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# SOCIALISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY – MORE THAN A UTOPIA?<sup>1</sup>

In the introduction to his «Tübinger Philosophie,» Ernst Bloch (1996: 95) differentiated between utopias that are «abstract» and «utopias that become concrete.» They remain abstract in so far as «their schemes could not be connected to the available societal tendency and possibilities ... they have to remain abstract in so far as they came too early.» Concrete utopias, on the other hand, contemplate a life without fear and compulsion, which is really possible and necessary, as the negation of the existing relations. The 20th century was, on the one hand, a «century of socialism,»<sup>2</sup> on the other – when it ended – a century of defeats and disappointed hopes, which were connected to socialism. The world which fell apart at the end of the 1980s, thus Eric Hobsbawm in the «Age of Extremes» (1998: 18), was a «world shaped by the effects of the 1917 Russian Revolution. We were all marked by it.»<sup>3</sup> A few years later, in his autobiography, he reminded us that – in view of the prevailing opinion since 1991 that there was absolutely no alternative to the society of individualistic capitalism and the political system of liberal democracy – «during the greater part of the 20th century ... such assumptions seemed quite implausible. Capitalism itself appeared to be standing at the edge of an abyss. As absurd as it may sound now, between 1930 and 1960 reasonable observers assumed that the state-controlled economic system of the Soviet Union with its five-year plans, which even the most sympathetic visitors had to find primitive and inefficient, represented a global alternative model to Western «free enterprise.» At that time the word «capitalism» attracted just as little approval as the word «communism» does today. Sober observers believed this system would in the long run overtake capitalism in productive capacity. I am not at all surprised to find myself once again in a generation which has become skeptical of capitalism, although it also do not believes in our alternative» (Hobsbawm 2002: 466).

1.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is becoming ever clearer that socialism's epochal defeats coincide with just as epochal transformation processes in the global capitalist system. The-

se in turn combine with the Great Crisis since 2007, which brought the social formation of global financial-market capitalism to the edge of the abyss and fundamentally delegitimized the ideology and policies of «neoliberalism.» The main tendencies in society's political development admittedly do not point to a renaissance of socialism as a «real movement,» nor as the answer to the Great Crisis:

– In the old capital metropolises (North America / Western Europe) the reactions to the crisis tend more to the right than to the left.<sup>4</sup> The weakness of the left was not overcome

1 This text is based on a lecture I gave on June 26, 2010 at a conference organized by wissentransfer [«knowledge-transfer»] and the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung in Berlin on the same theme. 2 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights – approved and proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948 – is completely appropriate for illustrating this thesis; for it documents after the Second World War – after the «Age of Catastrophes» – a global consensus on a model of cohabitation of people characterized by the peaceful resolution of conflicts, war against poverty, the individual's rights to freedom, democratic constitutions and education. Alongside the classic human rights (which go back to the declarations of human rights in the American and French revolutions at the end of the 18th century), we find here, next to the right to property, social basic rights, for example in Article 22, the right to social security, or in Article 23, paragraph 1: Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. Finally, Article 25, paragraph 1: «Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.» This Declaration points up two things: 1) the rights of freedom and social basic rights constitute a unity; 2) The rights that define «a good commonwealth» (almost on a world scale) are – in contrast to the utopias of early modernity – not understood as a far-off ideal, but as an objective possibility, as necessary and realizable goals. Finally, these rights are to be universally valid; they therefore form the legitimate standard for the criticism of social and political conditions that fall below its standard or violate it. 3 Ralph Miliband, Marxist political scientist and socialist on the left wing of the British Labour Party, founder of the *Socialist Register* now edited by Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, conceded in his last book (*Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, 1994), that «the model of the Bolshevik Revolution was decisive for all 20<sup>th</sup>-century revolutions.» With this revolution, there was the coalescence in the whole world of the hope of ending the suffering of the oppressed. «From Paris to Calcutta, from New York to Johannesburg, people who numbered among the most committed, militant and selfless activists of the left, cultivated their strength; and they subscribed unreservedly to Stalin's thesis, already formulated by him in 1927, that «a revolutionary is one who is ready to protect the USSR and defend it – without hesitation ..., openly and honestly; for the USSR is the basis of the revolutionary movement in the world, and this revolutionary movement can only be defended and brought forward if the USSR is defended,» (Miliband 1994: 43–44). 4 The November 2008 election of Barack Obama as President of the United States was hailed by many as the reaction to the failure of the «new right» around George W. Bush as well as a reaction to the financial-market crisis and thus as a left turn; since then such hopes have given way to more sober assessments especially as regards Obama's foreign policy. In 2010 we can still not conclusively tell if his program of war on poverty domestically and for control of the financial markets will have even partial results (see, among others, Soltz 2009). In any case, the opposition to Obama has shifted radically to the right (Tea Party movement). The success of Die LINKE in Germany is absolutely exceptional in comparison to electoral results in other European countries

through the crisis; the tendency to »authoritarian capitalism« (Deppe et al. 2008) has been reinforced.<sup>5</sup>

- In the periphery – in some Latin American countries – several regimes (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador) are pursuing the project of »socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century« (Boris et al. 2005; Boris 2007). The left shift there was, among other reasons, the result of catastrophes perpetrated by the military dictatorships since the 1970s and the neoliberal regimes of the 1980s and 1990s. This socialism is developing in a democratic way; it is pursuing the goal of overcoming the misery of the masses and making them capable of self-government. This requires laying hands on national resources, changing the relations of property (land reform) and barricading themselves against the economic and political power of the USA and the transnational corporations. It is in no way clear that this project can survive.
- In East Asia – with the People’s Republic of China at its center – an explosive development of export-oriented capitalism is being implemented, which is being planned and steered by an authoritarian state – led by China’s Communist Party. It is still an open question whether the hopes for a new type of »market socialism« (most recently Arrighi 2009) will be fulfilled, or the fear justified that Western states will copy this model of a financial-market capitalism steered by an authoritarian state. In any case, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century this problem will be at the center of major conflicts within societies and on the international level.

That the world after the end of the Cold War and of the competition between systems (1917–1991) finds itself in an epoch of turbulent and crisis-ridden ruptures, was recently strongly confirmed by the Great Crisis since 2007 – but also by the increase in the use of force in international politics (Roth 2009). It looks as if capitalism has gotten rid of all its opponents.<sup>6</sup> The socialist counter-model to capitalist world dominion – the transcendence of the logic tied to the private ownership of the means of production, to capital accumulation and free competition – remains weak also because the possible active subjects of such a transformation – the classes of wage workers as well as the masses of the precariat, as a whole that large majority of the world’s population which can be counted among the »subaltern bloc« (it was formerly called »the wretched of the earth«) – are behaving rather passively and / or their struggles in various parts of the world are not coordinated or unified. David Harvey (2010: 66) states: »nowadays the main problem lies in the fact that capital is too strong and the labor movement is too weak – and not the reverse!«

In view of the weakness of a »counter-hegemonic bloc« scenarios of negative utopias are imposing themselves. On the one side, with the rise of East Asia (in particular the rise of China, see Miqui Li, 2008), shifts in the power structure of the world order (from West to East) are occurring, which could certainly mean the end of that capitalist world system (and of the »American Century«). At the same time, however, new conflicts around the economic and political distribution of power in the international system are building up, which also have the potential for new military confrontations. On the other side, the crisis tendencies in the capitalist world system are increasing as well as the readiness to implement imperialist interests or religiously clothed claims of dominion through force. And with this the pessimistic diagnosis of the »iron cage of dependency [bondage],« which Max Weber

attached to modern capitalist systems in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, takes on ever more concrete form: as the tendency to an authoritarian capitalism, which secures the domination of financial markets and the (alleged) »freedom« and openness of the markets through state intervention, while inside itself, via state and market, the system establishes a »control society« (Foucault), which is intended to nip in the bud the potential of social protest and resistance, the opening of the subalterns toward socialist alternative programs.

Nevertheless, what is involved here is basically an open historical constellation, completely characteristic of transitional periods, but also for pre-revolutionary periods: discontent among the people grows, the old regime is destabilized as a result of a chain of (domestic and international political) crises, the ruling bloc disintegrates. The talk of »ungovernability« thus indicates a creeping political crisis, in which the state has to use continually more violence in order to uphold the existing order. The transition from a crisis of the »ruling bloc« to a (revolutionary) people’s movement from below has, however, often been a very long one; as a rule it presupposes a crumbling of the ancient régime’s state apparatus, or: the latter increasingly loses control over social stability. Only when the intellectuals pass on to a radical critique of the ancient régime and the lower popular classes give up hope of improving their life conditions inside the existing economic and political order, only then has the hour of those »revolutions« struck, which finally, from 1989 to 1991, hastened (even if they were an inversion of the content of the revolutionary central tendency of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) the world-historical upheaval in the direction of an epoch of turbulence and a new order.

## 2.

In the Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* (1859/60), Marx – after the experiences of the 1848 revolutions in Europe – synthesized the conditions of transition from one social formation to a new one as follows: »No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation« (MEW 13: 9). Marx’s philosophy of history was oriented, on the one hand, to the concept of progress of the Enlightenment and of idealism. In the *Manifesto*, the transition from feudalism to bourgeois-capitalist society, the realization of the »bourgeois epoch«, was celebrated as progress: »All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations

<sup>5</sup> David Harvey (2010: 218): »There are no signs that people in the advanced capitalist countries (aside from those who are normally discontent) are looking to a radical change in their way of life, although many realize that they must here and there limit some things or save.« He reminds us that »It took, for example, three or four years before the stock market crash of 1929 produced the massive social movements (both progressive and fascist) after 1932 or so« (Ibid. 217). <sup>6</sup> Thus Francis Fukuyama already at the beginning of the 1990s, when he proposed his thesis of »the end of history,« that is, that capitalist market economy and representative democracy have resisted the attacks by Bolshevism and fascism. There are no more challengers – whence »the end of history.«

with his kind» (MEW 4: 465). In saying this he was perfectly conscious that this transition would occur quite differently and non-contemporaneously in different countries and regions (for example, in England or Russia or in India and China). As soon as Marx analyzed the political revolutions of his time (Deppe 2008a) he not only avoided misjudgments, but he at the same time recognized their highly contingent character, that is, the never perfectly calculable course of the revolution, of the development of the relation of forces of classes and thus what would condition their success. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) he wrote: «Bourgeois revolutions, like those of the eighteenth century, storm more swiftly from success to success, their dramatic effects outdo each other, men and things seem set in sparkling diamonds, ecstasy is the order of the day – but they are short-lived, soon they have reached their zenith, and a long hangover takes hold of society before it learns to assimilate the results of its storm-and-stress period soberly. On the other hand, proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, constantly criticize themselves, constantly interrupt themselves in their own course, return to the apparently accomplished, in order to begin anew; they deride with cruel thoroughness the half-measures, weaknesses, and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their opponents only so the latter may draw new strength from the earth and rise before them again more gigantic than ever, recoil constantly from the indefinite colossalness of their own goals – until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves call out: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*» (MEW 8: 118).<sup>7</sup> Marx, however, was convinced that the «half-measures» and «defeats» of proletarian-socialist revolutions could be overcome to the extent that the relations themselves, that is, the «degree of ripeness» of developed capitalist relations of production make a change of formation possible and necessary. He did not want to pin himself down to specifying the forms of this transition and its duration – whether violent or peaceful, whether a «revolutionary break» or a gradual transition.

After the experiences of the 1917 Russian October Revolution and of the revolutionary mass movements at the end of the First World War in Europe, V. I. Lenin, in *Left-Wing Communism-An Infantile Disorder* (1920) formulated the basic law of revolution as follows: «It is not enough that the exploited and oppressed masses become conscious of the impossibility of continuing to live in the old way and demand a change; ... for revolution it is necessary that the exploiters can no longer live and rule in the old way ...; only then, when the «lower strata» no longer want the old, and the «upper strata» cannot go on in the old way, only then can the revolution be victorious ... that is, revolution is impossible without a total national crisis (of the exploited and the exploiters) ...» (Lenin 1964: 453).

These quotes from the so-called «classics»: draw our attention to two dimensions of transition. On the one side, the transitional periods between social formations comprise a long historical period; on the other side, political revolutions represent short breaks, which (like flashes of lightning) hasten this transition or – in the case of defeats – can re-fortify the old regime. They form distinctive breaks in the cyclic course of class struggles. That the «degree of ripeness» in the development of capitalist relations of production is a pre-condition for the possibility of the transition to a new formation, was

thoroughly recognized in the Marxism of the Second International (between 1889 and 1914). For politics, however, this recognition continued to have contradictory implications; for, on the one hand, the greater part of social-democracy, trusting in the objective laws of development of capitalism (i.e. in its «tendency to collapse»), pursued a «wait-and-see» politics, which indeed used a revolutionary language.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the contradiction was manifest, that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (in the wake of the Russian October Revolution), the revolutionary forces which related to Marx and Lenin, never won in the developed centers of capitalism. In this part of the world the reformist forces of social-democracy always dominated the labor movement. The communists, on the other hand, won in the periphery, thus in industrially under-developed, agrarian half-feudal former colonies or half-colonies,<sup>9</sup> in which the peasantry was much more numerous than the industrial proletariat. The Russian Bolsheviks could up to 1923 still hope that through «revolution in the west» (above all in Germany), they could be relieved. After this they stood before the gigantic task – unsolvable according to critics like Leon Trotsky – of constructing «socialism in one country,» one that was particularly backward, agrarian and devastated by war and civil war, and in so doing defended themselves from permanent military and political threat by external imperial powers.

At the same time, it was soon recognized that the conceptions of «revolutionary break» as the political pre-condition for transition – as it had emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the end of the First World War – could hardly be generalized in the sense of an always valid «law of revolution.» Conditions in countries (like Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia) which had to suffer military defeat and – after this – a collapse of the old state apparatus – corresponded more closely than elsewhere to the law of revolution, which Lenin formulated in 1920. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – under conditions of system competition – there were no comparable catastrophes and collapses in the developed capitalist societies. On the contrary, the latter developed highly differentiated tools to deal with and modify class conflict as well as the crisis tendencies immanent in capital. Socialist modifications, which were possible, for example, between 1944 and 1948 (once again here, at the end of a war) but also in the period between 1968 and the early 1970s in Western Europe, did not emerge from a collapse of the old regime, but as a result of the upsurge of class movements and mass strikes as well as of new social movements, the mobilization of intellectuals and artists, the strengthening of militant trade-unions as well as of socialist, radical democratic and communist forces in the parliaments, as alliance constellations of various social, political and cultural forces, etc., etc. The failure of such pro-

<sup>7</sup> In 1916 – in the midst of the First World War and against the background of the «collapse of the International» in August 1914 – Rosa Luxemburg once again sharpened her thesis of the proletarian revolution as a painful learning process in her «Crisis of Social-Democracy» brochure («Junius brochure»). «No pre-given scheme, valid for all times, no infallible leader shows ... the modern proletariat ... the way that it has to travel. Historical experience is its only teacher, its path of thorns to self-emancipation is not only paved with immeasurable suffering but also with innumerable errors. Reaching the goal of its journey – emancipation – depends on whether the proletariat understands how to learn from its own errors. Self-criticism, ruthless, pitiless self criticism going deeply into the reasons of things, is the air and light of the proletarian movement» (Luxemburg 1966: 21). <sup>8</sup> On this, see the contributions of the most important theoreticians of the Second International, Karl Kautsky and Rudolf Hilferding, whose theory of «organized capitalism» still determined the program and policies of German social democracy in the inter-war period (see Deppe 2003: 277 ff.). <sup>9</sup> After the end of the Second World War, regimes were established in Central and Eastern Europe under the dominion of the communist parties, from then on under the protection of the Soviet Union and the Red Army.

jects always in fact reflect anew the basic questions of revolutionary transformation, above all the question of access to the decisive levers of economic, political and the increasingly important power of access to the media.

### 3.

The perspective for socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must first of all start from the recognition that we live «in a world that has been captured, upturned and uprooted by the gigantic economic and technical-scientific process of capitalist development» (Hobsbawm 1988: 719). On the other hand, the survival of capitalism depends on it constantly being able to overcome or circumvent the constraints and limits of capital accumulation, which are expressed in crises (Harvey 2010: 66). Capitalism therefore cannot develop without the critique, that is, without the challenge supplied by anti-capitalist, i.e. socialist movements and theories (Boltanski and Chiapello 2003: 68 ff.). This criticism always relates – in its elementary moral form – to «concerns of justice.» The civilizing tendency of capital (constitutionality, parliamentary democracy, construction of the welfare state and realization of «social citizens' rights,» educational reforms, the struggle against poverty and marginalization) is the result of «probational trials» in which the «ruling bloc» has reacted to criticism of capitalism. It always aims at the «improvement of conditions of justice,» but also at the neutralizing of force through the primacy of law. However, as soon as this criticism is shut down, the limits are also removed, which check the crisis tendencies of the capitalist mode of production and the potential for violence of capitalist class dominion and its politics of interest.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Great Crisis beginning in 2007 has signaled the limits of global financial-market capitalism. At the same time, the development of the crisis, the political management of the crisis as well as the character of social and political struggles, makes the changes clearly visible, which differ from those resulting from the «Great Crises» of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the inter-war crisis with the world economic crisis after 1929; the «crisis of fordism» from the late 1960s on) and have deep implications for the strategic considerations of socialist forces. In this, at the same time, are reflected changes in the structure of modern capitalist societies and of the capitalist world system. Let us pick out five aspects:

1. The *contradiction between wage labor and capital* is still central to the capitalist mode of production: the hegemony of «neoliberalism» meant that the share of national income represented by wages was drastically reduced and a comprehensive redistribution from wage income to income from assets and capital profits – also favored by tax policy – has been carried out. At the workplace level, the number of employees has been reduced through rationalization; at the same time the number of «marginally employed» (sub-contracted workers, workers paid by the hour, etc.) has grown. The weakening of trade unions was a necessary consequence of these changes in the relation of forces between capital and labor. Nevertheless, in core areas of production and services this contradiction is still controllable and regulatable. In any case, further complexes of contradictions overlap and are connected to the «basic contradiction»: with the enormous (worldwide) growth of feminine wage labor,<sup>10</sup> relations of gender characterize the system of capitalist exploitation. At the same time, with the growth of global migratory flows (from the poor

to the rich sectors of world society), the ethnic segregation of the exploited classes and class fractions has been sharpened. The ecological crisis processes (climate catastrophe) also are tied both to the dynamic of capital accumulation (growth/destruction of the environment) and to the increasing «slumification» of the world (Davis 2006). In this the tendency to exclusion has been reinforced: ever more people are being shut out of the system of capital valorization (including the use of wage labor) and reproduce themselves in a «shadow economy» or in relations of simple commodity production. This complex of contradictions, which are immanent in the developed capitalism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, articulate themselves more as *crises of civilization* than as the crisis-ridden (and politically radicalized, thus revolutionary) confrontation of wage labor and capital in the core sectors of production and services.

2. This already opens the question of the role of the «working class» for socialist politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At least in the capital metropolises of the West the politics of the ruling classes – at the level of the state as well as the level of the plant and of material production – has been directed to defusing the role of the working class as a «revolutionary subject» (as had been formulated in the programs of socialists and communists). That their «historic mission» consisted (as the young Marx had formulated it) in transcending their own conditions of existence simultaneously with that of the whole of society (MEW 1: 472) has been successfully staved off up to now in the developed capitalist centers. At the same time deep structural changes in the composition of the working class have occurred in the last three decades. Labor-intensive areas of production were displaced into the threshold countries; the rise of capitalism in East Asia (including the People's Republic of China) coincided with a powerful proletarianization process, and the regional centers of class struggles were relocated (for example, to Latin America or now also to China).<sup>11</sup> In the old centers, the core of the industrial working class has shrunk; politically the «fordist mass trade unions» belong to the group of losers of the great transformation since the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> The new service activities have been redistributed only in small part to the new «employee aristocrats» in the financial and IT sectors and also to the mass of unqualified and precarious activities in commerce as well as in the private services sector; in both segments trade unions – despite the high degree of exploitation and the partly miserable work and life conditions – are only weakly anchored. The «social question» in transition to the 21<sup>st</sup> century is in the first instance determined by the growth of the precariat, by downward mobility and exclusion (Castel/Dörre 2009). «The most important social transformation characterizing our epoch can be summed up in a single statistic: the share of the precarious popular classes rose (in the course of a half century) from less than a fourth to more than half of the world's urban population – and this phenomenon of pauperization has to a significant degree also returned to the developed centers themselves» – thus Samir Amin (2008: xix) in the preface to a book on *Labour and the Challenges of Globalisation*.<sup>13</sup>

3. The relation of economy and politics, of market and state has not only been reconfigured by neoliberal policy (priva-

<sup>10</sup> «The bulk of the newly proletarianized populations are made up of women» (Harvey 2010: 62).

tization, deregulation, flexibilization) as well as by the consequences of financial-market capitalism. The relationship between the national space (including the role of the nation-state) and the transnationalization of the economy (the world market) and politics (EU, IMF, NATO, etc.) has fundamentally changed – especially as regards the regulation of relations between capital and labor. Politics – the ruling politics just as much as the socialist counter-project – takes place within a multi-level system (global – regional – national – local). These levels do not cancel each other out, but form a new complexity, which requires permanent mediation but also transnational coordination not only of the goals of left politics but also of political and trade union actions.

4. These changes, as well as the historical-political experience from the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on, naturally throw open a whole series of further political questions. These have to do on the one hand with the relation of social movements and political organizations. The political organization of social interests will continue to be needed in order to articulate the interests of the subalterns, that is, human rights in the political arena, in order to participate in the struggles for reforms, for the improvement of the conditions of work and life of the subaltern classes and to ward off reactionary and fascist dictatorship projects. They are also necessary in order to mediate the strategic orientations of struggles, to assimilate and process defeats and to work on developing the knowledge and critical consciousness («class consciousness») of the subalterns. Nonetheless, the claim to a vanguard role of a cadre party vis-à-vis the class (or the masses), and the claim to a monopoly on the truth connected to this, has been fundamentally disavowed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In other words: in the confrontation and in the movement for a «world that is not a commodity» (thus the old slogan of the World Social Forum), organizations, movements and intellectuals pursuing very different interests and political-worldview priorities, will cooperate with each other. The project of a «mosaic left,» for example, does not just reflect this historical recognition, but also the fact «that capitalist societies are subject to processes of social differentiation, from which idiosyncratic systems of function and action arise ... no actor of any of these partial areas can claim to possess or be able to possess an all-embracing total conception» (Urban 2010: 21).<sup>14</sup>

5. The crises of modern societies and the possibilities of social and political transformation that lie within them can strategically hardly be thought of according to the model of collapse (August Bebel always spoke of the «great Kladderdatsch» [ed. Note: «crash» – name of a political satirical magazine founded in 1848]). Modern capitalism has many – very effective – strategies for self-regulation, for the containment or regulation of those crisis potentials, which arise from the capital-labor contradiction as well as from class struggle (and the revolutionary strivings of the labor movement). The classic model of 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century revolutions was based on the idea that the inner contradictions would «explode» outward, as it were, or toward the surface of society and politics. The crises of developed capitalist societies, which interfere with their capacity to function beyond the periodic economic and financial crises, follow the model of implosion rather than of revolution. In other words: such functional disturbances appear not only in daily traffic chaos, in the occasional black-out of power nets, but also in the increase of psychological

ailments as well as in the social and moral «neglect,» which determines daily life in the excluded sectors of society (in the ghettos and banlieus) and which on the part of the state is increasingly answered with police control. Moreover, after the failed revolutions in the West, Antonio Gramsci, through the concepts of hegemony, civil society and war of position had already pointed toward a strategic perspective, which was oriented not so much to the collapse of the old power apparatus and to the «seizing of state power» by a small group of determined revolutionaries («storming of the Winter Palace»), but to a long battle for wresting hegemonic positions by the progressive forces in civil society – as the condition and precondition of the seizure of power (Deppe 2003: 245 ff.). This battle can only move within the institutions of a democratic constitution and includes the defense of human rights as well as constitutionality. These considerations have to be squared with the current level of capitalist socialization and security of its own power.<sup>15</sup>

The list of these central questions – for the development of a socialist politics and program – is not at all exhaustive. It would certainly have to be completed by the question of today's conditions for the formation of subjectivity, that is, the mediation of social experience with the interpretative models of everyday consciousness as well as of political world outlooks. For this we would have to go into the role of the (once so-called) «culture and leisure industries,» of the media, and into the changed forms of communication. Answers to these questions will not be invented at the desk of an intellectual, and they can only preliminarily and partially be answered in the program debate of a party. What will be more decisive are

<sup>11</sup> Beverly Silver (2003) has analyzed this process of capital movement in the capitalist world system and the related regional displacement of the centers of the global class struggle within a long period of time. <sup>12</sup> Although IG Metall still has a strong position (especially via the factory councils) in the large factories of the car industry (and in its supply sector), Thomas Haipeter (2009: 67) shows that they have become weak in the system of wage negotiations and of industrial relations. He ascribes this to «general developments» such as the «inner tertiarization of the industry or the loss of significance of the trade unions as a societal reform force.» The union can, «as a result of the global reorganization, boast of fewer negotiation successes for their members, ... in addition, security of employment is now in the forefront of the members' interest ... for the attainment of which wage contracts can appear to be an impediment. The situation of the unions is especially delicate in the enterprises when members and factory councils, together with management, plead for an undercutting of the sectoral wage-level norms in the sense of a 'wild-cat cooperation.» <sup>13</sup> In his analysis of the new contours of the global economy in transition to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Peter Dicken (2007: 478 ff.) has found for the old metropolises (in North America, Western Europe and Japan) first a «dramatic increase in the rate of unemployment» from the middle of the 1970s and a clear increase in inequality (contrasting the top 10 % to the bottom 10 % of wage recipients). With the example of greater metropolitan New York and London he sums up the new trends of spatial and social polarization:

» – *Employment trends*: in both London and New York the share of those employed in industry between 1977 and the mid-1990s has fallen by more than 20 % to under 10 %.

– *Social income spread* (inequality): During the 1990s inequality increased more markedly in New York than in the USA as a whole. In the USA, New York has the greatest income inequality. Similarly, in London income differences have considerably grown from the mid 1980s to the late 1990s.

– *Part-time work and informal labor markets*: In New York as in London, part-time work as well as the informalization of work has clearly increased. In addition, full-time jobs have been transformed into part-time jobs or into time-limited relations of employment. For the most part these involve low-paid jobs.

– *Ethnicity (race) and nationality in the labor markets*: In New York, blacks and Hispanics (immigrants from Latin America) have increased their share of total jobs, while the share of the white workers has gone down. In London, these are above all immigrants from Asia and from the Afro-Caribbean area ...» (Ibid. 458/6). <sup>14</sup> The changes that have taken place in the political arena since the 1970s are described by David Harvey (2010: 252) as a «shift of terrain of political organization away from the traditional political parties and the organization of wage workers in the factories (although this naturally still exists) in the direction of a less focused dynamic of social action over the whole spectrum of civil society.» <sup>15</sup> Perry Anderson (2010) has just shown, in a brilliant article on the two great 20<sup>th</sup>-century revolutions, the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, how the long struggle (between 1926 and 1949) of the Chinese CP – above all in the control of the «red liberated zones» and the civilizing and educational significance of the Red Army – contributed to the fact that the relationship of state to society, even in the Maoist period, always differed from that form of dictatorship which was erected after 1920 in the Soviet Union. In this, Anderson is interested in the question of the pre-conditions a) for the final collapse of the tradition of the «October Revolution» in Russia, and b) the transformation of Mao Tse-tung, that is, the economic and political rise of China in the transition to the 21st century.

the political learning processes and struggles, in which the left forces successfully act (but always have to take defeats as well), in which the protagonists achieve a change in the relation of forces in favor of the forces critical of capitalism and in which in the end the perspectives of socialist transformation are also concretized. The above-mentioned complex of contradictions require a strategic learning process in which the new quality of socialist politics achieves expression such that it understands – theoretically and practically – how to build bridges, create links between the contradictions bound up with the capital-labor antagonism and those complexes of contradictions which have to do with gender relations and the ecological crisis. Their inner connection are always constituted by capital accumulation (that is, by the primacy of producing profits) and the laws of competition. In equal measure, socialist program and politics faces the task of politically articulating and making effective the common interests of the various groups of intellectual middle strata, wage workers and groups that have been forced into the precariat or into marginality.<sup>16</sup> Finally, strategic intelligence will be measured by how far it is able to think of the various levels of struggle against capitalism (from the local to the global level) as a totality and mediate them with one another, without trying to cancel the relative independence of each level. Saying this is at the same time to point to core problems of the program debate of a modern socialist party, which does not see itself as the protector of a threatened tradition but carries out the critical, but also self-confident, appropriation of the history of socialism, while being aware that in view of the heavy defeats and the aberrations in 20<sup>th</sup> century socialism, but also in view of the deep changes in the structure of the capitalist world system, an equally far-reaching «renewal» of socialist theory and practice is needed.

#### 4.

Eric Hobsbawm (2010) opened an interview in *New Left Review* with the statement that since the publication of his *Age of Extremes* (1991) – that is, after the collapse of the «golden age» – five essential changes have occurred in the world: 1. The shift of the world economic center from the North Atlantic to South and East Asia; 2. the worldwide crisis of capitalism, which though long-predicted only became really determining after the turn to the new century; 3. the spectacular collapse, after 2001, of the USA's attempt to erect a system of unilateral world hegemony; 4. the rise of a block of threshold countries (BRICs), which are also increasingly cooperating on the political level; 5. the erosion and systematic weakening of the authority of nation-states – on their own territory but also in broad areas of the world. In the May 2009 interview with *Stern*, Hobsbawm dealt with the dramatic nature of the current crisis and did not exclude the possibility of incipient catastrophes and wars: «Everything is possible. Inflation, deflation, hyperinflation. How will people react if all security disappears, if they are thrown out of their lives, if their life's dreams are brutally destroyed? My historical experience tells me that we are heading – I cannot exclude this possibility – toward tragedy. Blood will flow, more than that, a lot of blood, people's suffering will increase, also the number of refugees. And then there is something else which I cannot exclude: a war, which will then turn into a world war – between the US and China.»

Socialism's perspectives are of course inscribed into the turbulence of this crisis-ridden transitional epoch. In it two – closely interwoven – processes predominate: *On the one hand*, the tectonic shifts in the structure of the world order, which is defined not only through the world market but also as a system of political-military power relations. The decline of the «capitalist world system» (Wallerstein), which for ca. 500 years was centered in the Atlantic area, subsumes the decline of Western – meaning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century US – domination of this system. It is still a matter of debate whether the «American Century» is definitively ending in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; Leo Panitch and other Marxist analysts of imperialism still insist on the «centrality of the American state for the global capitalist economy» (Albo et al. 2010: 125). In any case, the shift in the weight of power toward East Asia is fraught with conflicts; for the «old center» of the capitalist world system will not voluntarily give up the profits that were and are part of its domination – and the functioning of its own economy requires the control of resources (if it is not to go under), transportation routes and spaces of communication on a global scale. However, the «end of capitalism» as we know it (Altvater 2005) is heralded by the «end of the age of oil» as well as by the constantly rising costs, incurred by the use of fossil fuels as well as by environmental destruction and climate change.

*On the other hand*, the crises processes in global capitalism are acquiring an increasingly systemic character. This means, *first of all*: the capacity to resolve the various crises (crisis of growth, over-accumulation, financial crisis, food, ecological and climate-change crises, etc.) in the framework of the profit logic – via the so-called «self-correcting forces of the market» and via state bailout operations – is becoming increasingly constricted. Political crisis management is continually coming up against the limits of political control – not only due to limited resources but also because of limited efficacy. Said more simply: if holes are patched then the dyke breaks at another point.<sup>17</sup> The decreasing regard in which the political class is held in public opinion and the innumerable resignations of prominent, conservative politicians reflect this structural dilemma of the increasingly un-regulatable nature of the economy from the point of view of the conservative elites themselves.<sup>18</sup> The conflicts in society and in the state itself that are fought out around strategies and priorities in the management of the crisis show, *in the second place*, not only the relation of forces between the classes, but also represent interfaces between private solutions tied to profit (for example, of the energy economy or the bank and financial sector) or societal solutions, which are connected to intervention in the relations of property as well as in the material structure of production itself (energy consumption, emissions). The conjunctural programs for curbing the economy or measures

<sup>16</sup> Bieler et al. (2008: 266) sum up the results of an investigation into the implications of globalization for the working class and the labor movement in this way: «It is necessary to develop responses that address the situation of both the more privileged segments of the working class and the impoverished ones. It is also necessary to link responses by urban workers with the strategies of rural proletarians, within the sphere of both production and consumption.» <sup>17</sup> George Soros, one of the leading representatives of the financial world, said – during the so-called «Greek crisis» in May 2010 – in an interview with *Stern*: «At the moment, the Germans are driving their neighbors into a deflation ... And this leads to nationalism, to social unrest, to xenophobia – it endangers democracy» <sup>18</sup> The «second phase» of the crisis – thus Joachim Bischoff (2010: 20) – follows the stabilization of the financial markets through state debts, which from now on are passed on to the people through «austerity programs.»

to stabilize the labor market, to which the governments of most countries resorted, were motivated by the concern that a dramatic rise of mass unemployment could lead to social unrest and – in the last instance – to a strengthening of the forces critical of capitalism. The central problem lies in the fact that a) the giant public and private debts, which have by now accumulated, have been devalued, and b) the structural over-accumulation crisis, which from the 1970s was supposed to be overcome by opening up to the global financial markets (for investment-seeking capital), led to financial markets becoming autonomous in relation to the real economy and thereby to the creation of gigantic speculative bubbles (Brenner 2009). «In the end, the capitalist countries can only end the domination of finance capital, if they provide a way out of the debt crisis, and this way out cannot be had without a restructuring of the real economies» (Bischoff 2010: 22).

The systemic character of the crises is reflected at the same time in the development and organization of social labor itself. Capitalism is compelled to continue accumulation at constantly expanded levels. This compulsion results in the permanent pressure to drive forward the development of the forces of production – and with it the raising of the productivity of labor and the possibility, rooted in the latter, of reducing «necessary labor.» The «exclusion» of a growing part of the world's population from the economic circuits and processes of production dominated by capital is, on the one hand, the expression of the fact that the «enclosure» (Dörre et al. 2009: 21 ff.) has not yet become total in its spatial dimension. On the other hand, it reflects – through the chronically growing mass unemployment as well as the rapidly increasing dissolution of «normal labor conditions» (precarity) – the tendency, even in the capital metropolises, for the «setting free» of labor (and of the compulsion to work) to not coincide with the shortening of working time, the realizing of a basic insurance for all for the opening of new fields of activity in culture, the social services, education and science, which are not subject to the need for valorization of wage labor, through the «creation of a lot of disposable time outside of necessary labor time» Marx 1953: 595); rather it excludes ever more people from society and pauperizes them. At the same time capital increasingly is reverting – above all in the services sector – to «excluded population groups» (for example, to immigrants, asylum seekers and the stateless). In this, especially cheap labor power is recruited, which in turn replaces indigenous workers (those with union-wage and social-policy secured relations of employment). In this way the «achievements» of the fordist labor movement of the «golden-age period» have been called into question. At the same time, this prepares the ground for right-wing populist agitators, who even deploy a criticism of capital (albeit a nationalist and «völkisch» one) and thus find acceptance among the workers and their families hit by the crisis. In these complexes of contradictions, which concern the organization and development of social labor, a central challenge of socialist theory and politics for the 21<sup>st</sup> century materializes.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the crisis context, involving the logic of capitalist growth and the destruction of the environment and the consumption of resources, generates that «crisis of civilization» which is just as meaningful for the prospects of capitalist development as it is for the prospects of socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This theme had already been called to the public's at-

ention in the 1970s, with the first studies of the Club of Rome («The Limits to Growth»). One of the leading environmental politicians in the USA, James Speth,<sup>20</sup> has, in the conclusions of his last book on *Capitalism and the Environment*, advanced the thesis that «modern capitalism has destroyed the environment – and not in a small way but in a way that seriously threatens the planet.» In the «wealthier societies capitalism no longer contributes to human well-being,» and: «the end of the Cold War opens the door for questioning contemporary capitalism» (as quoted in Foster 2009: 62/63). In this, this crisis context is not produced only by growth and environmentally destructive emissions, but is becoming more acute since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century because the costs for dealing with the environmental crisis and the consequences of the economic and financial crises (including rising unemployment and poverty) have risen immensely. In view of the increasing state debt in the metropolises, the limits not only of growth but also of the state's capacity to control modern capitalism become increasingly evident. Added to this is the recognition that «the age of oil is coming to an end» (Altwater 2005: 141 ff.). The resource without which the developed capitalist economies cannot manage is becoming constantly scarcer. Its price will continue to rise; and securing the oil supply is at the center of «national security strategies» (Ibid. 152). However this problem is solved *the* capitalism whose growth is based on the consumption of fossil fuels – and especially of petroleum – is – along with the «the fossil age» – near its end. The confrontations around a «green New Deal» (Candeias 2009: 28 ff.) already make it clear that, also in this area of the transition to an ecological mode of production (as an answer to the environmental and growth crisis of developed capitalist economies), opposing strategies and interests are clashing: on the one side the profit-oriented strategy, which is mainly oriented to new investment possibilities, new technologies, organic products, etc.; on the other side those forces which advocate the linking of the realization of a new mode of production and consumption to active government control, a reinforcement of public investment and infrastructure, as a whole to a public – democratically legitimized – control of the economy, that is, to significant intervention into capitalist relations of property, which substitute for the control of accumulation through markets and the rate of profit a – democratically controlled – system of social and political planning.

<sup>19</sup> In the *Grundrisse*, Marx sharpened this idea still further. To the degree in which science is applied to production, the character of labor changes. Difficult physical work, characteristic of the early stage of industrialization, increasingly loses its importance. The human being behaves more and more «as the watchman and regulator of the process of production»; he is «alongside it, rather than being its main agent» (Marx 1953: 592-3). With this rise in productive power (in the age of the automatization and of the «micro-electronic revolution») the working time that capital deploys is reduced; however, in so doing there is also a shrinking of «surplus labor» whose products capital appropriates as surplus-value. In this process, so Marx reasons, «work in its direct form» ceases being «the great source of wealth.» And so «production based on exchange-value collapses.» Capital itself is the «processing contradiction,» which, with the increase of the productive power of social labor and of the scientification of production, creates the condition for the «free development of individualities,» for the «reduction of the necessary labor of society to a minimum, which then makes possible the artistic, scientific, etc. formation of individuals through the time that has been freed for them and the means that have been created» (Ibid. 593). The creation of «disposable time» under capitalist conditions, however, results in the massive and constantly increasing «setting free» of labor power from the wage relation itself. Thus unemployment, precarity and marginalization once again become lasting phenomena within the developed capitalist countries. Marx, in his time, was convinced that with this not only the material conditions but also the social prerequisites would be created to «blow up» these conditions (Ibid. 594). <sup>20</sup> James Speth was (under President Carter) Chairman of the Council of Environmental Quality in the Executive Office of the President, later President of the World Resources Institute in Washington; he taught in various universities and is the author of numerous books for which he has received a series of prizes.

## 5.

The history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century imparts the contradictory lesson that the goals of socialism – in the sense of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights – appear at first sight to be relatively «simple,»<sup>21</sup> that their implementation and generalization, however, have always been tied to very complex conditions and have been the result of fierce class struggles. The power of the utopia of a just society, in which people live together solidaristically and without fear, will be able to hold its own in the confrontation with the prevailing social relations, which are not up to dealing with these times. A «society or a social condition,» thus Boltanski / Chiapello (2003: 74), can «be defined by the nature of the tests it establishes as well as by the conflicts that are ignited around the justice-related aspect of these tests.» Ralph Miliband (1994: 194), in his last book *Socialism for a Sceptical Age* (1994), although he already began to grapple with the defeats of socialism in the world at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, held on to the hope that in view of the continuing contradictions of worldwide capitalism there will also be people who in the future will be moved by a vision of a new social order in which democracy, equality and cooperation – the essential values of socialism – will form the determining principles of social organization.» He based this hope on the fact that «the majority of humanity live in countries ruled by a wild capitalism in which welfare-state security is minimal or non-existent, where drinking water is a luxury inaccessible for the masses, and where sanitary conditions are frightful, where unemployment affects a large part of the population, where a large number of children have to work already at the age of six or seven, where the child-mortality rate is extremely high, where child prostitution is an everyday phenomenon, etc., etc.»

The socialist project, as well as the social movements and organizations which criticize the existing conditions and are committed to overcoming them in a socialist perspective, will

therefore not disappear from the agenda in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as its enemies hoped in the flush of victory in the 1990s. In Latin America the project of a «socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century» has long ago attained an independent profile. The criticism of the ruling conditions – connected with the project of a solidaristic economy, a just society and base-democratic forms of self-governance – is articulated in various movements and organizations, which often do not even call themselves «socialist.»<sup>22</sup> In the *Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels called people communists «who understand the limits, failings and destructive tendencies of the capitalist order as well as the innumerable ideological masks and false legitimations that capitalists and their apologists (particularly in the media) produce in order to perpetuate their singular class power» (Harvey 2010: 259). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is not a matter of the battle over the name, which is perhaps discredited, but over the strategic consolidation of the various social and political movements that form worldwide as a reaction to and criticism of the «economy of expropriation.» «Capitalism will never annul itself; it has to be ended. The capitalist class will never freely give up their power. They have to be expropriated» (Ibid. 260).

**21** In 1985 Ernest Mandel published an article on the «Actuality of Socialism» and in it defined the goals pursued by its adherents: It «means neither paradise on earth ... nor the creation of a perfect harmony between the individual and society or between people and nature. It also means neither the «end of history» nor the end of contradictions, which characterize human existence. The goals pursued by socialism's adherents are rather modest: namely resolving six or seven contradictions, which for centuries have produced human suffering of massive proportions – the exploitation and oppression of people by people, wars and violence between people should end. Hunger and inequality must be eliminated forever. The institutionalized and systematic discrimination of women and of races, of ethnic groups and national and religious minorities, regarded as «inferior,» must be ended. There must be no further economic and ecological crises» (Mandel 1985: 147). **22** In the last chapter of his new book *The Enigma of Capital* (2010: 252 ff.) David Harvey distinguishes five currents of thought and movements / organizations: 1) the great number of NGOs, the so-called «single-issue movements» (environment, poverty, women's rights, anti-racism, etc.); 2) autonomous, base-democratic movements, 3) the organizations of the labor movement (above all, trade unions); 4) movements against expropriation (through gentrification, industrial development, the construction of dams, the dismantling of social services and access to public education, etc.); 5) emancipatory movements focused on questions of identity (women, children, gays, ethnic and religious minorities).

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