucault’s books were translated into Italian as soon as they came out in France. See Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx. Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1991, p. 7.

13 We owe our knowledge regarding the adventures of postmodernism in America during the last four decades to the extremely comprehensive study by François Cusset. See *French Theory. Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux Etats-Unis*, op. cit.



not only in fields such as medicine, physics, chemistry, economics, in which areas, the United States, together with Britain, almost has a monopoly of innovation and discovery, but also in the social sciences and even in philosophy, which was traditionally considered an intellectual domain of European culture. It was for this reason that once postmodernism captured the US “market”, so to speak, it was but a short step toward its spread to and conquest of the international sphere.

### 3. 1968: A historical turning point of hybrid character

*When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning,  
he found himself transformed into a gigantic insect.*  
Franz Kafka, “Metamorphosis”

It is now time for us to discuss the part played by 1968 in the flourishing of postmodernism. We were in fact aiming for some time now to take up the question of 1968 on its own merits, so this question of its relationship to postmodernism provides at least a point of entry for us into this topic.

Let us admit at the outset that the lines that follow should be considered a partial self-criticism with respect to our earlier assessment of 1968. In an article (in Turkish) that we had written earlier in which we provided a detailed account of this historic turning point, we had contended that 1968 was an “international revolutionary wave”.<sup>14</sup> The reader will see in a moment that today we approach this characterisation with certain caveats. In effect, we really should have made these caveats explicit quite some time earlier. Narrating the story of this reassessment is, we think, worth our while.

When the Arab revolution broke out in 2011 and this was echoed by the people’s rebellions in other countries of the Mediterranean basin and beyond, we approached this phenomenon with great care, penning several major articles and many short pieces on the different episodes of this wave. From 2013 on, as we were looking for an answer to the question of how to situate this wave of revolutions and rebellions in the overall history of the modern age, we reached the conclusion that in our modern epoch, revolutions advance in *waves of world revolution*. Even bourgeois revolutions had emerged at least as regional waves, but the pattern was much more clear-cut when we came to socialist revolutions or revolutions that bore this kind of potential but failed or proved abortive. As we were testing this theoretical framework for the different clusters of socialist revolutions, we naturally hit, first and foremost, the first wave that started with the October revolution in Russia and its sequel in Europe and Asia and the second wave of revolutions that started in the midst of World War II and achieved victory in the aftermath of the war (or, in certain cases, were lost) as the most unmistakable cases of world revolution. The difficulty lay elsewhere: how was one supposed to approach 1968?

If 1968 was to be considered a new wave of revolutions just like the first two,

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<sup>14</sup> Sungur Savran, “1968: Bir Devrimci Dalganın Adı”, *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 9, March 2009.

then obviously it had to be considered “the third wave of world revolution” because of its unquestionably international nature. However, from the vantage point of 2013, besides conceding an indubitable revolutionary aspect to the phenomenon in its entirety, we felt a certain malaise regarding certain other aspects. We will go into these in a moment. But let us pose our original question again: if the present upheaval is itself such a worldwide revolutionary wave, which we insist it is, then was it the third or the fourth wave of world revolution? Not having found the necessary leisure to look into the matter more carefully on the basis of fresh research, we came to the decision that it would be wrong to situate 1968 on the same plane as the other waves. As we set out to write the present article, we found that this has been confirmed to be the correct assessment to make.

According to our present evaluation, 1968 is of the character of a *hybrid wave*. From a certain angle, it is the history of the emergence of a tremendous festival of mass struggles all around the earth. A partial balance sheet of those struggles was provided in the article that we have just referred to. But from another angle, it carries within itself the seeds of the wave of reaction that was to follow it soon afterwards. This is certainly not a trait that was to be observed necessarily in every country with a 1968 uprising. From Vietnam to Latin America, from Sri Lanka to Turkey, and even in some imperialist countries (Italy, Portugal, Spain etc.) 1968 wields exclusively the character of a revolution or, depending on the case, a rebellion. But in several imperialist countries (the United States, France, England, Germany etc.), although the revolutionary character is vividly present, the movement engendered the seeds of its own dissolution within its very nature. We would like to underline the merciless dialectic in question here: we are *not* talking of a reaction that sets in once the revolutionary movement fails in its enterprise. We are speaking of a reaction that is born of the very essence of the movement *itself*.

These seeds of reaction were effective both in countries where the revolution or popular revolt did not include the working class as an agency (America, Germany) and in those where the working class carried out powerful class struggles (France, Britain). This is not the distinguishing factor. The distinguishing factor is the power of the student movement. In those countries where the student movement played a major role (even in the case of France, where simultaneously with the student movement close to 10 million workers staged a strike and occupation movement that lasted almost for a full month), the movement did not recede under the overwhelming power of a force outside of it, but rather gave birth to a dynamic of dissolution *from within itself*. There were basically three elements at play: the *use of drugs* as a pervasive practice within the movement even during the phase of revolutionary ascendancy; the *setting up of communes* as the movement retreated from the streets, harbouring fantasies of breaking from bourgeois society immediately, rather than the movement looking for ways to sustain the revolution or the rebellion, as the case may be, by forming new mass organisations; and the substitution of a *striving for the emancipation of certain social groups in isolation from the rest of society* in place of an effort to build a united movement for total emancipation.

Some may display scepticism regarding the use of drugs: they might grant that this might be wrong when the movement is on the barricades, but nonetheless de-

fend their use afterwards. Our reply to them is that the struggle against capitalism has to aim for the defeat of a state apparatus that is under the control of a class fully conscious of its interests (the international bourgeoisie and its national fractions) and is a highly organised and disciplined class that is ruthless when the need to defend its rule arises. This is incomparably more difficult than driving and cannot be done “while intoxicated”. That is why the use of all kinds of drugs are prohibited in a Leninist organisation. Some others may retort, asking why communes are targeted since they embody a way of life based on shared property and thus go beyond the limits of bourgeois society. On the one hand, communes are precisely a return from scientific socialism to utopian socialism. The entire historic experience of the latter should have taught us that it is impossible to cast away the ills of a capitalist society marked by the law of value and a voracious appetite for surplus value by building small havens of that kind within those given conditions. On the other hand, to retreat to a life in communes implies abandoning the larger struggle. Communal life drains all the energy of the participants with a fixation on problems of private life, in particular those that derive from the communalistic practices of “free love” and leaves no space for other social and political matters. And when this comes together with the use of drugs and alcoholic drinks, it results in deeply hurtful experiences for groups that are in a weaker position (women and more seriously young girls, or even children of both sexes). Furthermore, the participation of people from different class backgrounds in the same commune and the institution of intimate relations between them creates serious risks of deep spiritual and mental convulsions. The ill-famed Charles Manson killing spree is simply one of the most grieving instances of such cases. Thirdly, the pursuit of the emancipation of different social groups *on their own* implies, by definition, the abandonment of the striving for social revolution.

Postmodernism rose on the basis of precisely these blind sides of 1968, first in France and later in the United States. In a certain sense, this current is the expression not of the revolutionary side of 1968, but of these aspects that form its Achilles’ heel. In an interview conducted in the wake of 1968, Foucault lists the necessary steps in order to remove the barriers that stand in the way of a complete change of society in the cultural sphere (alongside, it must be noted, class struggle, since at this early stage the prestige of Marxism is so high that to ignore the importance of class struggle would have been impossible for a thinker who is intent on changing social relations): “the suppression of taboos and limitations on and divisions in sexuality; practicing commune-type existence; disinhibition face to drugs; rupture from all inhibition and closures through which are reconstituted and reproduced normative individuality”<sup>15</sup>

He also enumerates the groups on which work has to be conducted: “We wish to work with high school students, university students, those studying in the supervised school, those who are held under psychological or psychiatric repression on what they wish to study or their relations with their families or in sexuality or

<sup>15</sup> *Aspettando la rivoluzione*, op. cit, p. 25. Our translation from Italian.

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concerning drugs...<sup>16</sup>

François Cusset, author of *French Theory*, sums up the picture in America in the following terms:

In ten years of activism, from the first marches of 1962 for civil rights to libertarian sleep-ins of the early 1970s, the vast American student movement was gradually transformed from an organised political opposition to a spontaneous movement with an overwhelmingly existential scope – from militant anticapitalism to a mystique of “free” bodies and hallucinogens. Just like Bob Dylan’s songs, which, around the same time, pass over from anti-imperialist folk to psychedelic spiritualism. This metamorphosis of the student rebellion, under the impact of the brutal suppression of 1970 as well,<sup>17</sup> is *one of the sociological determinants* of the reception and later the repackaging of French theory.<sup>18</sup>

Let us pay close attention to what the author is saying: He claims that one of the decisive factors in the adoption of postmodernism by the American academia is the transformation of the student movement from an anti-capitalist revolutionism to a Dionysiac cultural movement on the basis of a celebration of “free love” and drugs. We share the observation whole-heartedly.

It is quite telling, although we cannot go into this here, that an overwhelming majority of Marxists have missed the dialectics behind this hybrid character of 1968. A very interesting symbolic instance of this cecity is the following cute formulation by the late Chris Harman, one of the leading theoreticians of the Socialist Workers Party, the British one, describing the reabsorption of the revolutionaries of 1968 into the capitalist social order in the late 1970s: “If the fashion in 1968 was to drop out and drop acid, now, apparently, it is to drop in and drop socialism.”<sup>19</sup> It seems neither the late Harman nor Alex Callinicos, who quotes him approvingly, asked themselves the following simple question: in what sense is “dropping acid” the *opposite* of “dropping socialism”? What, in other words, is the relationship of socialism with LSD?

### 4. The rise of the modern petty-bourgeoisie and the educated (semi-) proletariat

Now we have to pose ourselves another question. A school of thought we have characterised as counter revolutionary may have been born from the bosom of 1968, recognised in history for its revolutionary character; unusual though this may be, it may be understood as a result of the dialectic of the internally contradictory character of that movement. However, the influence of the 1968 movement could not reasonably be expected to last longer than a decade or two. Half a century? How

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 33. *Ditto*.

<sup>17</sup> The allusion is to the killing of six students and the wounding of dozens at many universities, first and foremost Kent State (Ohio) and Jackson State (a black college in Mississippi), with police fire during student demonstrations on the Vietnam war.

<sup>18</sup> Cusset, op. cit., p. 65. Our translation from the French original. Our emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by Callinicos, p. 165.

to explain the conquest of the intellectual world by postmodernism and its affiliates for half a century already?

There lie three different factors behind the longevity of postmodernism. One is the significant change of the class structure first in the imperialist countries and later in others. Another is the loss of prestige of the various experiences of socialist construction of the 20th century initially and later their collapse. Finally, there is the solution found in the late 1970s and early 1980s by the international bourgeoisie to the crisis of world capitalism that set in in the mid-1970s, that solution taking the form of the neoliberal class assault of the bourgeoisie on the working classes of all countries (which was later consolidated by the adoption of globalism.) We will take up the first point in this section and the other two in the two sections that follow. Later we will unite these as a synthetic whole in Section 7. We will carry out this discussion necessarily in summary form, making references to earlier works of ours whenever possible.

The class basis of the hegemonic influence of postmodernism is the extreme importance gained by two distinct, albeit closely associated, social groups in the social structure of all countries from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century on: the modern petty-bourgeoisie and the educated (semi-) proletariat. We have written on these social strata in detail earlier (in Turkish) and here, given the wide scope of this article, we will present only a summary of our views on this question.<sup>20</sup>

The modern petty-bourgeoisie, widely called the “professionals” in the social jargon of the Western countries, is part of the petty-bourgeoisie in that this class both owns its means of production but also expends labour in order to produce commodities (usually services) itself, but is a special layer of this class because it is not, as its namesake the traditional petty-bourgeoisie, such as artisans, small tradespeople, or the small-holder peasants, a social category that has its roots in the pre-capitalist stage, but on the contrary is a product of modern capitalist society and its productive forces. This is a layer that is specialised in areas of production (mostly of services) that require higher education (medicine, law, finance, technology, including digital technology, architecture, tourism etc.) and uses this skilled labour in workplaces (doctor’s cabinet, pharmacy, veterinarian clinic, lawyer’s office, small-scale architecture, engineering, or design agency, accounting or financial consultation office, post-production studio, software preparation company etc.) that belong to itself and earns usually high or very high income relative to the general mass of the labouring population.

There are two very important differences between the two wings of the petty-bourgeoisie, the traditional and the modern. On the one hand, the material basis of the traditional wing of the petty-bourgeoisie is on the decline, with large-scale means of production constantly, albeit in contradictory movement, sapping the fundamentals of its existence. Proletarianization is a serious risk for the traditional petty-bourgeoisie. The modern wing has a much more durable material basis precisely because it is the product of modern conditions, although, here too, the development

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<sup>20</sup> Sungur Savran, “Sınıfları Haritalamak: Sınıflar Birbirinden Nasıl Ayrılır?”, *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 6, Spring-Summer 2008.

is sometimes contradictory, at least in the short term. Secondly, because the modern layer has received higher education or even beyond, it is different from the traditional stratum not only culturally for obvious reasons but also economically.

The second social group that we wish to dwell upon is not a stratum of the petty-bourgeoisie but of the proletariat: the educated (semi-) proletariat. These are the same kind of people as the modern petty-bourgeoisie except that they are employed as wage-earners, either by capitalists, by the government, or by non-profit entities. Let us explain the qualificative “semi” here. The upper strata of this class fraction come from wealthy families. In such families, intergenerational wealth transfer is very common, especially at the stage when the parents are between the ages of 45 and 55.<sup>21</sup> Later, with the death of the parents, a sizeable amount of wealth, mostly in the form of real estate, is transferred to the new generation. Under such circumstances, the proletarian cannot be considered to be fully proletarian. For only those workers are real proletarians who are *forced* (for economic reasons) to sell their labour power. In the same way as the poor peasant who, because he or she cannot subsist on the products of the land owned alone, needs to work also as wage-labourer, this layer is also semi-proletarian. He or she may very well leave her job in an advertising agency or at a university as a teacher and open a café, a boutique or a workplace in the area in which he or she has been educated. On the other hand, even if “semi”, this person is proletarian nonetheless since he or she is exposed to the same pressures (especially the prospect of layoff) as other proletarians

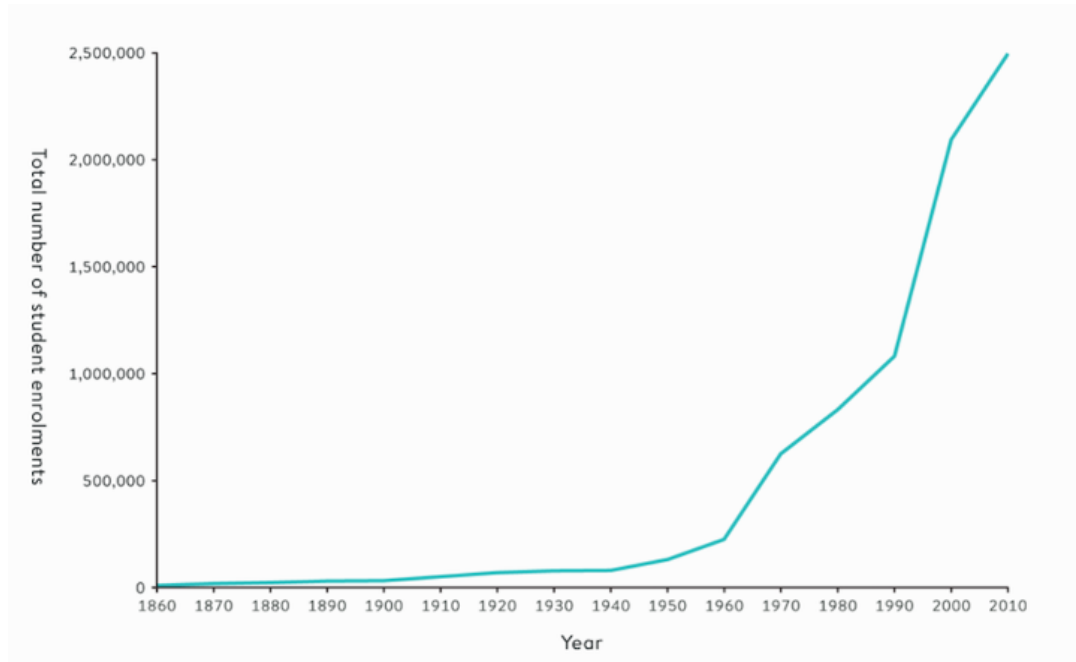
Although this class stratum leads a life based on wage labour in the sphere of production (and thus shares some important interests with the proletariat at large), from the point of view of its *origins*, its formation corresponds almost exactly to that of the modern petty-bourgeoisie in terms of the conditions and the trajectory of this formation. The medical doctor who owns a cabinet and the university teacher who teaches at a medical school or the architect who owns a design studio and the one that works for a big construction company etc. are exposed to different pressures in their work life, but are very close in terms of their socio-economic roots and educational background. Moreover, and more importantly, viewed dynamically, that is to say throughout their entire work life, as a result of either their own choice or some unforeseen circumstance, they may even reverse their respective positions in life. These two strata are also very similar culturally and in terms of their political orientation. That is why, for the purposes of this article, it will not pose a problem to treat them together and bring them under the rubric of the “modern petty-bourgeoisie” for the sake of convenience, with the proviso that their differences may bring up certain divergences in their class attitudes or their political orientation under certain conditions that can be taken up elsewhere.

A crucial institution in the class formation of these two strata is *the university*. The part the university played up until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was restricted to the uppermost thin crust of capitalist society. In 1901 in the United Kingdom (it should be remembered that this country was still the hegemonic imperialist power and set the tone of development) only one out of one hundred youth (as a

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<sup>21</sup> Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 2015, p. 75.

rule, only men) went to university. When we come to 1962 this figure had risen to four in one hundred. Currently (the figure is from 2015), almost 50 out of one hundred youth in some way try their hand at higher education.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 1: Number of young people of university age attending an institution of higher education, the United Kingdom, 1860-2010**

The same tendency is valid for all countries, albeit at differing tempos over time.<sup>23</sup> There is thus an almost perfect empirical overlap between what can be called the “mass university” and the hegemony of postmodernism.

Of course, from the methodological point of view, the empirical observation of correlation does not, on its own, imply sound causality. However, an expanding literature has recently shown in quite a convincing manner that university education acts as the grounds for the expanded reproduction of certain privileged classes or rather class strata. Comprehensive work on class analysis<sup>24</sup> and the most advanced representatives of the so-called “meritocracy” literature<sup>25</sup> have provided data that do not leave any doubt as to the vital importance of higher education in the new class formation of capitalist society since the 1970s.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, Chapter 7, passim. The graph is on p. 225.

<sup>23</sup> For the US, the pace-setter of present-day capitalism, see Cusset, op. cit., p. 54 ve Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit, What's Become of the Common Good*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2020, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> The book written by Mike Savage and his colleagues, published in 2015 (see footnote 20), is, according to the characterisation of the author, was built on the Great British Class Survey, organised by the BBC in 2013, the largest-based survey ever made in Britain (161 thousand responses).

<sup>25</sup> Michael Sandel’s book (see footnote 22 above) is celebrated as the *chef d’oeuvre* of this literature. A discussion of the concept “meritocracy” is of no interest to us, at least in this article.

What, then, is the decisive element in this new class structure of capitalism? In both literatures in question the answer to this question is unambiguously the “professionals”! More succinctly, it is the modern petty-bourgeoisie and its not very distant cousin, the educated (semi-) proletariat. University education functions as a mechanism that separates the modern petty-bourgeoisie (including in our usage the educated (semi-) proletariat) from the proletariat, as well as the traditional petty-bourgeoisie, as a privileged layer of society almost as a *caste*.

Why do we say a “caste”? The reason is that, under the deceptive slogan of “equal opportunity”, a competitive system that is rigged through and through is in place. Whatever the differences of the university entrance systems of the different countries, the reader will be familiar with the truth of what we are writing through their own personal experience. Whether it is a university entrance exam that is used or an admissions system that relies on the credentials of the youth that apply for admission, the undeniable fact that the offspring of wealthy and highly educated families have an immense head start for winning the competition shows us that the institution of the university really functions as the hotbed of the reproduction of the social position of the wealthy and the privileged.

Of course, in an age when university education has become such a mass phenomenon (fifty per cent of the relevant population in the United Kingdom!), not every youth who has, one way or another, succeeded in setting foot on the soil of an institution of higher education can have received a passport to enter the privileged minority of the modern petty-bourgeoisie. Here, the stratification of various universities becomes the breeding ground for a rigorous process of sorting out of the privileged from the ordinary and, thus, for the reproduction of the caste-like structure of the modern petty-bourgeoisie. In the United Kingdom, Oxford, Cambridge, and certain London universities and in the United States, a small number of other universities in addition to those called the “Ivy League” universities educate the *crème de la crème*. For those who are curious to know the statistics, let us cite some figures. Two thirds of the students of Ivy League universities come from families that belong to the wealthiest 20 per cent of American society. In some select universities such as Princeton and Yale, which provide highest quality education at the BA level (while some others such as Harvard concentrate more on the postgraduate level), the offspring of families who belong to the top 1 per cent of income distribution number higher than the children of those that belong to the lowest 60 per cent income group.<sup>26</sup>

Given all this, it is no wonder that a family paid **1.2 million dollars in bribes** in order to have their daughter (who had never even played football) to be admitted to Yale by presenting her as a football star! This is extremely good investment if you have the money. Yale graduates are almost certain to make it to the top one per cent of the income bracket. The *minimum* annual income of the top one per cent is 630 thousand dollars.<sup>27</sup> The sum of 1.2 million dollars will be amortised in a matter of two years!

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<sup>26</sup> Sandel, s. 16. For detailed information on Britain see Savage, p. 240-47.

<sup>27</sup> Sandel, op. cit., p. 27.



If it is true that the class formation of the modern petty-bourgeoisie is displaying a dynamic in the direction of turning into a caste-like structure, this social group (in both its components) has nothing to expect from the working class or other toiling sectors of the population, whatever its attitude may have been towards them in the earlier period of its formation. Its main aim, in fact, should be expected to be to emphasize its difference and to deepen the chasm that separates it from those social groups in order to strengthen the process of itself becoming a caste-like formation. It will also try to sever whatever ties may have been established in the past. In this phase of capitalist society, the working classes are suffering from a swamp-like stagnant poverty. According to the mind-blowing estimations of Thomas Piketty and his colleagues, the average income of a working-age member of the working class was 35 thousand dollars in 1964 and has stayed at the same real (i.e. purchasing-power) level ever since! For half a century (precisely the half-century that we are trying to understand) the average wage level has remained the same!<sup>28</sup> Why would the modern petty-bourgeoisie wish to tie up with this class? This picture also explains why the overwhelming majority of the student body at universities have become to a great extent depoliticised and broken away from the socialism that students were attracted to in the past. Our first proposition regarding postmodernism derives from these observations: ***postmodernism is the ideology of the modern petty-bourgeoisie and the educated (semi-) proletariat (plus the student youth who are aspiring to join those strata) to segregate itself from the proletariat and the poor.*** Postmodernism is the ideological counterpart of the so-called gated communities, housing estates that are guarded against the poor.

This proposition is true in its fullest sense only for the imperialist countries. Other countries (whether semi-industrialised of the BRICS type or outright poor countries or the former workers' states) are bound to display differences to various degrees from this overall verdict. But the essence of the proposition holds in those countries as well, however modified by other tendencies vying with this fundamental one. The validity of this tendency depends on a host of economic, political, cultural, historical factors, among which the relationship of the country with imperialism plays a special part.

## 5. The crisis of the bureaucratic workers' states

The second material condition of the historic rise of postmodernism is the collapse in the prestige of Marxism and communism as a result of the crisis of the workers' states. Having come out of World War II with great prestige since it was the Red Army and the revolutionary partisans (guerrillas) from France all the way to China and Korea that defeated Nazism and its allies, socialism started to lose its allure first with the revolution in Hungary in 1956, then with the Prague Spring of 1968, to finally collapse as a result of the downfall of the bureaucratic workers' states one after the other in 1989, in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Since this is a rather familiar aspect of turn-of-the-century history, we will not

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 214.

go into detail, but simply draw conclusions for our purposes in this article.

We have persistently emphasised all throughout our writings a widely neglected point regarding the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This history cannot be written without close attention paid to the part played by the October revolution of 1917 and the Soviet state, the first durable workers' state in history. On the other side of the medallion, we find this verity: it is impossible, as the post-Leninists have been trying to do, to explain the situation in which Marxism, socialism, the workers' movement, and class struggles around the world find themselves in at this beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century simply by looking at the changes that have come over capitalist society. The assessment of the present-day world situation cannot be made without bringing in the collapse of the experience of 20<sup>th</sup> century socialist construction. This goes for understanding the half-century hegemony of postmodernism as it does for other major events.

In this article we will not dwell on the story of the collapse of the 20<sup>th</sup> century experience of socialist construction nor of the so-called "communist" (i.e. Stalinist) movement, the bearer of that experience. We will go directly into a discussion of how these resulted in the rise and long-lasting hegemony of postmodernism. Had the working class been led by a revolutionary Marxist leadership, the Parisian events of 1968 could easily have been converted into a revolution whose chances for success would have been very high. Beyond that, what transpired in three countries of Western Europe around that time (the May events in France, the "hot autumn" of 1969 in Italy, and the 1974 Portuguese revolution) became so many missed revolutionary possibilities in the hands of the Stalinist "communist" parties that had already completed their transformation into national reformist parties. This inadequacy, or rather absence, of proletarian leadership cost the working class highly, in that 1968 turned against it or, in other words, the counter revolutionary aspect of 1968 became dominant.

1968 was also a period when the experience of socialist construction played a role from another angle that again worked against Marxism and communism. This was the entry of Soviet (or Warsaw Pact) tanks into another country, Czechoslovakia, a country in which the Czechs and the Slovaks lived together at that time. This was presented to the world as the "defence of socialism". The intervention crushed the so-called Prague Spring and this even before the trauma created by a similar move during the Hungarian revolution of 1956 had been healed.

When, a decade later, the gigantic working-class struggle of Solidarnosc, a trade-union movement in Poland, was suppressed by a military coup in 1981, the coffin would be sealed definitively for the 20<sup>th</sup> century experience. The reactionary movement led by Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in America in the 1980s, which spread around the world in subsequent years and decades, received a great boost from these successive events in the workers' states. The collapse of all the workers' states in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 was almost a confirmation of a fate already sealed.

One way or another, this collapse, followed almost immediately by the collapse and dissolution of the Soviet Union and the elemental process of the restoration of capitalism in China and Vietnam somewhat later, led to an immense loss of prestige

for Marxism. In a certain sense, Marxism was buried under the rubble when Stalinism collapsed.

It is not true that postmodernism obtained an intellectual victory vis-à-vis what truly had been the most powerful socio-economic system of thought ever seen in history. In its struggle against Marxism, the dice were fixed in its favour: Stalinism tied the hands of Marxism and postmodernism won a one-sided war.

Further on we shall see how this easy victory, in conjunction with the new class composition of capitalist society, created a new political matrix that would lead a happy marriage with postmodernism.

But since we have now reached the late 1970s and early 1980s, it becomes necessary to include a new factor, one that has *marked our history of the last half-century*, into our analysis. This new factor is neoliberalism.

## **6. The standard-bearers of neoliberalism: von Hayek, Friedman, Becker... and Foucault**

The second half of the 1970s saw, on the one hand, the adoption by the international bourgeoisie of the neoliberal strategy as a solution to the economic crisis that was then called the “oil crisis”, and, on the other, a sharp turn in the political orientation of Michel Foucault, undeniably the most important thinker of postmodernism, in that he now abandoned his furtive war of attrition against Marxism in favour of the raising of the banner of reactionary politics. This process unfolded in three different stages.

As is quite commonly discussed, with the blow to the Bretton Woods system as a result of the cutting off of the link between the dollar and gold, followed by the 1973-74 crisis, the international bourgeoisie grasped the long-term nature of the crisis that had set in and changed its overall strategic orientation sharply. The old Keynesian framework of economic policy and the measures brought together under the general heading of the “welfare state”, adopted in the post-war period as a political-ideological line of defence against the Soviet Union were abandoned and neoliberalism was embraced as the strategic orientation with the purpose of changing the balance of forces in favour of the bourgeoisie through the atomisation of the working class and the toiling masses. After the Soviet Union stopped posing a threat for the capitalist world, most definitively in the 1990s, this was bolstered by the adoption of the globalist policy perspective of the same international bourgeoisie, thus contributing to the consolidation of the neoliberal strategy.

In almost every country, this new orientation resulted in the birth of liberal tendencies within the left itself. For instance, in Britain, in the land of Margaret Thatcher to add insult to injury, *Marxism Today*, the theoretical organ of the Communist Party of Great Britain, became a completely liberal publication, all the while claiming that capitalism had entered a new stage. Stuart Hall, the editor of the journal, became a symbolic name as the defender of views mingling left-wing liberalism with postmodernism.

In France, a parallel tendency was born within the CFDT, the second largest

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trade-union confederation then and the largest nowadays, led at that time by a certain Edmond Maire. This new liberal tendency, all the more striking in a country where the liberal tradition had been weak even in the ranks of the bourgeoisie (compare Gaullism), led to the appellation “Second Left” or even more scathingly the “American left” by the more traditional left. The main intellectual figure within this tendency was Pierre Rosanvallon and the main political leader Michel Rocard, a politician who initially pursued a career in a small left-wing party, but then joined the main social democratic party of the country, the Parti Socialiste and was to even hold the office of prime minister at a certain stage. Michel Foucault’s flirtation with liberalism first started in his relation with this circle.

Yet this is nothing when compared to what was to come later. The second stage of Foucault’s declaration of war on Marxism is much more tumultuous. In the aftermath of the so-called Chinese Great Cultural Revolution, in Western Europe, some very fiery Maoist intellectuals of an earlier period, as is common in such turbulent periods, swiftly moved towards rabidly anti-communist positions from the mid-1970s onwards. Of these renegades, turned into “celebrities” on television screens through the cunning policies of the bourgeoisie and called the “New Philosophers”, two were brought spectacularly under the limelight: Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann. The balance sheet of the swift change that came about in this period, one that may easily be characterised as an “intellectual counter revolution”, has been admirably drawn by Cusset, the author of *French Theory*, in terms of publishing houses, journals and the main figures.<sup>29</sup> Communism was not the only target of this wave. In its overall assault on the “totalitarian state”, it targeted not only Marxism but the entire left, not only socialist revolutions, but also the French revolution of 1789, ordinarily considered to be the paradigmatic instance of a bourgeois revolution.

It was in this general commotion that Foucault decided to own up the “New Philosophers” when his former student André Glucksmann brought out a book titled *Les maîtres à penser* (The Masterminds) in 1977. The book advanced the idea that those who bear the true responsibility for the forced labour camps, widely known as the Gulag Archipelago, in the Soviet Union under Stalin are Hegel, Marx, and all the other masterminds who defend the reshaping of the world on the basis of reason. In the weekly *Nouvel Observateur*, a magazine widely read by the entire left, Foucault wrote a panegyric of the book, without the slightest reservation or caveat. For the benefit of the reader, let us add that Glucksmann held the masters responsible not only for the Gulag but also for Auschwitz. In his first book, published in 1975, Glucksmann referred to Foucault’s 1961 *Madness and Civilization* in order to stress the importance of centres of “micro power”. In his 1977 book, on the other hand, he referred to Foucault’s recent book of 1975, *Discipline and Punish*, and brought to the fore the “panopticon ideal”, symbolising ever-present control over everything. To Glucksmann’s mind, Foucault was “the first thinker since Marx who carries out systematic work on the origins of the Modern age”.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Cusset, pp. 324-26.

<sup>30</sup> Michael-Scott Christofferson, “Foucault and New Philosophy: Why Foucault Endorsed André

Let us take this opportunity to draw the reader's attention to another judgment of Foucault's. In writing on Glucksmann's book, Foucault claims that at the basis of the massacres committed lies the "vision of state-revolution with all the final solutions", put forth by the master thinkers.<sup>31</sup> He repeats the same formula elsewhere, talking of the "vacuity of a politics formed around the state/revolution duality".<sup>32</sup> We are of the opinion that these formulae that connect the state and revolution are the product, as we already pointed out in section one above, of the fact that Foucault's entire analysis on "micro power" is the ploy of a strategy that aims to refute Lenin's *The State and Revolution*.

Foucault can no longer hide his detestation of Marxism and communism. Didier Eribon, an assistant of his, in his biography of Foucault, cites many instances of this.<sup>33</sup> It is this detestation that came out openly for the first time thanks to the new wave that the New Philosophers started. The significance of the idea advanced by Foucault in his 1978 Tokyo Lecture to the effect that "the revolution has outlived its days" is clear. And nothing can bring out Foucault's intention than the title of that Lecture: "How to Get Rid of Marxism?"<sup>34</sup>

Yet not even this is that important. It looks almost insignificant when compared to the third stage of Foucault's transformation. Let us start discussing this stage by pointing out that certain changes in Foucault's *philosophical* outlook also came about in this process of transformation.

As has already been indicated, the signature approach in Foucault's treatment of the modern world is his emphasis on centres of "micro power". He was frequently taken to task for this, too. The most commonly mentioned criticism in this respect is the one levelled at Foucault by the American thinker Michael Walzer, who chided him for ignoring reactionary political regimes in his quest to make the "micro-fascism of everyday life" his real scapegoat.<sup>35</sup>

It is self-evident that in his *theoretical* trajectory, Foucault almost totally disregarded the power embodied in the central government.<sup>36</sup> However, there is a point that was overlooked by Walzer and others of his predisposition: from 1976 onwards, in his Collège de France lectures, Foucault changed this attitude and started to show a special interest in central government. Paul Patton, an Australian Foucault scholar,

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Glucksmann's The Master Thinkers", in Daniel Zamora & Michael Behrent (eds.), *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016. Christofferson has also written a book on the topic of the New Philosophers: *French Intellectuals Against the Left. An Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s*, New York/Oxford: Bergahn Books, 2004.

31 Quoted by Christofferson, op. cit.

32 Quoted by Mitchell Dean, "Foucault, Ewald, Neoliberalism, and the Left", in Zamora-Behrent, op.cit..

33 Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, translated from French [into Turkish] by Şule Çiltaş, Istanbul: Ayrıntı, 1989.

34 Quoted by Zamora, "Foucault, The Left, and the 1980s", in Zamora/Behrent. The exact French title is this: "Méthodologie pour la connaissance du monde: comment se débarrasser du marxisme".

35 Michael Walzer, "The Politics of Michel Foucault", David Couzens Hoy (der.), *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

36 We say "in his *theoretical* trajectory", for in the wake of 1968 he frequently crossed swords with state power in *practical* struggles, in company with Maoists or committed intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre. See Eribon, op. cit., p. 218 ff., 233 ff., 258, 266 ff., 286-87, 326 ff.

has commented that the reason for this neglect in the English-speaking world is the delay in translation of the Collège de France conferences into English. In the 1978 and 1979 lectures in particular, Foucault developed a new concept (“governmentality”) in order to take up wholesale the question of power at the central government level.<sup>37</sup>

The sense Foucault attributes to the concept governmentality is of vital importance. In his 1978-1979 Conference published under the title *The Birth of Biopolitics*, he contends that from mid-eighteenth century on, the state went over to a new mode of governmentality, or the art of governing, that is different from both the Middle Ages and the era of Absolutism (or of Mercantilism).<sup>38</sup> In this new stage, rather than taking the most important decisions itself, the state leaves them to economic actors who pursue their own self-interest. True to the method peculiar to postmodernism, rather than studying the historical conditions and the dynamics of this, Foucault investigates which intellectual current represents the method of governing through the market on the part of the state. The school he puts under the limelight is the science of political economy or economic liberalism, whose most salient representative is Adam Smith.

Throughout the school year, outside the original historical representatives of economic liberalism, Foucault also looks carefully into the forms this school later took in Germany (“Ordoliberalism”), in Austria (von Mises, von Hayek and others), and in America (in particular at Chicago University, with Milton Friedman and Gary Becker taking the front stage), thus bringing the debate up to the contemporary world.

In his treatment of this entire problematic in the *Birth of Biopolitics*, there are some very significant aspects of which we must not lose sight:

- 1) Foucault *naturalises* market relations, which Marx had already shown to be the result of socio-economic relations peculiar to a historic era, in other words to the capitalist mode of production. The idea that the predominance of the market is natural is something that Foucault returns to over and over again. On a single page there are five different allusions to the idea that the market is “natural” in essence.<sup>39</sup> Thus, Foucault goes back to the pre-Marxian illusions of classical political economy.
- 2) Behind this lies the idea that, to Foucault’s mind, the internal limitation exercised on the government is imposed not by *subjects* but by *things*.<sup>40</sup> Here we see that Marx’s observation that classical political economy is subject to commodity fetishism, to a conception in which human relations appear as relations between commodities (“things”) proves also valid in the case of Foucault.
- 3) The market is, in this society, the place where everything is verified. Foucault does not use the concept “verified” but creates a neologism: “*véridiction*” or “*veridiction*”. This term signifies a truth that comes out not in an objective sense but one that is subjectively valid or rather valid from the point of view of the

37 Paul R. Patton, “The Reception and Evolution of Foucault’s Political Philosophy”, *Kritike*, vol. 12, No. 2, December 2018.

38 Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique, Cours au Collège de France, 1978-1979*, Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2004.

39 *Ibid*, p. 33.

40 *Ibid*, p. 13.

inner functioning of the system. Thus, by characterising the market as the locus of the veridiction of all things, Foucault shares the perspective of the market as a “process of discovery” in von Hayek’s terms, except of course in postmodern idiom. It is at the end of the discovery process that truth comes out even if this is a truth that is relative or conditional. The market has become the sphere that imposes the truth of social life.<sup>41</sup>

4) We now come to the *most important* point. The *general conclusion* that Foucault draws from his 1978-1979 Conferences is this: “There is no sovereign in the economy.”<sup>42</sup> This should be understood in all its ramifications: what Foucault is saying here is that the state cannot keep the economy under its control, that it is a slave unto the economy. In other words, *planning is impossible!*

5) In effect, the thinker will complement this concluding sentence with the following idea: “In the final analysis, it is this problem that is going to be posed across Europe and the entire modern world through government practice, economic problems, socialism, planning, welfare economics.... And, on the obverse side, everything that looks like planning, an administered economy [the famous French *économie dirigée*], socialism, state socialism will become the problem of whether one can somehow overcome this curse formulated by political economy from its very beginnings, against the economic sovereign, which is, at the same time, the very condition of existence of a political economy.”<sup>43</sup> Together with political economy Foucault has stressed that curse, emphasizing that the state cannot become master of the economy. Closer attention will show that this is not simply a position that declares socialism and classless society impossible. “Welfare economics”, that is to say “the welfare state” itself is also impossible.

Given all this, the naturalisation of the market, the fetishism of commodities, the claim that the market is the indispensable form of the modern economy, Foucault is really advancing the idea that only a liberal economy can survive in this day and age. This is the “theory” that von Mises and von Hayek and Milton Friedman and Gary Becker all defend, cast in philosophical garb.

Beyond the 1978-1979 lectures, which is the fundamental text by Foucault on governmentality, his approach to the economy and to economic policy is but a confirmation, on more concrete questions, of what has already been said. The common approach shared with Hayek extends to areas other than what has been indicated above: Foucault is against social services in general and *public* health care services in particular. This is an opinion that Hayek shares, asserting that health care is no different from any other consumption expenditure (e.g. vacationing) and should be treated accordingly.<sup>44</sup> In addition, Foucault equates the so-called welfare state (the concept he has recourse to is “*sécurité sociale*”, all-important in France) with “bio-power”, which in his thinking is the source of domination over human bodies. Hayek is in agreement with Foucault on the repressive character of the welfare state.<sup>45</sup> Foucault also agrees with Friedman’s objection to state subsidy for public

41 On this cf. Mitchell Dean, op. cit., p. 147.

42 *Naissance*, p. 287.

43 Idem.

44 Zamora, “Foucault, the Excluded, and the Neoliberal Erosion of the State”, in Zamora/Behrent, p. 107.

45 Zamora, “Introduction”, in Zamora/Behrent.

services, claiming that this will only benefit the rich.<sup>46</sup>

But nothing so far written can compete with Foucault's reverence for the other major figure of the Chicago School, Gary Becker. In order to have an idea what kind of figure Becker is, one need only realise that he was characterised as the greatest social scientist of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by none other than Milton Friedman. It must be admitted that Becker is an original thinker: he has analysed many issues never before treated in economic analytical terms such as crime, the family, racial discrimination etc. according to the logic of mainstream economics.

François Ewald, Foucault's assistant, biographer, editor of his collected works, claims that Foucault was truly an admirer of Gary Becker. Ewald also declared this in public at a Chicago conference, held when Foucault was no longer alive, where Becker was also among those present. The reason for this admiration is particularly significant: according to Ewald, Foucault discovered in Becker the "possibility of conceiving power without discipline". His (Becker's) theory of regulation "makes it possible to conduct the behaviour of the other without coercion, through incitation".<sup>47</sup> We would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that Foucault himself has characterised this man as "the most radical of the American neoliberals".<sup>48</sup>

A great many followers of Foucault have disregarded this clear capitulation of their idol to neoliberalism, behaved as if they were captive to an *omertá*, an oath to remain silent, or have even gone further by trying to dress him up as a thinker hostile to neoliberalism. This is no doubt an interesting case in the history of ideas.

As a significant example, let us see the case of the illustrious Italian author, the former revolutionary Antonio Negri. Since it is impossible to deny that Ewald is Foucauldian, Negri takes refuge in the argument that he is a "right-wing Foucauldian" and alleges that the real Foucault follows Marx in "saying that the free market has never existed".<sup>49</sup> In what does Foucault "follow" Marx? Did Marx ever say that planning was impossible? How do we disregard the fact that, precisely around the same time (1978), Foucault was giving conferences to explain "How to get rid of Marx"? In his betrayal to his own past, Negri persists and signs!

## 7. "Identity politics" in the age of egoism

We started out with a "fifty-year solitude" for Marxism. At the point we have reached, we have seen that this half-century really overlaps with three other half-century-long world-historical developments: the rise of the modern petty-bourgeoisie as a class fraction and its quasi-transformation into a caste, the collapse of the bureaucratic workers' states, and the longest-lasting class assault by the international bourgeoisie on the working class and the toilers of the world as a solution to the crisis of world capitalism. Now it is time to rise towards a synthesis of these four

46 Zamora, "Foucault..." *ibid.*, p. 108.

47 Mitchell Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

49 Quoted by Mitchell Dean.



grand historic tendencies.

Naturally, we will first reach a synthesis of the change that has occurred in the material world and then move on to the consequences observable in the ideological and political spheres. Neoliberalism and globalism fundamentally aim to bring about the atomisation of all the classes and strata that are opponents of the bourgeoisie, but first and foremost the working class.

On the ideological plane, the basic tenet of this assault is “everyone for themselves and the devil take the hindmost”. Each individual, at best each family, must have been thrown into a universe where only they must be responsible for their future and no help from any others must be expected. (This is of course only the target to be reached. In real life this state is never achieved, but that is the kind of universe aimed for.) In such a society, it is impossible for any individual (or any family) to adopt any other strategy for survival apart from the pursuit of their self-interest. It is not possible for the individual to expect solutions to their problems from society at large or from certain social institutions. In such a society, egoism is a path onto which people are forcibly pushed. It is not a moral choice; it is an iron necessity.

The collapse of the 20th century experience of socialist construction, on the other hand, has played directly into the hands of neoliberalism *cum* globalism. What distinguished the societies in transition from capitalism to socialism from capitalist societies was not only the abolition of private property in the large-scale means of production and distribution. The overall situation in which health and education were rights for all individuals, where housing, transportation, books, the arts (including the opera and ballet) were offered to the people at quite low cost thanks to government subsidies had created a social environment in which individualism and egoism as categories of social psychology had been pushed to the back burner. Most importantly, there was no unemployment! No one could be laid off from their job (except for very serious discipline infraction) and even if they were, they could have found another job easily. This was a collectivist society where no one had to “run for their lives”. Communism, even at this primitive stage, is the exact opposite of egoism!

The collapse of these states one after the other or their gradual return to capitalism (the cases of China or Vietnam) created immense mistrust among the masses living in capitalist societies toward collective solutions to social ills. The weakening of socialist and communist parties of capitalist countries has its roots in the collapse of the bureaucratic workers’ states.

What we have said so far turns around a concept each human being can understand easily: egoism or selfishness, in the sense of an inordinate love and adoration of the self, paying attention to only self-interest and behaving accordingly, and remaining oblivious to the needs of other individuals and even going so far as to exploit them in the full knowledge of what one is doing. But now we are passing onto another plane. In our opinion, the epoch we are living in also displays a state that may be called *organised egoism*. The coalescing of the modern petty-bourgeoisie with the wealthier and powerful classes and strata and disregarding the fate of all the “plebeian” classes of society, that is to say workers, peasants, toilers of all sorts, ordinary public employees, the jobless, the urban poor, those at the very bottom

of the social hierarchy, the “underclass” as it is sometimes called, in other words the great majority is what we mean by this. This is what is original in the egoism of our epoch. The bourgeoisie and its guardians (politicians, generals, high-level bureaucrats, the intellectual mercenaries of the bourgeoisie and its more mundane propagandists etc.) have always acted with sheer egoism. That is the normal state of capitalist society. What is specific to our epoch is the fact that the upper crust of some strata of the petty-bourgeoisie (and at times the lower strata as well) join these usual suspects in order to form gated communities and segregated school systems and an imaginary Wall of China between its own universe and the world of the plebeians. This was not always so. It is to be hoped that it will not be so in the future.

This, then, is the *synthesis*. The modern petty-bourgeoisie, precisely at a time when its ranks were swelling rapidly thanks to the rapid growth of the mass university, has grasped the chance of turning itself into a caste, by benefitting from the crisis of socialism and Marxism and from the weaknesses of the trade union and political leaderships of the working class, finding itself in an overall situation in which its privileges are not being questioned by any powerful social force. It thus separated itself from the proletariat and the large masses of toilers to a degree not seen in the past. The weakening of the communist movement (we use communism here in the broadest possible sense) has been both precondition of the rise of the modern petty-bourgeoisie and also contributed to its expanded reproduction. The neoliberal and globalist overall environment, with its aspect of unbridled competition, formed the stage on which this entire game was being enacted.

However, as it was forcefully stressed in the last paragraph of the introductory section of this article, the different components of the petty-bourgeoisie also suffer from certain serious social problems. The oppression of women, of gays and trans people, of races and nations and believers in minority religions that find themselves subordinated even when they live as part of the wealthier classes, all this is not only a relic of past historic ages, but also a result of the “divide and rule” policies of the bourgeoisie as the ruling class. Added to this is the question of the destruction of nature as capital accumulates in ruthlessly voracious fashion. The modern petty-bourgeoisie is not happy because this deterioration of the natural environment also harms its own pristine environment, bringing down the market value of its property, including the second houses it owns in the most intact spaces of the natural environment. It therefore organises “Green” parties as a class weapon.

Thus emerge movements that pretend to bring together women or gays and trans people or people from oppressed races, nations or faiths or those that suffer from the destruction of nature etc. In abstract terms these various movements claim to organise all members of the oppressed category in question, *irrespective of social class and standing*. But strangely enough, the numbers of proletarians and members of other plebeian classes and strata that participate in these movements are negligible at best. Since the members of the *haute bourgeoisie* prefer to keep themselves busy in the domains of charity and investment in art works in the guise of support for cultural activities and unwilling to participate in such activities that may at moments get out of hand, these movements of “civil society” remain the *chasse gardée* of the modern petty-bourgeoisie.

It is as if postmodernist thought had been tailor-made for these movements. “Difference” is the fundamental philosophical concept. Everyone faces a *different problem*, everyone will experience their *difference* from others. It is impossible to change society as a whole. What attention should focus on are the centres of “micro-power”. Foucault speaks thus in an interview:

You are asking if a “society as a whole” can function, based on such divergent and dispersed experiences, deprived of a general discourse behind it. I, on the contrary, believe that the very idea of a “society as a whole” lies at the heart of utopia. This idea was born in the Western world within the very specific historical line that had capitalism as its outcome. ... “Society as a whole” is precisely what should not be taken into consideration, except as the object that one has to destroy.<sup>50</sup>

One has to work on singular experiences. The state, classes, class struggles – all these remain outside the horizon of struggle, just as “society as a whole”. Alain Touraine, a thinker close to these views but not himself a postmodernist has theorised the “New Social Movements”. Thus, everyone has their own movement. Political parties that can intervene in the overall functioning of society and change society radically are left outside the radar. “Identity politics”, that is to say organising and struggling around the narrow interests of a singular social position, spreads within the ranks of the modern petty-bourgeoisie and then attracts individuals from other quarters who see themselves in close proximity to one or another of these movements.

It will not please the partisans of the new social movements, but this needs to be observed in all frankness. The bourgeoisie is not really disturbed by these new social movements. As long as the women’s movement leaves aside questions that are of primary interest for working-class women, such as day-care centres, equal pay for equal work, women’s and children’s health and others, bosses are very much inclined to keep up the dialogue with the women’s movement. The European Union is extremely generous in supplying funds to all NGOs, another handy name for “new social movements”.

This gains on additional significance when one remembers that working-class problems remain totally outside the radar. A single example should suffice since it is so very much to the point: The United Nations Human Rights Council organises every year meetings called “Universal Periodic Reviews” of human rights violations for all countries one by one, where representatives from other countries can take the floor and level criticism at the violations of human rights by the country under review in turn. In these meetings, all violations are brought on the table but not questions pertaining to the violation of rights of the working class, neither the barring of trade union organising activities, nor the banning of strikes etc.

From the very beginning of this article, we have stressed the importance of the oppressed groups in question. We repeat this at this point. However, we find the present mode of organising of these groups harmful. We think they bear a class mark that capitulates before capitalist society. We do not only think so, we are cer-

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<sup>50</sup> *Aspettando*, op. cit., p. 37. Our translation from Italian.

tain they do. We nonetheless say that, in its essence, struggle against these types of oppression is rightful. But the representatives of these movements and more generally those who defend the theme of “human rights” without putting the problems to which workers and toilers suffer from on the agenda keep silent despite all criticism. Even if they do not ask themselves the question, the reader may very well wish to know why the problems suffered by workers and the poor are never brought on the agenda and why “new social movements” display symptoms of organised egoism.

Marx characterised the proletariat as the “universal class” that would save humanity from the alienation of the last class society in history. Lenin advanced the idea, in the most emphatic fashion, that if this “universal class” organises and struggles exclusively on the basis of its own class interests, it can save neither society at large nor even itself. He called the policy of concentrating exclusively on the interests of the proletariat “corporatism”. He placed the idea that the proletarian party must fight for political power on the basis of gathering around itself all classes, strata, social groups and layers oppressed and exploited by capitalism and later also imperialism at the centre of its strategy.<sup>51</sup> Together with other Russian Marxists and with the contribution of talented students of his like Gramsci, he used the concept “hegemony” for the act of winning over all the classes and other social groups that may reasonably be expected to take the side of the proletariat against capitalism without the use of coercion, without recourse to force.

This method achieved a resounding victory during the October revolution. This revolution was a gigantic step forward for the emancipation not only of the working class but also of oppressed nations and peoples, of women, and of oppressed religious faiths.<sup>52</sup>

By no means have the “new social movements” taken this policy into consideration, thoroughly hostile as they are to Leninism.

## 8. Postmodernism conquers the “new social movements”

Postmodernism has not only contributed to the questioning of the central position of the proletariat in a general sense. We say “contributed” since the real factor in the loss of this central position of the proletariat had to do with the developments within the material-practical world: the decisive element was the fact that the workers’ states had fallen prey to capitalist restoration, thereby shattering the collectivist aspirations of the masses. Postmodernism strengthened this impact in the ranks of the intelligentsia by providing an alternative to Marxism.

However, its impact was not limited to this alone. Postmodernism conquered the so-called “new social movements” from the inside. The movement that suffered most from this was the century-old women’s liberation movement, in its feminist form. (We will briefly touch upon the same kind of influence for the movements of

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51 See, among others, our *Marksistler, vol. 1: Teori-Pratik Birliđine Dođru*, Chapter 8.

52 For women see Armađan Tulunay, “The Land of the October Revolution: a country of women walking on the road to emancipation”, *Revolutionary Marxism 2018*; for oppressed nations see Sungur Savran, “The Muslim October”, *Revolutionary Marxism 2018*.

gays and trans people.) It is a widespread mistake to think that the “second wave” of the feminist movement born in the 1960s after a period of relative quietude following the “first wave” of feminism set in motion by the “suffragette” movement of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is still with us. Those who think so are deeply mistaken. It is the “third wave” that rules now.<sup>53</sup> And this new wave started precisely at the same historical moment in which postmodernism became a hegemonic force over the feminist movement. Ideas that percolated in the 1980s resulted in the winning over of the dominant wing of feminism by postmodernism starting with the year 1990 in what may be characterised as an explosive development. We see that not only postmodernism in general but the ideas of its most influential thinker Michel Foucault gained around that turning point a wide influence within the feminist movement.<sup>54</sup>

Let us first determine the turning point in concrete terms. The year 1990 is the moment when the book that formed the most advanced instance of the influence of postmodernism and of Foucault on feminism saw the light of day: Judith Butler’s volume *Gender Trouble* laid the ground for a framework to be called “queer theory”, thereby moving the entire discussion on gender to another level. Alongside this, Susan Hekman’s *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism and Feminism/Postmodernism*, a reader edited by Linda Nicholson were brought out in that same fateful year. That very same year a symposium was organised where Judith Butler, on the one hand, and Seyla Benhabib, a student of Jürgen Habermas, the most influential critic of postmodernism in the bourgeois academia, debated one another, joined by two other authors. This debate was published in the journal *Praxis International* the following year. A subsequent edition of the same book was published in German with new articles by the same authors, which was then translated into English and published in 1995 in a volume edited with an introduction by Linda Nicholson, whom we have met earlier.<sup>55</sup>

Immediately before and more so after the turning point of 1990, many other books and anthologies were also published pointing in the same direction. Let us simply mention a few of these since they are emblematic of the deep influence Foucault had on this new literature: Jana Sawicki’s *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power and the Body* (1991), Lois McNay’s *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (1992), Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993) and an anthology compiled by Susan Hekman, *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault* (1996).

An important book in the literature relating to gays and trans people in this vein

53 Among many sources here is a comprehensive one: Susan Archer Mann, “Third Wave Feminism’s Unhappy Marriage of Poststructuralism and Intersectionality Theory”, *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, No. 4, Spring 2013.

54 Actually, French postmodernist feminism emerged earlier, understandably given the primacy of French culture on the question of postmodernism. Julia Kristeva’s influential work in this area may be dated to 1977-1982. “The Laugh of the Medusa” by Hélène Cixous goes back as far as 1976. Luce Irigaray also started to produce her work in the 1970s. See Raman Selden/Peter Widdowson/Peter Brooker, *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Harlow: Pearson Longman, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2005, s. 129-137.

55 *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, New York/London: Routledge, 1995.

is by David M. Halperin, important theoretician of queer theory: *Saint-Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (1995). Need we add that Judith Butler, the creator of “queer theory” is a thinker who closely follows the thinking of Foucault?

If we go back to feminism, we must point out that the 1990s created such an upheaval in feminist theory that Seyla Benhabib, an opponent (albeit with certain concessions) of postmodernism, felt the need to say, in agreement with another feminist writer, Linda Alcoff, that “feminist theory is undergoing a profound identity crisis at the moment”.<sup>56</sup> At around the same time, two authors of Marxist origin, Michèle Barrett and Ann Philips, wrote, for their part:

The founding principles of contemporary western feminism have been dramatically challenged with previous shared assumptions and unquestioned orthodoxies **relegated almost to history**. These changes have been of the order of a “paradigm shift,” in which assumptions rather than conclusions are radically overturned.<sup>57</sup>

Some may still have doubts as to what direction this upheaval pointed to. Let us then cite the unimpeachable judgment of two of the most authoritative feminist authors of the time: “The ultimate stake of an encounter between feminism and postmodernism ... is the prospect of a postmodernist feminism.”<sup>58</sup>

For those readers who wish to see for themselves what acrimonious controversies this transformation led to and how the representatives of the second wave approached and reproached the new generation, we would recommend an article by Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher of the older generation, in which she ferociously attacks Judith Butler.<sup>59</sup>

Now it is time to look at how and in what manner postmodernism influenced feminism. Up until this point in the present section we only presented the reader some empirical information in order to bring out the unexceptionable truth of a new, postmodernist wave of feminism. From this moment on, as the relations of interaction and hegemony between two currents of thought or rather a current of thought and a social emancipation movement are being taken up, we will inevitably bring into the discussion our own assessment of the issues raised. We are no expert in feminism and we would rather leave judgments on this movement to Marxist women, so it is natural that our views will be expressed as they ought to be in humble fashion. On the other hand, because we believe that our grasp of postmodernism is much deeper than those who have lost their way in its maze, we will nonetheless draw some conclusions from our discussion.

Let us then turn to the debate itself. The point of departure of authors who claim that postmodernism and particularly Foucault are natural allies of feminism is the

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<sup>56</sup> *Feminist Contentions*, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted by Susan Archer Mann, op. cit, p. 55, from the authors’ 1992 book, *Destabilizing Theory*, our emphasis.

<sup>58</sup> Nancy Fraser/Linda Nicholson, “Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism”, in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda J. Nicholson (ed.), New York/London: Routledge, 1990, p. 20.

<sup>59</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody. The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler”, *The New Republic*, 22 February 1999.

allegation that the postmodern critique of reason and science, on the one hand, and the discovery by feminism that all the philosophical and scientific ideas developed so far are products of the mind of men, and not women, on the other, overlap. According to this view, postmodernism contends that science and the academia are neither impartial nor objective. Feminists, as well as other currents of thinking that owe their existence to taking the side of the oppressed, have become aware of this fact on their own.<sup>60</sup> Up until this point, there seems to be some shared ground.

However, the critique postmodernism levels at science and the academia goes much farther than this. Taking their cue from Nietzsche and Heidegger, postmodernists claim that science is an impossibility, that it belongs to the category of meta narrative, that the reason that has become dominant in the spheres of philosophy and science ever since the age of Enlightenment has turned truth which is concrete, local, specific, piecemeal, and most importantly necessarily intertwined with a power struggle into one that pretends to be the unquestionable truth of the universe. In other words, they do not only question the procedures and protocols of philosophical and scientific reason as it has developed so far, as the feminists do. They put reason itself in parentheses. Postmodernism is an ideology of scepticism, of relativism, indeed of obscurantism.

It is here that we find the source of the great tremor in feminism. It is because of this that from within the feminist movement that was based, in the past, on perfectly comprehensible and clear ideas, whether one agrees with them or not, a series of currents and authors have separated themselves by writing in terms of a discourse hardly comprehensible to mortals and started to produce texts that are so intricate that they cannot be understood by others.

Of course, the only problem is not the fact of abandoning reason, which is indispensable for every movement fighting for liberation or emancipation. As important is the question of the possibility of the struggle for emancipation itself. In postmodern feminist theory, and particularly in Butler's work, emancipation almost becomes a dream. In the words of Seyla Benhabib, with postmodernism, a tendency towards an "escape from utopia" has flourished.<sup>61</sup> This is no coincidence. In a Foucauldian or Derridean philosophy based on the Nietzsche/Heidegger tradition, the "death" of the subject renders great emancipation struggles an impossibility. That is because emancipation necessarily is always and everywhere the emancipation of a subject.

The obverse side of the medallion is that all of this is supported by an incredibly low quality of criticism directed to Marxism. Jane Flax, a prominent name in postmodernist feminism, "consolidates" her position on the basis of the errors of Marxism, which is the major target of her opposition to meta narratives. According to Flax, the central importance of Marx's categories, in particular of labour, is derived from the generalisation of the specific form of the production of commodities.<sup>62</sup>

The criticism of a theory can be only so wide off the mark! Marx does not derive

<sup>60</sup> Fraser/Nicholson, op. cit., *passim*.

<sup>61</sup> Benhabib, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>62</sup> Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory", in Linda J. Nicholson, op. cit., p. 46-47.

the central importance of labour from the production of commodities that is the necessary form of the product under capitalism. On the exact contrary, it is thanks to the central role played by labour in distinguishing the human from all other organisms in all times that he can correctly recognise what is specific about commodity production. Marx had put Hegel back on his feet. Flax turns Marx upside down and places him on his head!

The other element that complements this criticism of Marx is the reduction of dialectical reason to Enlightenment thinking by postmodernist feminists and postmodernists at large. Once again, the lead role goes to Jane Flax. We bring Seyla Benhabib to the witness box: “Western reason posits itself as the discourse of the one self-identical subject, ... the story of the male subject of reason”. Then Benhabib adds the following, not even realising what she is saying: “If the subject of the western intellectual tradition has usually been the white, propertied, Christian, male head of household, ...”<sup>63</sup> Propertied? Marx’s subject? No one aware of the fact that for Marx there is never a single subject, but since the beginning of written history there has been a struggle between the exploiters and the exploited, the oppressors and the oppressed, can write this sentence about Marx, whoever else they may wish to include within the authors of this idea. Here it is clear that in order to get rid of Marx (remember Foucault, “How to get rid of Marx?”), one needs to abstract from the decisive difference between Marx and the philosophers of the ruling classes.

Let us conclude with a quip by Sheila Benhabib. She reminds us that the 1980s had opened up with the discovery of the “Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism”.<sup>64</sup> At the end of the decade, she concludes, one realises that behind the restlessness lay a more seductive courter.<sup>65</sup>

Unless feminism itself overcomes the damage done by postmodernism in its bosom, it will not be able to establish an alliance for real emancipation with other social struggles (the exception is the movement of gays and trans people, which seems to have become one with feminism under the umbrella of queer theory). All around the world, the women’s movement is one of the most robust and lively sectors within the masses, be it the struggle against violence or for the right to abortion or still other areas. But as long as the outer frame of this struggle is maintained within the straitjacket of postmodernism, the mainstream of the women’s movement will remain captive to the ideology of the wealthy strata of the modern petty-bourgeoisie.

## 9. Towards the end of the age of egoism

At this stage we have to pose the following question: is the age of egoism here to stay? Are postmodernism and left-wing liberalism as the ideological expressions of this age philosophies of the future? Certainly not! History moves in accordance

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63 Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance”, in Nicholson (ed.), *Feminist Contentions*, op. cit. p. 19.

64 Heidi Hartmann, 1981. “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union.” In *Women and Revolution*, edited by Lydia Sargent, Boston: South End Press, 1981.

65 Benhabib, op. cit., p. 17.



with the laws of the dialectic, which implies constant change. Postmodernism as an ideology will lose its allure when the material conditions of the age of egoism are eliminated and its prestige within the intelligentsia will dwindle as its weight within social movements and struggles declines.

Certain symptoms already suggest that the process of the disappearance of the age of egoism is about to begin. We first observe the deterioration of the conditions of the reproduction of the modern petty-bourgeoisie as a caste. The part the university plays in the reproduction of this caste-like structure is weakening perceptibly especially for the educated layers of the (semi-) proletarian layers (which we have mostly treated as a part of the overall phenomenon of the rise of the modern petty-bourgeoisie for the purposes of convenience). The Third Great Depression that started in 2008, after hitting the poorest sections of the population, has already started to dim the future prospects of this relatively more well-to-do part of the class hierarchy as well. As a result of this, apart from the offspring of the most prosperous families (who attend the most prestigious universities), graduates are more and more facing the prospect of unemployment and, concomitantly, increasing difficulty to pay back the student debt they contracted while going to college.

We should add to this a contradiction created by the very success of the university as a mechanism for the formation of a caste-like structure. Whereas initially a university degree was a key to distinguish oneself from the lower classes, the very fact of this success started to attract these lower classes to the university at whatever cost. As the children of the members of the working class also became enrolled at universities, new problems were bound to emerge. The most salient among these is that the working-class or oppressed minority youth (the two categories overlapping in many cases) with scant economic means, poorly educated in decrepit high schools, and poorly equipped in cultural terms because of the parents' low level of education, have to go for student debt in order to meet the ever-increasing tuition and fees of college education as demand increases, but will have to drop out after a certain point and thus leave the whole family face to face with a quagmire of debt.<sup>66</sup> This is why in the United States, for instance, student debt had reached the astronomical sum of 1.7 trillion dollars and the Biden administration has now decided to cancel some of this debt under great pressure. The formation of the caste-like structure has become so vulnerable as a result that the number of students who apply for college admission has even started to decline.<sup>67</sup> In a certain sense, then, the trend that emerged half a century ago is finally going into reverse gear.

This multi-faceted process does not only push graduates to share the same common fate with the main body of the proletariat. In one of those mischievous reversals of the dialectic, it pushes these same people to the forefront of the class struggle. The increasing numbers of the educated workforce who, because of the decreasing opportunities of privileged jobs, head towards physical labour (particularly in the services sector), play an undeniable part in the palpable increase in the unionisa-

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<sup>66</sup> "They Got the Debt but Not the Degree", *New York Times*, <http://alturl.com/oqm85>.

<sup>67</sup> "College Enrollment Drops, Even as the Pandemic's Effect Ebbs", *New York Times*, <http://alturl.com/g59s3>.

tion drive in these industries, perhaps also because of the wide chasm between their earlier expectations and their present plight.<sup>68</sup> In other words, the new members of the strata of the educated workforce that had become accustomed to existing as a labour aristocracy are now starting to lose their aristocratic privileges and coming forth with their unalloyed proletarian attributes. The children of the strata who, in the past, imbibed “fair trade” coffee at Starbucks, pontificating on the pollution of the environment or questions pertaining to feminism or to LGBTQI+ now take the lead in the unionisation drive at the same Starbucks chain.

Secondly, neoliberalism suffered a grave debacle in 2008. Now it has become the topic of a fiery debate within the ranks of the ruling classes of all countries. Globalism, the international dimension of neoliberalism, and its twin the mythical theory of globalisation acting as its ideological handmaid, have already gone bankrupt. On the one hand, governments of different political persuasion turn their faces more and more to protectionism and all flows within the international economy (foreign capital, foreign trade, credit flows, technological cooperation etc.) have slowed down if they have not suffered an absolute decline. On the other hand, the rise of proto-fascism or outright fascist movements fan the flames of nationalism and protectionism deliberately. In fact, this tendency is becoming hegemonic and governments that do not share any of the other characteristics of proto-fascism (and most clearly the Biden administration in the United States) adopt the same kind of nationalist and protectionist economic policies. Finally, the Ukraine war leads to a further fragmentation of the world economy, under the impact of both sanctions and the cessation of trade in certain sectors due to hostilities.

The same will occur somewhat later within the domestic aspect of neoliberalism. The depression that started in 2008, as we have discussed in greater detail elsewhere, displays certain specificities relative to the previous two. It is a depressive crisis that is deepening only gradually. The most important factor here is China, with a special dynamic of its own, whose extremely high level of economic growth even in the morose environment of the Third Great Depression has acted to rejuvenate, so to speak, the agonising world capitalist economy. But China itself is now slowing down, as was to be expected in a world environment of paltry economic growth. It is impossible for an economy that has laid its stakes on the role of the “workshop of the world” not to be negatively influenced from the meagre forces of that world. Growth based on over-credit is becoming ever more problematic in that country, in a process where the construction industry and local government loom forth as the weak links. The big risk is that the banking industry might join those weak links. On the other hand, first the pandemic and now the Ukraine war have caused great blows to the world economy. This coming winter is bound to create great social unrest, especially in European countries. Neoliberalism cannot act as the basis of state policy under such dire conditions. The nationalisation of the natural gas industry both in France and Germany are only the first signs of the incongruity of market methods and the coming profound crisis.

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<sup>68</sup> “The Revolt of the College-Educated Working Class”, *New York Times*, 28 Nisan 2022, <http://alturl.com/2uu8g>.

We thus see that of the three material conditions of postmodernism two are in the process of losing their validity. However, the third condition, the crisis of Marxism seems to have a long life. Despite the turbulent period of popular uprisings, people's rebellions and revolutions that has set in since the Arab revolutions of 2011, this crisis is far from its denouement. Many of these popular uprisings were directly an outcome of class struggle dynamics. But socialist/communist movements, sunk deep into a malaise of which they cannot recover, are no longer capable, neither theoretically, politically, and morally, nor organisationally of leading such powerful popular movements. Hence, the different episodes of the revolutionary wave that shook the world first between 2011 and 2013 and then in 2019 ended all in a frustrating return to the *status quo ante* (no doubt under the impact of other important factors as well)<sup>69</sup>.

That is why the supremacy of postmodernism and of left-wing liberalism in the theoretical and ideological domains is well and alive, without any major inroads. This is indeed extremely ironic, since as opposed to genuine Marxism, postmodernism has not only not foreseen where the world is going, but is even responsible in the first degree of all the catastrophe that is descending on our future. Moreover, humanity has now come on the threshold of fascism and of a new world war and postmodernism has nothing to propose to fight these ills.

This renders our task doubly challenging: if we are not going to sit by idly while the world is being destroyed by the powerful and the greedy, we will have to, on the one hand, work with all our might to create revolutionary parties and a revolutionary International, and, on the other, continue our work ceaselessly in the field of the "battle of ideas".

## Conclusion

In this article, we looked for an answer to the following question: what are the driving forces behind the "fifty years of solitude" that has befallen Marxism or, what is but the same thing in obverse facet, behind the supremacy of postmodernism over the intellectual universe of the left in the last half-century?

There are two very widespread answers to this question. The first is of course the answer provided by the partisans of postmodernism itself. To their mind, Marxism was either wrong from the beginning or has lost its validity since we entered the postmodern age and thus ceded the ground to postmodernism. The other is the answer given by a set of Marxist theoreticians: as capitalism has entered an entirely new stage, a new school of thought (or a family of such schools) have replaced Marxism as the dominant intellectual current. Manifestly, this seems to be a materialist explanation. However, by granting that, whatever it is called, "postmodernity" or whatever else, these Marxists are in effect ceding the ground to the postmodernist

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<sup>69</sup> We tried to analyse these factors in the light of both 2011-2013 and 2019, in Turkish. See our "Arap Devriminin Sorunları", *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 17-18, Winter-Spring 2013 and "Arap Devriminin Dirilişi: Türkiye İçin Dersler", *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 39-40, Summer-Fall 2019.

school.<sup>70</sup>

If this article has anything novel to offer, it is the idea that the rise of postmodernism and the eclipse of Marxism are two sides of the same coin and are the synthetic result of three phenomena contemporaneous with this decline and rise, three phenomena that have come about in the material-practical world, i.e. the rise and transformation of the modern petty-bourgeoisie into a caste-like social structure, the crisis and ultimately collapse of the bureaucratic workers states, and the rise of neoliberalism as a crisis-resolution strategy of international capital. These are all *transitory phenomena*. Otherwise, one cannot, by any means, talk about a new stage of history, postmodernity or whatever else.

All the errors, contradictions, at times fantastic dimensions, of the family of schools of thinking affiliated to postmodernism have been taken up in the various pieces published in this issue of our journal. The most reliable criterion of the truth or falsity of a theory is the judgment passed by practice over time on the “knowledge” provided by that theory. The falseness of the predictions made by these theories over a time span of 16 years have been exposed constantly in the 50 issues of *Devrimci Marksizm* (our Turkish mother publication) and the six annual issues of *Revolutionary Marxism*.

All the predictions of Marxism have turned out to be correct. All the predictions of postmodernism and its cousin (through Foucault, it has been shown in this article) left-wing liberalism, both on the world scale and within Turkey itself, have been refuted by practical life. Let us content ourselves with a single example. When Lehman Brothers went bankrupt in 2008, in an assessment published immediately after the event, the Editorial Board of this journal predicted developments that have all been borne out: the entry of the world economy in a phase of great depression, the rise of fascism internationally, the emergence of the threat of a world war in the horizon, revolutionary upheavals etc.<sup>71</sup> The utmost value of this journal lies in those predictions since Marxism is not an acrobatics of the mind but a guide for action for the revolutionary proletarian movement that aspires to a classless society.

In what sense, then, is the discussion laid out in this article a guide for action? To the extent that revolutionary Marxism as a political current has always defended the establishment of an alliance between the oppressed masses and the proletariat, to the extent that it has always claimed that total emancipation for the oppressed can only come about under the political rule of the working class, the adepts of identity politics have accused it of postponing the struggle of the oppressed until after the revolution. However, we can now clearly see that the currents of identity politics in our day and age do not only refrain from collaborating with the proletariat. They refuse to have even *the slightest link* with it. Of course, there are those who still

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<sup>70</sup> We hope to show, on a future occasion, that this attitude is in effect a kind of capitulation to postmodernism. Three prominent instances: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, London: SAGE, 1989; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992; Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism, A Marxist Critique*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.

<sup>71</sup> Devrimci Marksizm Yayın Kurulu, “Yeni Bir Dönem Açılıyor: Mali Çöküş, Depresyon, Sınıf Mücadelesi”, *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 8, Winter 2008-2009.

consider themselves socialists within these identity politics movements. Some of them may even still consider that proletarian socialism is important for the future of humanity. However, this only remains a thought process, never being translated into action. The socialism of the socialists within such movements exists as a faith that belongs to the sphere of private life.

Faced with this reality, what is to be done should be clear: the consolidation and strengthening of a revolutionary proletarian party that absorbs into the programme for the political power of the proletariat, the winning over of the class to Lenin's conceptions; the persuasion of certain currents within the oppressed masses and layers by the party that the proletarian programme for power will bring in its wake their emancipation; the move by these currents to then convince the masses of the oppressed to make the choice between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; the raising of the struggle against the bourgeoisie together on the part of the proletariat and the oppressed masses who regroup around it; with the seizure of power by the proletariat the termination of all the different forms of oppression that come from the depths of history and have served in modern times the bourgeoisie to divide and all the more firmly rule over the masses.

Such is the alternative method of approaching the question. This is the establishment of proletarian hegemony. Not by force, not through coercion. The Leninist definition of hegemony implies the taking over of leadership without the use of force. Everything will depend on persuasion, propaganda, agitation and, of course, organising.

Some might ask: why is a sort of priority accorded to the working class? Why do you speak of "hegemony" and not simply an alliance or cooperation? If we speak of hegemony, that is because only two forces can possess the position of ruling class in modern society: the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. Whoever refuses to stand by the proletariat, whoever wishes to stay away from its quest for power, that class, that stratum, that group or that person will be buttressing the current ruling class, the bourgeoisie.

The proletariat is not only the object of the gravest cruelties of capitalism. It is the only force that can lead the fight to destroy the monster. That is why all the oppressed of the world need to gather around the proletariat. The proletariat is the subject of history. Postmodernism declared the death of the subject. It is our wager to bring it alive in the person of the proletariat.