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SUMARIO

ARTÍCULOS

CRISTÓBAL KAY	André Gunder Frank: «Unidad en la Diversidad» del Desarrollo del Subdesarrollo al Sistema Mundo	7
CARLES SORIANO CLEMENTE	La crisis sistémica y la crisis planetaria a la luz de la tasa decreciente de ganancia	25
H. C. F. MANSILLA	Los ensayos de actualización del marxismo y el peligro de justificar una tecnocracia autoritaria	49
RICHARD D. WOLFF	Inflación, Economía de Mercado y Guerra de Clases	71
RONALDO MUNCK	Sociología Global: Hacia un Paradigma Alternativo desde el Sur	83
ENRIQUE FERNÁNDEZ-VILAS	El «Populist Zeitgeist»: Un Acercamiento a Cas Mudde y la Derecha Radical Populista	107
JOSÉ M ^a GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ	Systemic Metamorphosis in the 21st century	121

Systemic Metamorphosis in the 21st century

José María García Martínez

Universidad de Murcia

España

Resumen: En el siglo XXI, el proceso de desarrollo capitalista está atravesando por importantes transformaciones económicas, políticas, sociales y culturales. En el presente artículo se realiza una breve síntesis de algunos factores relevantes relacionados con estas transformaciones políticas, analizando el nuevo campo de batalla político entre el nacionalismo enfrentado a la globalización y la corriente política progresista surgida en el siglo XXI, reflexionando sobre el papel que juegan los tradicionales movimientos socialistas y de izquierda en el espacio público de la política abierto por las nuevas condiciones de la globalización contemporánea y las severas consecuencias de la política neoliberal extendida por todo el mundo desde finales del siglo XX.

Palabras clave: Progresismo, Nacionalismo, Estados Unidos, Europa, Globalización, Neoliberalismo.

Metamorfosis Sistémica en el siglo XXI

Abstract: On 21st century, capitalist development process is going through important economic, political, social and cultural transformation. On this paper I try to contribute with a brief synthesis of some relevant factors related with these political transformations, analyzing the new political battlefield between a nationalism faced against globalization and 21st century progressivism, reflecting on the role of traditional left and socialist movements on the public space of politics opened by the new conditions of contemporary globalization and the harmful consequences of the neoliberal policy spread throughout the world since the last years of 20st century.

Keywords: Progressivism, Nationalism, United States, Europe, Globalization, Neoliberalism.

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One of the main characteristics of capitalist system in the 21st century is the extraordinary ability that demonstrated to appropriate of some of the most important ideological vindications of the left (such as feminism, struggle against racism, climate change, progress and scientific development) and capture the most important movements and leaders in order to legitimate capitalist system through the appropriation of feminist ideals, the impulse to science and technological development, the diversity and inclusion policies in governments and companies, and the LGBT struggle. It is not required to say that this struggle is made from a liberal point of view and is not observed this collective support from a socialist perspective. Or, in other terms, what some conservative observers labeled as «woke left» (*The Economist*, 2021). Another good example of this political endeavor is what can be observed in education, with financial entities and banks, supporting the cause of a so called progressive and liberal education (an education that serves the interests of the system) and colonizing universities, reducing exigencies to the students and turning universities and graduate schools into education enterprises, supported with public investment dedicated to for-profit scientific research useful for corporations and big businesses (Giroux, 2016).

All the left and socialist ideas and struggles, progressive advances in line with the 18th century philosophy of the Enlightenment, now are permeated and, though there are supported for collective advances by many people, unfortunately in many cases are used by the capitalist system and its agents, presenting themselves as a revolutionary force of change.

However, being one of the main contradictions of the system the struggle between the search for private profit and the demands for a better life of the majority of the working population, advances in progressive policies and science, traditionally defended by both liberals, socialists and communists, are now defended by important sectors of the middle class, especially in global South countries. Hobsbawm aware us against the «presumption that the (manual) working class would necessarily be the chief agent of social transformation» (Hobsbawm, 2011: 418). At the same time, the traditional working class, displaced by liberal politics in the deindustrialized and financialized countries of the global North, turned to the demagogues of the far right, who advance an agenda against liberal globalization. An example closer for the readers from Western Europe is the Italian elections, where Giorgia Meloni, considered «far right» by many observers (*BBC*, 2022) was elected following the government of the champion of the markets Mario Draghi (2021-2022).

The 2020 elections between the Republican and the Democrats in the United States also represented this challenge between the ethnonationalism and the progressivism of Joe Biden (Riley and Brenner, 2022: 26). The Trump administration (2017-2021), where the top positions were held by billionaires and top figures of the fossil fuel industry, like Rex Tillerson, faced in the 2020 election with Joe Biden, former vice president with Obama (2009-2017). Despite this public representation of a quiet and measured American government to the public with this 80 years old president, most of the people on his

administration is much younger than him. Biden appointed a Cuban origin politician for the Department of Homeland Security, African Americans for top positions in the administration and in the Joint Chief of Staff, being the first time in history than an African American held the position of Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, and people from the traditional Democrat establishment, like Antony Blinken.

The monopolies of pharmaceutical companies (Moderna, Pfizer), the US military-industrial complex, the media and communication, and Internet monopolies (Google, Disney, Virgin) represent a capitalism of «generalized monopolies» (Delgado Wise, 2022). This capitalist class, however, is divided between the national capitalist members and the transnational capitalist class, that in a context of high mobility of investments between countries, many of these corporations and hedge funds present themselves as a progressive force in order to gain legitimacy among the population. This diversity and support of progressive collectives such as homosexuals, minorities or women, it can be seen in two ways: 1) an important social advance and social conquest for many traditionally oppressed collectives like women and homosexual people and 2) one of the most powerful tools of 21th century capitalism to re-legitimize itself after decades of neoliberalism and making harm to families and entire societies, especially in the global South with the Structural Adjustment Programs.¹

On the other side, the vast majority of the humankind is living between the ruins left behind by the neoliberal storm. Lower salaries, instability, and precarious contracts (in the case where that exist), poverty and a restauration of the traditional hierarchical ideas of domination, together with traditional powers such as the new religious groups like Evangelicals, came back and strike strongly. According with the Nobel Prize Paul Krugman, «wages for ordinary workers have in fact been stagnant since the 1970s» (Krugman, 2014). The vast mass of the working class, having lost referents or a common ideal, turned to the emotional compensation of the far right, offered by the ascent of far-right populist parties throughout Europe. Economic solutions are also not offered by them, other than small subsidies in many cases oriented to gain political and electoral support (Carrillo, 2020). These political movements merely express their angry against the «global oligarchy» without any realist alternative to oppose. The constant attack to gay collectives, women rights and to all the progressive conquests of the society become a valuable scapegoat for the far right to gain the support of people not benefited from capitalist development process and that suffer worsening life conditions, environments degraded by years of neoliberalism and resentment against the people benefited from neoliberal globalization.

From an historical perspective, there is no doubt that the global economy is going through major changes the last decades, and it is uncertain at the time of this writing where these changes will head to. Since the decade of 1970s, the change of economic

¹ This is the name that receives the public policy oriented to improve the profitability –to create growth- through privatization of public companies, reduction on wages and public budget cuts, especially in public services like health and education (see for example Stiglitz, 2002).

policy addressed by the president of some of the most developed countries, such as Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) in the United States and Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) in the United Kingdom, followed the policies called as «neoliberal», this is, policies oriented to make profound changes in society and productive systems through privatization of public sectors and assets, removing legislation in favor of workers such as pensions and higher wages that reduce profitability of companies, together with any regulation that restrict free flows of investments and reduction of legal obstacles to financial speculation, given the period of economic stagnation and the oil crisis of the 1970 (Harvey, 2005). These policies impulse the so-called globalization, a movement of money, goods, materials, and information impulse by the revolutionary advances of internet, microelectronics, communication media and international transports. A society that was labeled by sociologists like Daniel Bell as «postindustrial» (Bell, 1976), where increase of preeminence of real estate, insurance, the financial sector and technology deals with a reduction in industrial employment in traditionally industrialized economies (Hudson, 2015).

Within the limits of the State, the economy oriented towards the foreign markets, what transformed productive systems of the countries in order to take the most of the benefits of the global growth. In many countries, especially in the global South, this process becoming highly beneficial for sectors such as tourism. In the year 2018 tourist sector contributes with more than 10 per cent of GDP in Spain, the highest figure among the OECD countries (OECD, 2020: 18). The global production chains also were ample benefited, together as the workers who were able to find a job in these outsourced production plans, since most of the industrial working class now is located in global South. This is related with the changes in the economic structure of the societies, with the spread of factories to many countries in global South thanks to the improvements of technologies and communications.

On the other side, as has been said, there is a privileged sector of investors and agents that resulted highly benefited from this process of globalization, and this is one, on the humble opinion of this writer, most important contributions of William Robinson to social science. I am referring to the process, historically new in the age of globalization of 21st century, of the surge of a ruling class that operates in a global context, beyond the frames of the state, and that benefited by far from this process of hegemonic globalization. Despite conventional wisdom tell us that we all benefited from this process, actually there are some sectors more privileged than others.

William Robinson coined the term of «transnational capitalist class» (TCC) in his work «Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity», published in the year 2014. By studying thinkers located in the critical tradition such as Gramsci, in an interdisciplinary research that includes Max Weber, Karl Marx and an impressive bibliography hard to summarize in this review, William Robinson show us the important transformations that global economy faced in the 21st century, giving us education and ideas about what to do in this confusing century.

Far from the current fashions of the academia, mostly based in the postmodern tra-

dition initiated by the French thinkers such as Lyotard at the end of the 20th century, but now ample distributed throughout all the study centers, both in the North and in the Global South, William Robinson offers an impressive research that help us to clarify where the world is going, especially if we focus on a political response to the global crisis that «involves militarism, extreme masculinization, racism, the search of scapegoats (such as immigrants workers and Muslims in the United States and Europe) and mystifying, sometimes millennial, ideologies» (Robinson, 2014: 163).

In his research, William Robinson addresses not only the increasing of militarization for profit, but also the creation of «an increasingly fascistic pop culture combines this celebration of militarization and masculinity with fantasy, mysticism, and irrationality, as epitomized in the mass appeal of extremely violent computer games, the proliferation of reality TV shows, and the glorification of military aggression, social violence and domination in mainstream Hollywood cinema» (Robinson, 2014: 212). This is one aspect that is required to take in account studying the superstructure of the society, that is, the complex of laws, ideas, culture and beliefs related with a given infrastructure, being the productive, economic and social relations of production and reproduction. Other professional sociologists like Wolfgang Streeck studied on his research this transition to a society based in consumption that took place in 21th century (Streeck, 2012).

One of the most important aspects that determine current globalization process is the surge of a transnational capitalist class and a global ruling class represented in people like Klaus Schwab, president of the World Economic Forum, George Soros, Bill Gates and supranational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. These people enjoy the mobility available to capital and is in a drastic contrast with the migrant restrictions that workers face considering the wage differentials that every country experiences according with their particular historical development, that determines the level of life and the satisfactions and remunerations in a given territory (Delgado Wise and Martin, 2015).

The different salary levels in each political and social environment according with the concrete historical development process helps to explain the different wage levels that we can observe in each country, based in the historical evolution of these societies, the history of worker organization, the past fights for higher salaries and for better legislation to protect native working classes. One of the best examples of this aspect is the European Union, with the food legislation, the worker legislation and the strong state policies of the Welfare state, product of one century of collective struggles and advancements of the collective rights of European citizens and especially unions and popular struggles.

The increase of fluxes of migration and the economic and technological advancements of the 20th century, especially the technological revolution that put in hand of all citizens of the world information of the situation in every country in the planet, was one of the factors that increased the desire and the need to migrate to other countries. This is true also for global corporations, that taking the most of the «restrictive migratory regimes» (Delgado Wise, 2022: 254) and the difficulty to move for workers from one territory to

another, installed part of their productive processes in countries in global South where wages are lower, and where there are not a politically active collective culture and with no public legislation that protects workers and environment, for the historical reasons we specified above.

We have to remember the case of the Rama Plaza in Bangladesh, where a factory outsourced by a global European corporation collapsed in 2013, killing more than thousand people (ILO, 2018). These global companies face fewer responsibilities in these countries, and the state, in need of these important investments, cannot take or lack political will to carry out effective action against these corporations in favor of the working citizens of these countries.

These are the contradictions exposed by William Robinson in this work, some subjects that require serious scientific research to elucidate the best way to achieve a better life for the citizens of the world, both in global North and global South countries, far from the «authoritarian developmentalism» (Arsel *et al.*, 2021) against collective freedoms and the common good. It is important to highlight that William Robinson calls to a democracy directed not only towards the majority of working population but also for the employers that are against authoritarian solutions to the current global crisis.

We cannot ignore the importance that Robinson gives to find democratic solutions when we have to observe, alas, the resource to «authoritarianism» to address these crises and the glorification of masculinization and militarization, which can take the world society to a dead end and far from the constructive values inherited from the Enlightenment. We observed a first stage of this conflict between authoritarianism and the government of this global ruling class in the opposition between Donald Trump and Joe Biden already mentioned, getting Trump more support in the deindustrialized and depressed areas of the rust belt with lack of public services such as decent hospitals and public schools, almost no opportunities of job or future perspectives for most of the society, neglected by the managers of the global economy and ignored sometimes by their own governments. In the words of Carrillo, «95 percent of economic growth was concentrated in an scandalous way in the 1% richer of the population, as well as owners of mortgages and the new proletariat of that country were abandon to its destiny at the helm of Walmart and the ultra-rich of Silicon Valley» (Carrillo, 2021: 149). We can also observe this conflict on the elections for French presidency in the year 2022, between the workers and citizens who supported Le Pen for the Élysée, against a majority of citizens that supported the neoliberalism of Macron and the option posed by Jean-Luc Mélenchon based on the traditional socialist demands of ecology, respect for the rights of every person, social justice and antifascism (a 21th century fascist thinking directed towards the many Muslim population and Black people in France, as we could see with Zemmour and the nationalist right of Le Pen).

Can be said that one of the defining lines of 21st century will be this conflict between the winners of the hegemonic globalization and the demands of social justice and care about the members of the community left behind and most harmed by the capitalist

system. Focusing on important aspects related with the socialist tradition such as feminism, tolerance and antiracism, we should not forget the working people, avoiding to embrace the transnational capitalist class and forgetting the majority the population, mostly workers and small business owners, who need a political option that protects the rights of the people who live in the boundaries of the State apart from the liberalism, the far right, or the conservative parties that support the traditional *statu quo*. The book from William Robinson offers to policymakers and to every reader -which is one of the most positive aspects of his book, being written in a language accessible to all- pathways to dissipate the postmodern fog in what we live and find a better future for all people in the world, a «transnational popular project» (Robinson, 2014: 238) against the project of the global ruling class, that will represent in its more barbarous way state repression, endless working days and debt peonage to avoid any alternative to the current system.

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