HOW CAPITALISM WENT SENILE

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Is capitalism losing its progressive dimension, turning destructive instead? Is it perhaps even coming to its end? This line of reasoning sounds familiar, but the question is more widely discussed today than has been for a long time. Michael Hardt and Samir Amin, two of the main critics of today's capitalism, talk about the future of the system, the movements resisting it and the alternatives they propose.

C. A. Lundberg & M. Wennerhag: Many leftist intellectuals attended the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. You both were also there. Why?

Michael Hardt: My interest in Porto Alegre was from the perspective of the globalisation movements, which have suffered from two great limitations this far. First, the movements of North America and Europe have not been able to extend to movements in other parts of the world, which are similarly opposed to the politics of the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO. Porto Alegre was an opportunity to expand these movements, transforming them in order to link them into a larger network. The other limitation is that they have primarily been protest movements. I think the majority of people involved recognise that it has to be a constructive movement as well, that it has to construct alternatives. In this respect too, I think Porto Alegre was something very positive.

Samir Amin: I think Porto Alegre is an important event because it indicates the possibility of building a global Left, which could contribute in a changing of the present balance of forces in favour of capital, which has been established as a result of a historical development which started a number of decades ago. The target of the World Social Forum is to move beyond the fragmentation of all kinds of protests and to build an alternative to neo-liberal globalisation. It is stated in the final document that what is needed is regulation of capitalism, where one must take into account the social interests of the labouring classes and the people. The second point is that glob-

al militarisation is deeply related to the neo-liberal, transnational strategy. Therefore, the struggle against war is part and parcel of the struggle against neo-liberalism.

Lundberg & Wennerhag: You both stress unity. Do you think that the Left should try to reach a common understanding of contemporary capitalism?

Hardt: I am not sure that we should agree. These questions should be debated, and are being debated, and there are big differences among those who participated in Porto Alegre. One should not assume that everyone agrees. The goal should not be unity and agreement, but interaction and discussion.

Amin: I totally agree. It would be dangerous and unproductive to try to agree on everything, even on the most important questions. The Left must build what I have called "convergency with diversity". This is a point in time where there are many movements — local, regional and so on — representing different types of resistance and protest. Their visions of society and the future do not necessarily converge, but can be conflicting. Therefore, I have suggested three dimensions of this convergency with diversity: criticism of capitalism, criticism of the imperialist dimension of capitalism, and the radicalisation of democracy. When it comes to democracy, it is important to reach a mutual understanding on the dangers of what I call low-intensity democracy, where you can vote one way or the other, but it does not really matter. I think many people — everyone who is the least progressive — are against this and want something more. It does not mean that they agree on what the alternative should be. There are different analyses of where the contradictions are and which the most efficient strategy may be. This difference has to be respected.

Lundberg & Wennerhag: It seems that something has happened during the recent years. There is now a broader discussion about the vulnerability of capitalism, even among commentators on the right. Do you see a breakdown of the capitalist system as we know it in the near future?

Hardt: I share the view of those saying that capital has crises; capital constantly has crises, but crises do not mean collapse. One thing one has to understand about the functioning of capital traditionally, and probably even more so today, is how crises function instrumentally, how crises function to support the system. I think this is also true about the various wars today. Wars do function as crises of the world system, but as crises that reinforce the global order rather than pose its vulnerability or its collapse. I have no idea what is going to happen in 30 years, but I do think there are ways of working towards the transformation of the contemporary capitalist system. I am very hesitant to hold any view on the collapse of capital in an "objective" way. When there is a transformation of the capitalist system, it will be through the constructions of alternatives to it, rather than through its own weakness and dissolution. So this is something we have to do; the system will not die for us.

Amin: I fundamentally agree. It has happened in history that systems have broken down suddenly, such as the Soviet Union. But I do not

find it a useful analytical tool to claim the breakdown of a system on the basis of its internal, growing contradictions. There are internal, growing contradictions, but the system usually has the capacity to take advantage of them, thereby transforming itself and surviving.

Lundberg & Wennerhag: So, what are the growing contradictions or conflicts within contemporary capitalism?

Hardt: The growing distance between wealth and poverty and the increasing "uselessness" of parts of the world. Capital has increasing difficulties with making productive the global population. I am hesitant to use the old Marxist concept of "surplus army of labour", since I do not think it is a question of that specifically. It is true, though, that capital has an increasing difficulty with making the world productive.

Amin: I would like to reformulate this point. During a long period of time, capitalism was a progressive force in the history of humanity, which was also the view of Marx. This could be stated as follows: the expansion of the market was integrating more than it was excluding. Now, we have reached a point where this relation between integration and exclusion is being reversed, not only temporarily due to a lower rate of growth, but due to deep structural reasons. An increasing part of the population of the world is useless, just as Michael said. This is what I mean when I say that capitalism has entered the age of senility. Its progressive dimension is shrinking and its destructive dimension is expanding. Therefore, another pattern of organisation is needed to ensure growing wealth for everybody. But even if my assumption is correct, it does not mean that this senile system will die by itself. These processes could lead to something even worse than capitalism, if it is possible to imagine something worse.

Lundberg & Wennerhag: In the book you, Michael, have written together with Antonio Negri you introduce the concept of "Empire". What is the difference between this and a simple continuation of "imperialism"?

Hardt: One of the fundamental characteristics of the imperialisms of the 19th century was their competition. Today, competition between the dominant nation states is less important than the co-operation among them. This is one way in which the traditional model of imperialism no longer defines our contemporary era. Two of the fundamental differences between imperialism and Empire are that the latter has no centre and no outside. But to say that there is no centre does not mean that there are no hierarchies within the global system. The real question one eventually has to answer is: What is the relationship between the United States and Empire? In the book, we say that Empire is defined by the bomb, money and ether (meaning the communicative spectacle), and that Washington, New York and Los Angeles pose the poles of these three elements of imperial power. However, one should not overestimate the power of the United States; I do not think the United States is capable of controlling global affairs as a nation state. That is not to say that there are no great differences between the United States and other nation-states, but one must relativise the differences in order to understand complex hierarchies rather than locate

the United States as pinnacle of the system. I also think that the US are less powerful than they think they are. We are often confused by the US' conception of itself.

In any case, this is what we are proposing with the concept of Empire. Rather than a centre of global power, we propose a distributive network of powers that is no less oppressive, in fact in many ways more oppressive. This requires a different kind of political strategy. There are certain times when it is rhetorically useful to say that the United States is in control, and thus to be anti-US. But thinking, as I do, that that is not really true, one has to develop different strategies. The structure of anti-Americanism as political practice and orientation inside and outside of the United States, has been very strong. And that is not enough, that is not adequate.

Lundberg & Wennerhag: Samir, do you share this view?

Amin: In some respects, but I find the analysis insufficient. Capitalist expansion was imperialist from the beginning. I am critical of the traditional view that imperialism appeared at a later stage of capitalism. That is why I insist on continuing to label the system, Empire or not, imperialist. Reading history as a succession of hegemonies, as Immanuel Wallerstein does, implying that one hegemony must replace the other, is a very doubtful viewpoint. Real hegemony has always been relative, much more so than the leaders of the hegemonic powers think. The rule is not hegemony but lack of hegemony, which is not to say that there are no hierarchies. However, we have reached a new stage in which there will be fewer and fewer contradictions among the various parts of the centre. One could speak of the formation of a collective imperialism. But that does not mean that there is no hierarchy, not even that there is no specific US imperialist project. It is important to mobilise, not against the people of the United States, but against the US military hegemonic project. This project has occupied the front seats since 1990, with a series of wars which will continue, judging from recent announcements. Here it is important to make a distinction between Europe and the United States. It is not that the European transnational capital has different interests than that of the US. But as a result of history, the American society emphasises liberty and disregards equality, which is not the case in Europe. This is the reason why socialism was invented in Europe, not in the US. There is a possibility for a serious Left to be rebuilt in Europe, and that is why I consider Europe — more than the US, and much more than Japan, for different historical reasons — to be a weak link in the global imperialist system. Within the Third World Forum Network, we have started some discussions on this with representatives of the European Left. These forces can form the nucleus in a re-built Left in Europe. I think the question of imperialism is fundamental. If the imperialist dimension is overlooked, there will be no European Left.

Lundberg & Wennerhag: In the aftermath of September 11th, the power of the nation states seems to have been strengthened, at least when it comes to the control over citizens. How do you think this will affect the role and the power

of the state, which is nowadays often claimed to be diminishing?

Amin: We should be careful in saying that the power of the nation state is being reduced; all of this is contradictory and ambiguous. We should agree on the basic principle that there is no economy without politics. Imagining that capitalism operates without politics, without states, is pure nonsense. But if we look at the forms of organisation of power today, there is something to the view that the power of the nation state as it has been built up historically, is being reduced by the deepening of globalisation.

Hardt: It might be better to think about the transformation of state regulatory elements, rather than their diminishing. We can have the same figures, the same offices, and the same institutions, although they play a different role, or are differently oriented. When one says that the nation state is withering away, one thinks of it actually shrinking, whereas of course the state structures — certainly from Reagan and Thatcher on — did not shrink, they in fact grew. The question should be about the orientation of the transformation. Then, one does not run the risk of thinking that politics is diminishing, or that political control is diminishing, because they are certainly not.

Lundberg & Wennerhag: In the history of socialism, the role of the state has always been ambivalent, oscillating between proletarian internationalism and the right to national sovereignty. Is there any room for the nation state today, from a leftist point of view?

Hardt: The social democratic project, in its ideal form, has always involved use of the state for institutions of welfare, and certain — although always limited — democratic channels of participation. One part of the question is the extent to which there remain possibilities for such a project today — not whether its desirability has diminished but whether its possibility has diminished. The question of national sovereignty is slightly different. I agree with the view that there is, in a way, a progressive value in the subordinated state insisting on national sovereignty, but in the dominant state, nationalism is always and everywhere an ugly thing.

Amin: I never liked the word nationalism. To me, being an internationalist, it has always been nasty, associated to the defence of the bourgeois nation and of imperialism. An awareness of the national dimension, which is something different, is important. There is a naïve tendency in the European Left, especially among the youth, to negate this dimension. The national arena is still important for class struggle and political consciousness. These people want to move beyond the nation, and for good reasons. But under the present circumstances, this abnegation can be instrumentalised by the dominant capital, which is already the case. This is also true for sub-nations, like Egypt where I come from. The weakening there of the national dimension has led to something even worse than nationalism, namely Islamism. That is because people need to relate to some sort of sub-collectivity, which makes sense to them in the global system. The Egyptian Arab nation had a very positive dimension, despite its contradictions and limits, and despite the fact that it was partly used by the ruling classes. But Islamism is completely destructive. The US establishment understood

this at an early stage, and their alliances, not only with the Taliban but with all kinds of Islamist movements, reflect an awareness of that. And therefore it is very dangerous to underestimate the political significance of nations.

Lundberg & Wennerhag: Michael, you seem more inclined to stress the qualities of anti-nationalism.

Hardt: Absolutely. Benedict Anderson has this slogan about the nation as an imagined community. It seems to me that it is sometimes useful to reverse that formulation. Unfortunately, sometimes the nation is the only community people can imagine. I think that there are other ways of constructing collectivities. If one says that one wants to struggle against all sorts of nationalism, and if the only other possibilities are an Islamist internationalism or the internationalism of neo-liberal capital, I agree that there has to be some other alternative. But I think that the nation is not the only other locus of identity.

Amin: Class is one.

Hardt: Class is certainly one.

Amin: And hopefully it can be even more important than nations. Anderson is right when he says that nation is an imagined community, but once it is imagined it becomes real, it is a real community.

Hardt: Of course it is real, but isn't it a poverty of the imagination if that is the only community we can imagine? What I am saying is that we can imagine other communities, and that is what I think these globalisation movements are doing.

Lundberg & Wennerhag: Looking at these new collectivities in connection with the creation of new democratic forms — what are the realistic possibilities of creating political alternatives?

Hardt: I am not sure that the new movements at this stage are ready to propose concrete alternatives, but these experiments with network structures are very interesting. This is what Toni Negri and I try to grasp with the term "multitude". It is quite similar to this "convergency in diversity", with perhaps a different accent: multiplicity remains in an unreduced fashion in a common project. The network seems to be a good metaphor for this. A distributed network in one way never poses contradictions between different points, since there is always a means of triangulation. This was one of the things that seemed most puzzling about Seattle. Here are groups that we thought objectively in contradiction with each other — trade unionists and environmentalists, but also anarchists, church groups, lesbian groups, and so on. Yet, they functioned together in a way that the contradiction did not play out. All contradictions were displaced within this network structure. I think this is partly because the geometrical imagination works. There is a kind of effective triangulation and an addition of other points in the network, which allow for a common project. I think this is something fundamentally different from the united fronts, or coalitions. Our previous conceptions of social movements have to be altered. We now see something completely new, in a period of experimentation with democratic forms which are not yet clearly developed.

Lundberg & Wennerhag: When it comes to the question of heterogeneity, Marxism, with its focus on class, has long been criticised for making other forms of oppression invisible. Is it possible at all to combine a universal, political goal with a notion of differentiated political subjects?

Hardt: Yes, that is what Toni Negri and I refer to when we talk about the politics of the multitude. During the 1980s, there seemed to be two general models of political organization in the US. One was based on unity, and the various older parties functioned in that way. Sometimes this was posed in that classic Marxist formulation that there is a primary division in society. There are other struggles, but they are subordinate and function within this unity. Identity politics contested this view. It was based on differences, and the autonomy of different struggles — some about sexuality, some about gender, some about race, and so on. Today, it seems to me that this division has been displaced, so that multiplicity and commonality in struggles do not contradict one another any longer. In Seattle, you could see this in specific terms. I think that the contradiction between identity and difference has been displaced by the continuity between multiplicity and commonality. To come back to your question, this seems to me a rich field for the experimentation with different forms of democracy, but one that is not at all mature in the sense of proposing an alternative social formation.

Lundberg & Wennerhag: In Seattle the trade unions played a large role, and in many European countries the trade unions have traditionally been playing a crucial role in the socialist movement, within the confines of the nation-state. However, few of the trade unions from the first world participated in Porto Alegre. What role can trade unions play within the Left today?

Hardt: Trade unions in general can of course play an important role, but certain trade unions are not progressive at all and have very little progressive potential. The question for me is not to choose between trade unions and other social groups, but among trade unions. Some trade unions are very close to these movements, others are not. Some are interested in change, some are not at all.

Amin: I think that trade unions in general are facing a great challenge. The form of trade unions is the product of a few specific stages in the history of capitalism, especially the Fordist stage with its big industries and concentration of workers in big units, and a clear-cut frontier between blue-collar and white-collar, and so on. This was a time when the expansion of the market was more including than excluding. One was operating within this general framework, which created specific patterns of organisation, within which targets were formulated and reached — which created credibility, legitimacy, support, and so on. Now, we are in a period when those patterns of organisation are being dismantled and the new ones have not yet crystallised clearly. This is a challenge for the trade unions. These labouring people have a common, objective interest, but they are not organised in a way which promotes this interest. How is one to rebuild a certain degree of unity in this situation? There are some trade unions in some places that have started to think about

this challenge, for example SUD in France, which was one of the founders of Attac and active in Porto Alegre. There are also some branches of trade unions in Italy that are aware of this, and the question is now being discussed more systematically by CUT in Brazil, COSATU in South Africa and by KCTU in South Korea. I think that this is a challenge which is present everywhere, and therefore one has to open a discussion on this topic, and eventually invent new forms of organisation that will be able to handle this new situation.