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Austerity and Its Antitheses: Practical Negations of Capitalist Legitimacy

What is at stake in the recent and current protests against austerity around the globe is the *legitimacy* of capitalism. This is expressed in the fact that anti-austerity protests call into question the validity of the significations capitalism generates to justify its existence. These significations are produced and reproduced in the processes of commodity exchange and monetary transactions. They are immensely powerful because they are incorporated into social practices and, at the same time, represent symbolic manifestations of these practices (see, e.g., Castoriadis [1998] 2007). The legitimacy of capitalism depends on its capacity to colonize both the material and the symbolic resources mobilized by human actors in their daily construction of social reality. The main point of anticapitalist practices is to undermine this colonization process by insisting that it is both viable and desirable to create a society in which subjects and objects are not reduced to mere commodities. Nothing is more legitimate than the act of questioning the established legitimacy of the given through the subversive legitimacy of the not-yet.

The mass protests against austerity demonstrate that it is possible to develop individual

and collective spaces of *autonomy* capable of challenging the imposition of capitalist social structures and practices. In addition to rejecting the systemic imperatives of an administered world, resistance against programs of austerity contributes to the construction of a society shaped primarily by the purposive, cooperative, and creative resources of humanity. The potential transformation from being objects of capitalist domination to being subjects of emancipation reminds us that the struggle for autonomy is crucial to the self-realization of humanity. Recent and current mobilizations against austerity challenge the pervasive influence of capitalist imaginaries by creating empowering realms based on noncommodified expressions of autonomy.

Another noteworthy aspect of the mass protests against austerity is the struggle for individual and collective *sovereignty*. A world beyond austerity is a world that goes beyond the systemic logic of both economic and political power, as exercised by the market and the state. To be sure, there is a considerable diversity of participants in contemporary practices of austerity-related contestation. What most of them have in common, however, is their desire *not* to reproduce the power relations that have shaped the context of social austerity. While these acts of negation can be seen to prefigure a type of collective determination that refuses to accept the omnipresence of capitalist domination, the anti-austerity protests mobilize resources of antipower (Holloway [2002] 2005; Susen 2008a, 2008b) in a radical sense: they resist not only the notion of the distribution of goods being channeled through the market but also the notion of will-formation and decision-making processes being channeled through the state. In part, this is because of their general opposition to the state. More importantly, though, this is due to the specific role of governmental institutions in enacting austerity measures, which contribute to reinforcing the sovereignty of commodity-based forms of production. The challenge of anticapitalism consists in replacing the systemic sovereignty of the power-driven state and the market-driven economy with the species-constitutive sovereignty of a self-realizing humanity.

Austerity inside Prosperity

Since the beginning of the recent and ongoing economic crisis, programs of *austerity* have been implemented by governments that share the neoliberal commitment to deregulating the economy. The economic contraction ensuing from the financial crisis of 2008, owing to declining taxation revenue, significantly contributed to the indebtedness of the state, while increasing

levels of expenditure to stimulate aggregate demand and meet the costs of rising unemployment and other welfare measures (Castells 2011). However one may explain or interpret the current financial crisis, it is difficult to ignore how austerity programs have become a major means of responding to the economic downturn in both “peripheral” and “core” capitalist countries.

Austerity is the negation of one of the most significant sources of legitimacy in capitalist society: *prosperity*. Prosperity, over the long term, has served as a means for supposedly transcending the contradictions of capitalism, or at least for alleviating the pathological consequences of its existence. Prosperity represents a vital ideological point of reference, permitting the economically deprived sectors of society to ameliorate their situation by converting the disempowering experience of discontent and desperation into the empowering belief in progress and self-realization.

The arrival of widespread prosperity reinforces the idea that capitalism, despite its stratifying logic, serves the *collective well-being*. As such, it is used as a discursive tool mobilized to sustain the ideology of endless economic growth. Its tangible significance is reflected in widely accessible and increasingly high-standard patterns of production, distribution, and consumption. Given its legitimizing power, prosperity appears to be a gift endowed by regulated capitalism. In this sense, it represents an integral element of capitalism’s systemic capacity to create a sense of legitimacy by allowing for the development of wealthy societies founded on regulated market economies. The jargon of prosperity is essential to ensuring the reproduction of capitalist realities. For it conceals the inner contradictions of capitalism by replacing “class struggle” with “class compromise,” thereby converting the history of the market into a success story. This does not mean that, in advanced capitalist societies, prosperity is always preponderant over austerity. On the contrary, the most flourishing capitalist societies have undergone periods marked by austerity. Yet, austerity tends to be imposed on those who live on the margins of society and are largely excluded from the privilege of benefiting from the alleged gains of prosperity.

Far from representing an unambiguous idea, the concept of prosperity can acquire different connotative meanings: it can be associated with “reward” and “grace,” with the “satiation of desire,” or with the “consummation of a self-actualizing subjectivity.” In relation to capitalist society, it can be employed to refer to an economic state of growth, combined with rising profits and high levels of employment. A merely economic conception of prosperity is problematic in that it reduces individual or collective well-being to a growth-oriented state of affairs. Contrary to the rhetoric of prosperity, the

concept of austerity evokes negative connotations: it can be used to refer to “asceticism,” “discomfort,” the “denial of desire,” or the “imposition of a self-alienated subjectivity.” In relation to capitalist society, it tends to be employed to describe an economic state of recession, combined with falling profits and high levels of unemployment. Paradoxically, then, the concept of prosperity is both *antithetical to* and *dependent on* the concept of austerity.

The Reality of Austerity

The tensions and contradictions inherent in capitalism imply that both the enactment and the orchestration of austerity need to be delegated to *the state*. The fact that the state is an agent of austerity gives the impression that what is at stake is not the economic system as such but those who are officially in charge of controlling and regulating it. Without a doubt, capitalism requires the state to be an enforcer of austerity. The risk of capitalism revealing its commitment to austerity consists in undermining the legitimizing signification of prosperity. From a historical perspective, austerity tends to be associated with authoritarian regimes, rather than with liberal or quasi-liberal political orders. For its implementation may involve the concentration of legislative, judicial, and executive powers capable of suppressing subversive forces opposed to capitalist domination. Regardless of whether it is dictatorially imposed or democratically legitimized, the political enactment of austerity is aimed at the preservation, rather than the delegitimization, of capitalism.¹ In this sense, austerity entails the prioritizing of the social interests shared by the dominant classes.

The *ideology* underlying capitalist programs of austerity suggests that, even in the face of protracted crisis, well-being can and should be achieved through the creative destruction of market forces. Thus, it seeks to justify the detrimental short-term effects of austerity by insisting on the substantial long-term benefits of prosperity. Indeed, the ideological propagation of a long-term payoff gained from short-term cutbacks plays a pivotal role in legitimizing the politics of austerity in the name of prosperity. Unsurprisingly, the discursive defense of austerity measures is vital to protecting the privileges of economic elites. In the context of a major financial crisis, however, these policies are increasingly difficult to justify, particularly to those who suffer the consequences of their implementation in the most tangible ways.

Austerity policies need to make use of the full scale of ideological elasticity, in order for them to be able to set the agenda and determine the parameters of justifiability. Ironically, programs of austerity are most successful

when accepted, or even supported, by those who live on the fringes of society. Regardless of whether their acceptance or support is open or tacit, conscious or unconscious, deliberate or unintended, direct or indirect, the extent to which those who suffer the consequences of imposed scarcity refuse to question their legitimacy is indicative of the degree to which the long-term goal of prosperity can be ideologically mobilized in order to defend the politics of austerity.

Austerity cannot be dissociated from the inescapable *fragility* that permeates all, including the seemingly most stable, forms of society.² Programs of austerity are generally tied to fiscal crises of the state and to the real or potential decline in capital accumulation. Particularly in times of crisis, those who impose programs of austerity tend to present them as technocratic solutions to merely financial problems, rather than as social processes shaped by struggle and contestation. To the extent that the promise of prosperity — conceived of as a state of real or imagined well-being consistent with the commodifying logic of capitalism — constitutes a legitimizing force that can be challenged by programs of austerity, systemic crises expose the ineluctable *fragility* of market-based societies, thereby undermining the belief in rational mastery, which is central to the project of modernity. The dogma of capitalist prosperity presupposes the possibility of control, regularity, and predictability. The arrival of capitalist austerity, by contrast, illustrates the power of uncertainty, irregularity, and unpredictability. It is no secret that capitalism permits, and de facto depends on, a certain degree of contingency, without which it cannot assert its sociohistorical authority, especially when facing crises of legitimacy, which are indicative of its own fragility.

Capitalizing on Austerity

From the outset, capitalism has constituted a systemic force driven by *creative destruction*. The quasi-theological spirit underpinning the capitalist teleology is expressed in the fundamental terminological tools underlying liberal ideology: the “invisible hand” of the market allows for creative destruction through destructive creation, that is, for the possibility of destroying existing productive forces by creating new ones and, correspondingly, for the possibility of creating new productive forces by destroying old ones. Yet, unlike the Schumpeterian view of creative destruction, the predominant forms of destructive creation in contemporary capitalism ensue not from innovation but from the market in the *devastation of value* and the *increasing dependence of capital accumulation*, as well as *personal accumulation* in this

new theology, on *highly destructive economic instruments*, such as credit default swaps and derivatives. It is important to remember that these instruments do not just enforce austerity in a manner consistent with neoliberal ideology; they incorporate it into their operation and thereby convert austerity into an object of market exchange and, hence, into a way of profiting from unmet needs. Advanced capitalism has generated expectations that it cannot fulfill. In this sense, it has produced the context of its own negation. "What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all," as stated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels ([1848] 2000: 255), "is its own grave-diggers." In other words, the rise of capitalism cannot be dissociated from the production of the conditions of its own demise. Surely, there is the capitalist hope that wealth will continue to accumulate and that, as a result, borrowings are a reasonable and sustainable way of securing the long-term future of national and global markets. To the extent that structural crises form part and parcel of commodity-driven markets, however, the implementation of austerity programs reflects the destructive potential built into capitalism.

Austerity regimes do not undermine but strengthen the commodifying logic of capitalist society. As such, they stipulate what is possible and what is impossible, as well as what is desirable and what is undesirable, by reinforcing the pervasive power of *commodification processes*. According to the commodifying imperatives of material, symbolic, and financial markets, the worth of every aspect of society can be measured in terms of its exchangeability. Programs of austerity are marked by relative indifference toward the existential significance of human needs and people's vulnerability, since they prioritize the market value of commodities over the substantive value of socially constructed realities.

The imposition of austerity regimes demonstrates that the development of capitalism is driven, to use Max Weber's terms, not only by purposive rationality (*Zweckrationalität*), concerned with outcome and success, but also by value rationality (*Wertrationalität*), focused on the creation of rules and norms. Austerity, then, is not simply about money but also about the social – or, literally, *coexistential* – values deriving from it. One of the great ironies of the current economic crisis consists in the fact that the harshest consequences of austerity are experienced primarily by those who were peripheral to the circumstances that generated it. Put differently, those who are not responsible for the economic crisis are those who suffer the consequences in the most substantial and detrimental manner. What makes this paradox even more significant, however, is another major contradiction: *programs of austerity apply the market-driven rationality that generated the finan-*

cial crisis in order to resolve it. The reason for this is that, rather than constituting short-term adjustment strategies, programs of austerity are part of a wider political and economic project: neoliberalism.

The rise of *neoliberalism* and the implementation of *austerity* packages are intimately interrelated. They are the reverse of the ideal of redistribution, implying that wage earners and those dependent on the welfare state – such as the aged, the unemployed, and the ill – have to bear the costs of indebtedness. Programs of austerity can be conceived of as a *displacement of costs* onto wage earners in particular and onto citizens in general. Attempts of neoliberal states to “correct” or “rectify” so-called market failures on the basis of austerity policies illustrate that we are confronted with an inversion of the Keynesian or social-democratic consensus of the postwar era – an inversion that, of course, began with the large-scale implementation of free market policies in the 1980s and, thus, long *before* the financial crisis of 2008. According to the neoliberal model, we need less, rather than more, redistributive policies and more, rather than less, austerity measures, in order for the global capitalist economy to regain both legitimacy and stability. Neoliberal agendas are put into practice through processes of “privatization,” “deregulation,” “decentralization,” “debureaucratization,” and “flexibilization.” In the early twenty-first century, austerity policies are an integral part of this neoliberal program.

The past forty years may be characterized as a period marked by the *redefinition and remobilization of the spirit of capitalism*. This spirit converges with classical liberal ideology in the sense that it advocates bourgeois ideals of “ownership,” “merit,” “opportunity,” “competitiveness,” “initiative,” and “individual freedom.” At the same time, it goes one step further in endorsing a “*new spirit of capitalism*” (Boltanski and Chiapello [1999] 2005), which, due to its innovative and seemingly inclusive nature, appears to be much more elastic and adaptable than previous forms of class-based domination. Indeed, one of the key ingredients of this “*new spirit*” is capitalism’s ability to mobilize – or at least appear to mobilize – the purposive, cooperative, and creative potential of meaningful activity, to attain an unprecedented degree of legitimacy within a rapidly changing global society. Far from being reducible to a system of oppression and domination, capitalism, by embracing this “*new spirit*,” has made every effort to exploit its own elasticity and adaptability with the aim of presenting itself as an efficient framework capable of accommodating, and stimulating, the most empowering resources of humanity. The rise of the politics of austerity, however, contradicts and undermines the legitimizing capacity of this “*new spirit of capitalism*.”

Anti-austerity Movements

The movements that have emerged in the struggle against austerity belong to a longer sequence of contestation concerned with challenging the predominance of *global capitalism*, sustained by neoliberal policies. Anti-austerity movements draw on the empowering resources of “alter-globalization,” insisting that the construction of a world that breaks with the functionalist logic of markets and states is both possible and necessary (Pleyers 2010; Santos and Rodríguez-Garavito 2005). The various political confrontations opposing global capitalism and austerity share a concern with the right to individual and collective self-determination (see, e.g., Browne and McGill 2010; Conway 2004; della Porta et al. 2006; Eschle 2001; Farro 2004; Maney 2002; Susen 2010). As a consequence, these movements have sought to defend the interests of the relatively unprivileged majority against the interests of a privileged minority, thereby contesting the disempowering control exercised by the political and economic protagonists of neoliberal globalization. In particular, the struggles against austerity have called the legitimacy of mainstream political agendas, including the representational decision-making procedures of liberal democracies, into question.

Anti-austerity movements – such as the *Indignados* movement (see, e.g., Taibo 2011; Torres López et al. 2011; Velasco 2011) and the Occupy movement (see, e.g., Byrne 2012; Graeber 2012; Miller 2012) – advocate radical democratic practices capable of realizing the emancipatory potential of *self-empowering* individual and collective actors. In this sense, their grassroots communism is diametrically opposed to historically institutionalized forms of socialism, as experienced, on a large scale, in the twentieth century. As grassroots movements, they locate the emancipatory potential of their projects in *everyday practices*, rather than in the ossification of people’s autonomy resulting from the institutional power exercised by political parties and governments in the name of state legitimacy. In essence, their refusal to engage in the traditional struggle for and over state power is reflected on three levels.

First, anti-austerity movements are inspired by the ideal of *autonomization*. This means that they are, to a large extent, self-organizing and self-generative. Although they engage, to be sure, in critical debate with political parties, trade unions, and associations opposed to global injustice, they avoid being directly influenced, let alone controlled, by these organizations. In fact, grassroots activists tend to be suspicious of mainstream politics and conventional institutions. Their antiestablishment attitude is expressed in

their discontent with the disempowering nature and stifling effects of party politics pursued by local, regional, and national governments, even if these are, or claim to be, left-wing.

Second, anti-austerity movements are motivated by the ideal of *democratization*. Drawing on radical conceptions of direct and deliberative participation, they seek to break with the principles of delegation and representation of traditional parties and liberal pluralism. Therefore, they do not have any official spokespersons representing other participants' views and opinions. Instead, they aim to meet the radical demand for full participation by trying to ensure that, in principle, everyone is given equal opportunities to voice their opinions and directly participate in the decision-making processes of their assemblies. Anti-austerity movements attempt to challenge accepted patterns of hierarchical authority and institutionalization, which manifest themselves in both formal and informal mechanisms of exclusion. Rejecting the taken-for-grantedness of vertical structures, they seek to organize themselves horizontally. By so doing, they appear to have demonstrated that the ideals of equality and autonomy are mutually inclusive. There is no direct or deliberative democracy without protecting and enhancing both the equality *among* and the autonomy *of* its participants.

Third, anti-austerity movements endorse the ideal of *reappropriation*. Their "communizing" spirit is based on their attempt to reinvent social relations in ways that break with the capitalist logic of private appropriation and expropriation.³ In other words, through practices of direct participation, they aim to incorporate both subjective and intersubjective experiences and understandings into their discourses, instead of subscribing to a list of dogmas and doctrines. Their participants' attempt to reappropriate their lives and lifeworlds in ways that transcend the systemic logic of the state and the market is indicative of their desire to develop alternative social relations founded on a strong sense of individual and collective self-empowerment.

Anti-austerity movements are inspired and sustained by what may be described as "*communizing*" processes, understood as an ensemble of purposive practices based on a sense of meaningful togetherness (see, e.g., Castells 2012). Their sense of worthwhile sociality is created by virtue of horizontal and multimodal networks. What is normatively more significant, though, is that their sense of meaningful togetherness derives not from an established community, which presumes a set of strongly held preexisting and shared values, but, rather, from the *potential* for discovering both commonalities and differences through the process of participating in open – and, hence, overtly contradictory – practices. "The horizontality

of networks," writes Manuel Castells, "supports cooperation and solidarity while undermining the need for formal leadership" (2012: 225; italics removed from original). The critical engagement with the possibility of direct democracy is reflected in a wide range of participatory activities, from general assemblies to the operation of smaller groups and the construction of spaces for informal democracy. While these realms of alternative social activities are both tension- and power-laden, they constitute valuable contexts for grassroots-democratic practices. As pointed out by Jacques Rancière, the insistence on the "communizing" nature of these processes is crucial in at least three respects: "First, it emphasizes the principle of the *unity and equality* of intelligences; second, it emphasizes the *affirmative* aspect of the process of *collectivization* of this principle; third, it stresses the *self-superseding capacity* of the process, its *boundlessness*, which entails its ability to invent futures that are not yet imaginable" (Rancière 2010: 176–77; italics added). In short, the communizing spirit of anti-austerity movements is indicative of their commitment to contributing to the creation of inclusive, affirmative, and imaginative practices.

When reflecting on the nature of capitalist social relations, we are confronted with a curious situation. On the one hand, capitalist social relations, because of their emphasis on *private initiative* and *individual freedom*, cannot be divorced from the principle of *social competition*, whose omnipresence undermines the scope for alternative – that is, non-profit-driven – ways of coordinating human practices. On the other hand, capitalist social relations, owing to mechanisms of *private appropriation* and *individual expropriation*, cannot be dissociated from the experience of *social fear*, which has pervaded neoliberal regimes over the past decades. What is this fear? It is the fear that there will be no collective support, let alone unconditional *solidarity*, in the face of people's present or future vulnerability. Rather than defending the need for collective responsibility, the acceptance of the status quo presupposes that social sources of human vulnerability are to be tackled through *individually mobilized* resources of preventative action. Social fear triggered by the imposition of austerity programs reflects the preponderance of the logic of competition, which reduces human beings to utility-driven players, who are expected to follow the rules of the capitalist game and make calculative assessments, in order to "better" their position in society.

In light of their immersion in a relentless struggle over material and symbolic resources, social actors are forced to be deceptive and manipulative, since profit-maximization constitutes the underlying imperative of their commodified practices. Far from being reducible to irrational responses caused by exposure to uncertainty, fears triggered by the destabilizing effects

of contemporary capitalism have a rational basis, in the sense that they reflect people's legitimate concerns not only about the future of their lives but also about the future of society. To be exact, we are confronted with *the fear of fear*. The fear of fear is a form of disempowerment that can lead to inertia and paralysis, unless it is challenged by individual and collective processes of reempowerment. The simple fact of protesting is a way of confronting the fear of fear with the galvanizing force of empowerment. Instead of endorsing individualist strategies of self-interested protection, protests against austerity illustrate that *solidarity* in the face of scarcity is one of the most valuable resources of humanity.

The opposition to austerity has revitalized the potential for *democratic creativity* (see, e.g., Pleyers 2010: 226).⁴ Movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the *Indignados* have emerged and developed on the basis of the *autonomy* of their participants, thereby challenging mainstream conceptions of representation and delegation. Given their emphasis on the significance of their participants' autonomy, these movements are opposed to the idea of delegating discursive power to a spokesperson, who, by definition, would be formally entitled to speak on behalf of everyone else. To the extent that anti-austerity movements reject the idea of hierarchical authority, they seek to ensure that, in principle, the contributions of all participants have equal weight, instead of attaching more value to the contributions made by those in formal or informal positions of authority.

Rather than replacing an existing system of domination with a more efficient or more compassionate set of power structures, the point is to challenge disempowering forms of authority through the autonomous actions of self-legislating communities. The initiation of radically democratic social practices commences with the negation of consolidated systems of authority. In fact, a central feature of the recent anti-austerity protests is their relative openness toward *experimentation* with radical democratic practices: their experimental attitude toward nonhierarchical decision-making processes is essential to the self-understanding of anti-austerity movements, enabling their members to explore new possibilities for independent communication and meaningful collaboration.

Anti-austerity movements remind us of the importance to discard disempowering mechanisms of managerial authority and leadership, insisting that genuine democracy emanates from self-empowering grassroots forms of social collaboration and public exchange. They invite us, therefore, to take issue with the strategically motivated separation between "means" and "ends." Undoubtedly, they have taken up the notion that genuinely democratic practices are based on direct participation, openness, and transparency.

In this sense, they have sought to challenge political alienation deriving from power-laden mechanisms of institutionalization. Democratic creativity implies an acceptance of a certain degree of indeterminacy, precisely because it aims to facilitate imagination and experimentation.

Room for Hope: Beyond Commodification

The current global economic crisis can be regarded as facilitating an increasingly widespread awareness of the contradictory tendencies that have shaped capitalist societies in recent times. Radical ruptures with the logic of capitalism can be conceived of as moments of antipower to the extent that they break with the logic of the established order. One of the emancipatory aspects of the anti-austerity movements consists in their capacity to contribute to a revalorization of *use-value-oriented practices*, which, although they constitute a vital element of human life-forms, are, under capitalism, undermined by *exchange-value-oriented transactions* (Castells 2011). These practices are crucial in highlighting the empowering nature of noncommodified ways of consolidating social relations.

European countries that have been hit the hardest by austerity programs – notably Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Ireland – have witnessed the revival of solidarity-based communities, which are self-governed through the creation of alternative realms of mutual support: barter networks, time banks, community banking, producer and consumer cooperatives, urban farming, communal living, transformation of transportation systems in cities, volunteer-based social services, counseling networks, voluntary associations, P2P (peer-to-peer) digital cultural sharing, and open-source innovation in the computer world (Castells 2011: 206–9) – to mention only a few examples.

Even if – in terms of their overall impact upon society – many of these alternative practices are ameliorative, rather than transformative, they demonstrate the desire, as well as the necessity, for inventing ways of satisfying individual and collective needs through the construction of self-empowering realms of interaction that escape the commodifying logic of capitalism. To be sure, this does not mean that these processes should be idealized, as if they allowed for the emergence of completely autonomous interactional microcosms capable of transcending the systemic imperatives imposed on them by the societal macrocosm. This does mean, however, that – owing to their ability to break with the hegemonic logic underlying the capitalist production of commodities and, thus, with the repressive

rationality underpinning large-scale programs of austerity – their practical orientation toward the creation of spaces of individual and collective autonomy constitutes a powerful step toward the construction of an emancipatory society. Where there is austerity, there is not only despair but also hope.

Notes

- 1 A striking historical example of a “democratically legitimized program of austerity” can be found in the policies implemented by former German chancellor Heinrich Brüning, who was in office between March 30, 1930, and May 30, 1932 (in the Weimar Republic), and who was sometimes described as the “famine chancellor” (*Hungerkanzler*). We owe this remark to Werner Bonefeld (2012b: 35). See also Bonefeld 2012a.
- 2 On the fragility of social reality, see Boltanski 2009: 130, 230, 233, 236, 262n76.
- 3 On the concept of “communizing,” see Holloway 2010: 210, 258, 283n10; see also Susen 2012: 291. On the concept of “communism” in this context, see, e.g., Rancière 2010.
- 4 For more details on the concept of “democratic creativity,” see Browne 2009.

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