

Reform or Revolution: Actual Problems of the Movements in Europe

Thursday 27, 15.30 – 18

the question of “**reform or revolution?**” needs to be answered not with “or” but with “**and**”: if revolution means a radical change of social relations towards post-capitalist societies which overcomes the central features of existing inequality and exploitation of humans and nature and to live at the cost of future generations then

- a) we need to identify the actual forms of capitalism, i.e. its neoliberal and neoimperial forms – forms of property, of production and reproduction, of exploitation, of institutional stability, of subjectivity etc.
- b) we need to acknowledge existing struggles to overcome these central features:
- c) we should analyse their dynamics and progress as well as their difficulties

I will concentrate on the first question because I think that we need to understand the current changes in order to develop alternatives; my main argument is that for Western Europe it is necessary to think the actual situation as **neoliberal and neoimperial hegemony**.

What does that mean?

if hegemony means that

- the ruling forces are able to make compromises among them which means to predominate or even exclude other fractions (*today*: fractions oriented towards the global market predominate over nationally oriented fractions);
- the ruling forces are able to generalise their interests as “national interests” (*today*: the creation of national competitiveness; or “local interests” and local competitiveness) and their life-styles as attractive (*today*: the oligarchic model of flexibility, hyper-consumption, individualism, strong market orientation in every-day lives);
- the ruling forces are able to transfer their projects into state projects (*today*: neoliberal forces were able to transform their interests into state politics);
- dominant forces are able to integrate many of the subalterns ideologically into their projects, i.e. the latter think that they are really part of the “national project” (*today*: today national competitiveness);
- the ruling forces are able and willing to make compromises (depending on the ability of the subaltern to force compromises; *today*: these forces are not so strong; they accept that global competition needs “adjustment”; there are real material advantages for many workers out of the globalisation of production, finance and consumption, especially the “modern” middle classes);
- the terrains of struggles between relevant actors are more or less accepted (the terrains are the state, institutions of bargaining, the bourgeois public; *today*: there is no real questioning of the transformation towards a neoliberal state)

- major contradictions (class, gender, competition among nation-states, capitalism and environment, discipline versus other subjectivities etc.) are “processed” and stabilised through dominant social norms and institutions; one example is the “ecological crisis” which still exists, of course, but at the same time a strategy of ecological modernisation became predominant;
- alternative voices and actors, world views and forms of living can be ignored or are delegitimised or repressed;
- the “costs” of adjustment (*today*: unemployment, welfare cuts, poverty in the Global South, crises in other countries, destruction of nature etc.) are broadly accepted as “necessary”;

IN SHORT: if neoliberalism and neoimperialism form part of the desires, hearts and minds of most ordinary people and is reproduced through dominant social norms and institutions we can talk about a hegemonic situation.

The dominant “processing of contradictions” of neoliberalism and neoimperialism is actually in the capitalist centres, beside the modes listed above (“today”), especially the orientation towards competition, racism, xenophobia and welfare chauvinism.

This has to do with the increasing real competition of people, with a public discourse of “we” (in Germany) against “them” (outside); with scapegoating politics; with the destruction of social security and welfare institutions.

I would like to highlight some aspects in order to clarify my argument:

European Union

There is no questioning of overall developments; we could see this as an example in the debate about the European Constitution which was accepted by the European Parliament two weeks ago. The constitution has two main orientations: one to “lock in” neoliberal politics, to avoid the development of alternatives; secondly, for the first time in history a constitution obliges the governments (European Commission and national governments) to promote militarisation;

There was almost no resistance to this constitution; this has to do, of course, with the lack of mechanisms to question it (there is no critical European public) --- the only chance is that in national referendums the constitution will be rejected;

But it is more: a broad acceptance of neoliberal and neoimperial politics.

unions:

Of course, we need to acknowledge all those struggles in unions to make them more sensitive for the far-reaching changes; the negative consequences for workers in their countries and even more in other countries; to democratise unions, etc;

But in general we need to say that most unions in Europe not only accept the ongoing transformations but are an active part of them: a social-democratic intellectual called this a “corporatism of competition” (better would be: of competitiveness”) – and this is indeed the

case: the “national interest” predominates very often a critical perspective; the dominant discourse that “our competitiveness” and therefore “our wealth” seem to be threatened unions in general are not very active in the global social movements, nor in the protests against wars or the exclusion of migrants;

what does this mean for counter-hegemonic struggles?

If hegemony has to do with everyday lives, the material and ideological reproduction of people, the acceptance through hearts and minds – the question still is:

How can the central features of actual capitalism can be questioned?

- it is not only private property and the capitalist state but all those aspects in the hearts and minds;
- a “grand strategy” or master plan is just not feasible nor desirable. Of course, we need concrete strategies against the mobility of international capital, against biopiracy, against the privatisation of water; but should not think that they are part of one great game;
- radical change is much more complex, full of contradictions – asking we move forward;
- a broad horizon of another world needs at the same improvements of living conditions, to struggle for the own control over the lives, affirming identities;
- the state is an important but only one terrain; it is necessary to question not only the content but also the structures of politics.

The major difference between reactionary and emancipatory movements is for me that the latter are strictly internationalist in perspective. Solidarity, identity, the improvement of every-day lives (all that is central for reactionary movements as well) is not that of some people but in tendency

but let me end with an important point:

I am convinced that we can think resistance and the creation of alternatives through this Gramscian lenses of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Counter-hegemony makes sense in order to think resistance and the building of alternatives.

However, the horizon of alternative societies cannot be a kind of “counter-hegemony” because it is closely linked to the idea of social power (and in Gramsci’s proper thinking even state power).

How can we think complex societies, their institutions, forms of social organisation and decision-making, subjectivities, ideas and mechanisms of solidarity and “good lives” without power?

I have no answer to this question but I hope that we will develop it practically through debates, productive conflicts, learning processes as well as social, political and economic institutions which will be completely different from those of today.