



From humanity to nationality to bestiality: A polemic on alternatives without conclusion

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World Stock Markets in Turmoil (*Guardian*, 5/8/11)

Collapse of Neoliberal Ideology (Harvey and Milburn, in *Guardian*, 5/8/11)

State of Emergency (*Guardian*, 5/8/11)

Preface

Given these headlines, the conclusion is easily reached that capitalism has had it. Yet, in the meantime the politics of crisis resolution has gone forward unabated by means of a ‘financial socialism’ that akin to the political response to the debtor crisis in the 1980s, seeks to secure capitalist wealth by socialising the losses through a politics of austerity – in essence, this is what the so-called neoliberal project of social adjustment was and is about. It is however the case that the attacks on labour since 2008 express a neoliberalism of a new dimension. Whilst Margaret Thatcher declared that there is no such thing as society, the current British Prime Minister, David Cameron, believes that society does not only exist. He also thinks that society is big. No wonder, the cuts that his government is in the process of implementing would break the backs of a small society. The demand for the big society is therefore apt. It really takes a big society to cope with a financial socialism that, in the case of the UK, seeks to balance the books by the ‘deepest cuts to public spending in living memory’ slashing departmental budgets by an average of 19% and predicting job losses of five hundred thousand public sector workers by 2014, and similar measures in France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Ireland, Italy and Greece, have been introduced as a matter of ostensibly sheer necessity¹.

¹ BBC News, “Spending Review 2010,” October 20, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11579979>.

Protests in Greece have been the most sustained. The dilemma faced by the protesters became clear when in late 2011 the former Prime Minister Papandreou proposed a referendum to make Greek society take ownership of, and responsibility for, austerity. In essence, the proposed referendum asked Greek society: 'do you prefer poverty within the Euro or do you prefer poverty outside the Euro?'. In the meantime, poverty is to be achieved by means of Euro-membership, for now at least. We will see whether the conventional political process possesses the capacity of fracturing and domesticating the rebelliousness of Greek society or whether the alternative parties of social order will come to the fore to re-order Greek society, and whether the well funded and equipped Greek military will remain in the barracks. The shift from the humanity of anti-austerity to the nationalisation of order is certainly a real possibility, and the question then really will be about the degree of bestiality that will render order and accompany the re-ordered nation. Of course, bestiality is not relative and does not come in degrees. It comes for the sake of social discipline.

Institutional transformation for labour and against austerity

The necessary critique of austerity is not intrinsically critical of capitalism, and often amounts to proclamations that are merely abstract in their negativity. Abstract negativity is the sniffer dog of thought². It barks in perpetuity and without bite. It sniffs out the miserable world, from the outside, as it were, and asserts its own superiority of insight and political know-how to resolve the crisis of a whole political economy. What purposes will anti-austerity serve? Is it about the courage and cunning of a struggle for the creation of a different mode of subsistence; or is it about the rejection of cuts without further thought about the irrationality of an economic system that contains misery in its conception of wealth; or is it about the attempt at containing financial excess, making capitalism more effective as an economy of labour; or is it about the regressive utilisation of misery as a pretext of national revival for the sake of national industry, national wealth, and for the benefit of a national people? And what is the name of The Other upon which the idea of an anti-austerity politics of national harmony depends in its organisation of the national outrage against the forces of economic disharmony, be they the invisible as the hand of the market and its naturalised proponents whoever that might be, the abstract national as the exacting hand of the Germans, or abstract institutional in the form of bankers as merchants of greed and peddlers of misery?

The struggle against austerity is a struggle for the basic provision of human needs: housing, food, heating, clothing, and also for the time of affection and love. It is a struggle for existence (Bonefeld, 2010). This struggle can be expressed in all sorts of different forms, including communism and socialism, and also nationalism and barbarism. The political left has no monopoly on the forms that progress takes (Bonefeld, 2012a). Progress is not a given. It has to be fought for. For some, from Panitch via Lapavistas to Callinicos and

2 On abstract negation as the sniffer dog of thought, see Adorno (2008).

Wagenknecht, anti-austerity describes a political project of restructuring capitalism in the interest of workers. Wagenknecht (2012) demands a left strategy that akin to the 1950's idea of the social market economy secures the social presuppositions of market freedom, that is, the inclusion of workers into the realm of capitalist freedom. She portrays the then German minister of economy, Ludwig Erhard, as a proponent of a socially inclusive and socially responsible economy. Her vision of the 1950s bears little, if any, connection to the reality of a political economy that Erhard defined succinctly as 'prosperity through competition' (on this see Bonefeld, 2012b). Her view is however symptomatic of a left that perceives of social democracy as a progressive social market alternative to austerity. Unsurprisingly, in the election contests, Die Linke loses out to the Pirate Party, which campaigns for free access to the Internet.

In distinction to Wagenknecht, Alex Callinicos (2012) argues for a socialist alternative to austerity. At its base, he argues, socialist anti-austerity has to overcome the entrenchment of neoliberal dogma in the regulative institutions of the capitalist economy, and he therefore demands institutional transformations to achieve anti-austerity objectives. He urges the left to remember the original response to the crisis of 2008, which, for him, revealed the real possibility of a socialist programme of crisis-resolution, one that combined financial nationalisation with – socialist – fiscal stimuli. In order to re-assert the reality of this 'hastily' abandoned response to the crisis of 2008, the left anti-austerity strategy has to focus on achieving institutional reform, putting banking and credit into public ownership and operating the system of finance under democratic control³. He proposes the devaluation of weaker currencies, reintroduction of capital controls, concentration of investment resources on strategic industries, and the re-institutionalisation of national policy controls. However, he considers that the desired alternative of a progressive Keynesianism at the national level is not in-itself sufficient. Its viability requires anchorage in transnational institutions to secure progressive objectives in the face of global market challenges. Nevertheless, the national state is key. As Saad Filho (2010: 253-54) argues, the national programme of economic planning 'is potentially more advantageous for the working class because the state is the only social institution that is at least potentially democratically accountable and that can influence the pattern of employment, production and distribution of goods and services... at the level of society as whole'. For the sake of a rational political economy, ostensibly for the benefit of workers, finance has to be nationalised and democratized by means of state. This is the background to Panitch, Albo and Chibber's (2011) demand for a programme of central planning. They argue that the movement against austerity, particularly the Greek rebellion, 'only served to reveal the continuing impasse of the left' (2011: x). In fact, the anti-austerity movement exhibits a 'sorry lack of ambition' (2011: xi) – that is, it amounts to a mere reaction to austerity. The movement is merely negative in its refusal to accept austerity. That is, it does not formulate a left alternative to austerity and thus lacks the ambition and courage to struggle against austerity with a positive political programme of manifest change. As they

3 On the history of this demand since the abandonment of the Bretton Woods system of international financial regulation in the early 1970s, see Bonefeld (2006, 2008).

put it in dramatic pose, ‘we cannot even begin to think about solving the ecological crisis that coincides with this economic crisis without the left returning to an ambitious notion of economic planning’ (*ibid.*). That is, anti-austerity requires a programme of economic planning to secure those rational investment decisions ‘for the allocation of credit’ that benefit the working class (*ibid.*). This socialism of investing in the working class, says Saad Filho (2010: 255), requires a left that is able to ‘imagine an alternative future’. There is thus the call for a large scale mobilisation of the working class to alter the balance of class forces in favour of labour – to overcome ‘wage restraint’, gain ‘control of the financial system’, ‘rebalance core economies’, ‘nationalise banks’, ‘recapture [national] command over monetary policy’, ‘facilitate workers participation in confronting the problem of debt’, ‘impose capital controls’, ‘regain [national] control over monetary policy’, pursue an ‘industrial policy’ to ‘restore productive capacity’, etc. (Lapavitsas, 2011: 295). The aim of progressive socialism is the long term ‘abolition of capitalism’ (Saad Filho, 2010) and its replacement by a system of central planning (Panitch et al., 2011). That is, the capitalist economies are to be restructured ‘in the interest of labour’, for the sake of ‘employment’, and in the interest of ‘better conditions’ for workers, including the ‘distribution’ of wealth, the achievement of ‘economic growth, and employment in the longer term’ (Lapavitsas, 2011: 295-296).

The socialist programme of anti-austerity rightly contests the manner in which the economic surplus is distributed, and is strenuous in its demand that capitalist wealth should not be sustained by taking money out of the pockets of workers. They demand that wealth is redistributed from capital and labour and one might add, this redistribution is good for capital, too – commodity markets depend on sustained consumer demand. Money, they say, has to be made to employ workers, create employment, pay good wages, and improve conditions. Struggle is the means of shifting the balance of class forces in favour of workers to secure the ‘institutional transformation’ (Callinicos, 2012) that will make money the servant of the working class, securing its interests. The struggle against austerity is thus a struggle for the working class. Whichever way one looks at it, to be a member of the working class is a great ‘misfortune’ (Marx, 1983: 477). Even its proponents demand that it works, and what they call socialism comprises the ambition of transforming money into productive activity, into productive engagement with workers by means of state authority, in the name of economic rationality, and for the benefit of society at large. They assert that this planner state does not govern over labour but that it rather governs in the interest and for the benefit of workers.

Political economy is indeed a scholarly dispute how the booty pumped out of the labourer may be divided and clearly, the more the labourer gets the better. After all, it is her social labour that produces the ‘wealth of nations’ – and the proposed anti-austerity politics recognise this in their programmatic stance and political outlook. However, class analysis is not some flag-waving on behalf of the working-class. Such analysis is premised on the perpetuation of the class of workers as the socio-economic condition of social reproduction. Affirmative conceptions of class, however well-meaning and benevolent in their intentions, presuppose the working-class as the labouring class that deserves a better, a new deal – that

is, profits are to be invested into labouring activity, which in fact perpetuates the ‘old dodge of every conqueror who buys commodities from the conquered with the money he has robbed them of’ (Marx, 1983: 546). The critique of class society achieves positivity only in the classless society.

Anti-austerity and the critique of society

Anti-austerity as a critique of existing society is confronted by the great difficulty of conceiving of communism as a form of human existence that is totally different from what we know, from the pursuit of profit to the seizure of the state, from the pursuit and preservation of political power to economic value and economic resource, and the reduction of the life-time of the worker to labour time. What really does it mean to say that time is money, and what would it take to transform the time of capital into the time of human purposes? This idea of anti-austerity follows a completely different idea of human development – and it is this, which makes it so very difficult to conceive, especially in a time of ‘cuts’. One cannot think, it seems, about anything else but ‘cuts, cuts, cuts’ (cf. Bonefeld, 2011). Only a few years ago the debate was about the Paris Commune, the Zapatistas, Council Communism, the Commune of human purposes, now it is about cuts, and fight back, and bonuses, and unfairness, lack of job opportunities, etc. And then suddenly, imperceptibly it seems, this idea of human emancipation – in opposition to a life compelled to be lived as an economic resource – gives way to the demand that money is to be used for the productive investment into workers to render capitalist accumulation valid – for the sake of workers. Cuts or no cuts, capitalist austerity or socialist ambition for rational economy that is the question – not of communist transformation but for the sake of employment, fair wages, and welfare support for workers. On this everybody can agree. Capitalism is not a system that takes mass unemployment and sluggish rates of accumulation lightly – in fact, it characterizes its crisis. For the sake of abstract wealth, it demands the employment of the unemployed to secure optimum factor efficiency, sacrificing living labour on the pyramids of accumulation for accumulation’s sake. Workers do indeed depend on employment for the sake of life. Divorced from the means of subsistence, waged employment is the means of existence of labour in capitalism, at least for the lucky ones! The socialist demand that capitalism invests into workers is to the point: in capitalism, labour subsists by means of wage income and concessionary welfare hand-outs, and this form of subsistence requires sustained economic growth in support of employment.

What is the alternative? Let us ask the question of capitalism differently, not as a question of cuts but as a question of labour-time. How much labour time was needed in 2011 to produce the same amount of commodities as was produced 1991? 50 percent? 30 percent? 20 percent? Whatever the percentage might be, what is certain is that labour time has not decreased. It has increased. What is certain, too, is that despite this increase in wealth, the great majority of society has been subjected to a politics of austerity as if famine, a universal war of devastation, had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence. What a

calamity! And, yet, this is absolutely necessary in our society, to secure the progress of abstract wealth. Capitalism does not produce deplorable situations (*Mißstände*) that require political intervention to rectify the situation and improve the market situation of workers. It comprises deplorable human conditions (*Zustände*). Less living labour is required to produce the same amount of commodities than only yesterday, and society finds itself cut off from the means of subsistence, forced to accept frugality and be more industrious in order to perpetuate an irrational mode of production, in which human productive effort asserts itself as a crisis of finance, money and cash. The current crisis is said to require the appropriation of additional atoms of unpaid labour time to resolve the crisis of debt, finance, and cash flow, by means of a real breakthrough in labour productivity. Time is money. And if time really is money, then man is nothing – except a time’s carcass. That is to say, class is a category of a perverted society, and thus an entirely negative category that belongs to workers, that is, the misery of labour is the sine qua non of capitalist wealth. Poverty is not a deplorable state of affairs. It is a deplorable condition: capitalist wealth entails the pauper in its concept.

What does the fight against cuts entail? Fundamentally, it is a struggle for subsistence and against the reduction of life-time to labour-time. The fight against cuts is in fact a fight for life, and for a life to be lived. This fight, as I argued at the start, might well express itself uncritically as a demand for a national politics of jobs and wages, technocratic government and protected borders, and in the name of national solidarity, national wealth, national labour, and national harmony. This national idea will focus on The Other as an excuse for a damaged life. Still, the demand for access to the means of subsistence might not be contained by the assertion of the national state as the authoritative institution of an imagined national community. It might in fact politicise the social labour relations, leading to the question why the development of the productive forces at the disposal of society have become too powerful for this society, leading to financial disorder and austerity to maintain it. Such politicisation, if indeed it is to come about, might well ask why the human content of economy, that is, human social reproduction, takes the form of a national labour plan, at its most progressive. This politicisation of the social labour relations will thus express, in its own words, Jacques Roux’s (1985: 147) dictum that ‘freedom is a hollow delusion for as long as one class of humans can starve another with impunity. Equality is a hollow delusion for as long as the rich exercise the right to decide over the life and death of others.’ The struggle for freedom is the struggle for the certainty of human subsistence. Freedom from need is the satisfaction of needs, and need is not hierarchical. Needs are always equal, except in a society in which equality is coerced to appear as an abstract equality before the law, nation, or money. The social individuals who possess no other property than their labour power must by necessity become ‘the slave of other individuals who have made themselves the owners of the means of human existence’ (Marx, 1970: 13, translation amended). For them, the freedom of capitalist wealth is the ‘freedom to starve’ (Adorno, 2008: 201).

There is as much freedom as there are men and women with the will to be free. This ‘will’ cannot be manufactured, nor can it be organised from the outside. Only a reified

consciousness can declare that it has the requisite knowledge, political capacity, and technical expertise for resolving capitalist crises in the interests of workers. Its world-view describes capitalist economy as an irrationally organised practice of labour, and proposes socialism as a rationally organised practice of labour by means of conscious planning by public authority. In this context the role of the 'theorist' is that of the analyst, not of the unconscious, but of the conscious organisation of economic necessity, without asking how the workers might benefit from a production process that is not at the disposal of direct producers themselves. Freedom is not a resource. It has no price and in its essence it is priceless. There is then the conundrum: as I argued elsewhere (Bonefeld 2002: 133), communism is the self-activity of the social individuals who determine their own affairs. Or as Marcuse (1967: 61) put it: slaves 'have to be free for their liberation so that they are able to become free'. In other words, the society of the free and equal has already to be present in the consciousness and practice of the dependent masses and has to achieve material existence in the revolutionary movement itself. The crux of the whole matter lies in Marcuse's paradoxical formulation: the slaves can free themselves only insofar as they are not slaves, on the basis of their non-identity. How can this be?

Making ends meet is the 'real life-activity' of 'living labour activity' (see Marx and Engels, 1978: 154). It entails everyday struggle over the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus value in every individual workplace and every local community. The existence of living labour as an economic category does not entail reduction of consciousness to economic consciousness as such. It entails the concept of free market or planned economy as an experienced concept, and economic consciousness as an experienced consciousness. At the very least, economic consciousness is an unhappy consciousness. It is this consciousness that demands resolution.

'In itself' the working class does not struggle for institutional transformations, capture of monetary policy, or ambitious programmes of economic planning. It does indeed struggle for better wages and conditions, and defends wage levels and conditions. It struggles against the 'werewolf's hunger for surplus labour' and its destructive conquest for additional atoms of labour time, and thus against its reduction to a mere time's carcass. It struggles against a life constituted solely of labour-time and thus against a reduction of human life to a mere economic resource. It struggles for respect, education and recognition of human significance, and above all, it struggles for food, shelter, clothing, warmth, love, affection, knowledge and dignity. Its struggle as a class 'in-itself' really is a struggle 'for-itself': for life, human distinction, life-time, and above all, satisfaction of basic human needs. It does all of this in conditions in which the increase in material wealth that it has produced pushes beyond the limits of the capitalist form of wealth. Every so-called trickle-down effect that capitalist accumulation might bring forth presupposes a prior and sustained trickle up in the capitalist accumulation of wealth. And then society suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if famine, a universal war of devastation, had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to be destroyed; and why? Because there is too much civilization, too much means of subsistence; too much industry, too much commerce. The productive forces

at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of bourgeois property; on the contrary, they have become too powerful for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and so soon as they overcome these fetters, they bring disorder into the whole of bourgeois society, endanger the existence of bourgeois property. The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them. And how does bourgeois society get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones. (Marx and Engels, 1996: 18-19)

The freedom to starve is an experienced freedom. In this context, the idea of anti-austerity as a matter of political choice between capitalist austerity and a socialist labour economy really amounts to party political ticket-thinking that organises itself as an attack on This misery and That outrage, promising to overcome This poverty and That misery. And who attacks the conditions that render this and that possible? Ticket-thinking transforms the protest against a really existing misery that blights the life of a whole class of individuals into a political advertisement for some alternative party of order. Its assertion to possess the means of resolving the conditions of poverty and misery cuts ‘the sinews of [the] greatest strength’ of the oppressed class by making it ‘forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice’ (Benjamin, 1999: 252). That is, the promise of a beneficial resolution to poverty without any changes in the existence of the worker as a productive means debilitates the power of resistance by deluding the oppressed that history is on their side, freeing the future generations of working class nieces and nephews from this and that poverty.

Without conclusion

The understanding of class struggle has thus to be brought down, away from the ‘lofty’ sphere of abstract supposition of a politics on behalf of workers, and towards ‘the real life-activity’ of the real individuals, their activity and their conditions of life. Instead of asking how best to plan the economic resources labour, land, and means of production, one should ask what it means to live the life of an economic resource, leave behind the labour market – this Eden of human rights – and accompany the seller of labour power beyond the factory gate on which it is written ‘no entry, except on business’, and follow the seller of body parts into the operation theatre, if indeed there is one. What, then, does it mean to say ‘no’? Where is the positive? The society of the free and equal can be defined in negation only. Humanisation of social relations is the purpose and end of human emancipation. However, the effort of humanising inhuman conditions is confronted by the paradox that it presupposes as eternal those same inhuman conditions that provoke the effort of humanisation in the first place. Inhuman conditions are not just an impediment to humanisation but a premise of its concept. Especially in miserable times, the positive cannot be found in the perpetuation of this premise. Any such claim would disavow the ostensive humanism of anti-austerity as a shame at best or at worst a pretext for the claim to power for its own sake. The positive can only be found in the negation of the negative world. Only radical opposition to capitalist society is able to force concession (Agnoli,

2003). The politicisation of the social labour relations by means of sustained mass demonstrations and social struggles is of key importance. It comprises the laboratory of the society of the 'free and equal' in action. Historically, it has assumed the form of the 'Soviet', the Commune, the Räte, the direct street democracy of the assemblies, which, pace Panitch et al., manifests no impasse at all. It is the laboratory of communist freedom.

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