

## NEW MASSES?

The past few years have witnessed successive mass flare-ups in India, Turkey, Brazil; street protests have ricocheted up the Balkans—Zagreb, Sarajevo, Sofia, Bucharest—to Ukraine, where Yanukovich was chased from office last month. Paradoxically, it is not so much in the recession-struck Northern heartlands but in the neo-capitalist Second World, and in the—supposedly booming—BRICs and emerging economies, that popular anger has made itself felt. The weakness of resistance in the advanced-capitalist zones, despite the provocatively regressive policies of austerity and financial bail-out, remains to be explained—and, hopefully, transcended. But the marginalization since 1990 of capital's historic antagonist, organized labour, must be part of the answer. In the East and South, what social forces and what politics are in play? In *NLR* 78, Göran Therborn offered a survey of the global class landscape, examining the realities of the 'new middle classes' of the developing world. In this issue, Therborn analyses the oppositional potential of subordinate layers across six continents: pre-capitalist indigenous and peasant forces, 'surplus' populations, manufacturing workers, wage-earning middle classes. Under what conditions can defensive protests against the commercialization of public space and services, as in Turkey and Brazil, or popular anger at corrupt, repressive regimes—Ukraine, Maghreb, Mashreq—trigger alliances between them? In Brazil, a bus fare hike sparked demonstrations across the country in June 2013. André Singer examines the social and political complexion of the protests, finding a confluence of classes out on the streets: *déclassé* youth and 'new proletarians'—a *Movimento Passe Livre* organizer describes a 'gigantic quantity' of the protestors working in telemarketing, with college degrees\*—and inflation-hit middle classes. What politics do the cadres of the new resistance movements bring to the fight? Lines of descent can be traced from the alter-globo movements of the 90s—Chiapas, Seattle, Genoa, Porto Alegre—as well as from the Latin American protests of *cocaleros* and *piqueteros*, and from the Colour Revolutions of the early 2000s (some with discreet Western embassy backing). But as Singer describes, in Brazil as elsewhere, sections of the right and centre had major parts to play. Mapping out the contradictory contours of these upsurges will be a central task as future waves of resistance unfold.

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\* Lucas Oliveira, 'Está em pauta, agora, que modelo de cidade queremos', interviewed by Maria Caraméz Carlotto for *Revista Fevereiro*, no. 6, 18 October 2013.

GÖRAN THERBORN

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### *Social Bases of Resistance*

**C**RITIQUES OF CAPITALISM, if they are to make any political sense, must have—or find—a social base. From the nineteenth century through to the twentieth, the most salient critique was dubbed ‘the workers’ question’, for its mass base was to be found in the rising industrial working class. It was an issue not merely for the emerging labour organizations and their occasional Liberal sympathizers, but also for conservative opinion; even the fascists, the most violent enemies of the labour movement, modelled their organizations after its example. Industrial workers maintained their centrality up to the 1970s. By then a further social base for anti-capitalist struggle had emerged in the anti-colonial movements, mobilized around the issue of national liberation and against imperialist ‘dependent development’.

Over the past thirty years, however, de-industrialization in the North has halted and reversed the forward march of labour; here, the ‘grand dialectic’—that is: the clash between the increasingly social character of the forces of production and their private ownership—has been suspended. Meanwhile, the successful industrialization of leading countries in the South during the same period has so far largely meant that capitalist development is now seen as possible in Asia, Africa and Latin America, contrary to once influential dependency theories. Are there, then, any rising social forces today that could be functionally equivalent to the organized working classes or the anti-colonial movements of the twentieth century? Clearly, there are no mass anti-capitalist layers visible at present—a novel situation for capitalism, in the context of the past 150 years. However, if we look not for anti-capitalist movements but rather for mass formations that are potentially critical of contemporary

capitalist development, important social forces are making themselves manifest. We can distinguish four different kinds.

### *From the margins*

The first potentially critical social force consists of pre-capitalist populations, resisting the intrusions of big business. Indigenous peoples, recently somewhat empowered, are the main subject here. They are politically significant above all in Andean America and in India, but are present across much of the South and have developed international networks. They lack both the numbers and the resources to carry much weight, except locally; but their struggles can be articulated with wider critical movements of resistance. At present they are a force to be reckoned with in Bolivia, as the main component of a fractious governing coalition, and in India, as the core of a large-scale insurgency; in both cases *encadrés* by organizers from the labour-movement tradition—laid-off socialist miners turned coca growers in Bolivia, and Maoist professional revolutionaries in central India. The latter have taken a severe beating recently, but they have not been defeated or destroyed. In Mexico, the Zapatistas still hold the Lacandona region of Chiapas. Such mobilizations can be contradictory: in Communist-ruled West Bengal, peasants defending their land against industrial development projects blocked a Chinese-style turn and propelled a right-wing regime into power.

The second, largely extra-capitalist, critical force is made up of the hundreds of millions of landless peasants, casual labourers and street vendors who constitute the vast slum populations in many parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America. (Their equivalents in the North might be the growing numbers of marginalized youth, both native and immigrant, outside the employment nexus.) Potentially, they constitute a major source of destabilization for capitalism. The pent-up anger and violence of these layers have often proved explosive, sometimes viciously so, in ethnic pogroms or just riotous vandalism. However, these ‘wretched of the earth’ have also been involved in struggles against evictions and for access to water and electricity; they played a significant part in the 2011 Arab revolts and in the anti-austerity, anti-government protests along the northern Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts—Greece, Spain, Bulgaria, Romania.

Under what conditions might these forces connect with any viable socio-economic alternative? It's clear that any such critical alternative would have to speak directly to their fundamental concerns—their existential collective identity and their means of livelihood. It would need to develop modes of communication reaching deep into these popular strata, generating charismatic leaders with broad relay networks, personal as well as electronic. As the urban population in particular is unlikely to be organized, this potentially critical force will not spring into action without a focal triggering event, the nature of which is impossible to predict.

The everyday dialectic of capitalist wage-work is, of course, still very much with us, even if it has been geographically reconfigured. The residual industrial working class in the North remains too weak to pose any anti-capitalist challenge; but austerity and capitalist offensives are generating short-horizon protests, not least in France, where organized labour threatened to disrupt petrol supplies in 2010 and steelworkers occupied plants in 2012. The new manufacturing workers in China, Bangladesh, Indonesia and elsewhere in the South may be in a better position to raise anti-capitalist demands, but their position is weakened by the vast supply of labour, and they are already being overtaken by more fragmented service-sector employment patterns. Repeated attempts to form labour parties, from Nigeria to Indonesia, have foundered; the only success over the past thirty years has been the Brazilian PT. South Korea and South Africa both possess important, union-based labour movements, but they lack strong political articulations: the South African unions are overshadowed by the nature of ANC rule, the Korean ones undermined by petty factionalism, which torpedoed a well-developed project for a united left party in late 2012.

While the class struggles in the South have been successful in winning wage rises and, to some extent, less gruesome working conditions, they seem unlikely to develop into a more systemic challenge. In East Asia, in particular, industrial capitalism is delivering higher levels of consumption, in a way that slower-developing European economies took much longer to achieve. True, Communist Party rule in China and Vietnam means that an anti-capitalist turn is not inconceivable—and would be feasible, if attempted. Yet for this to happen would require both a halt to growth and effective working-class mobilization against the enormous

inequality the system has generated, which threatens the ‘harmony’ or social cohesion of Communist capitalism. This is imaginable but highly improbable, at least in the medium term. A more promising scenario may lie in connecting workplace struggles with community ones, over housing, health, education or civil rights.

### *White-collar masses*

A fourth, potentially critical, social force may now be emerging within the polarizing dialectic of financialized capitalism. Middle-class layers, crucially including students, played a leading role in the movements of 2011—Spain, Greece, the Arab Mashrek, Chile, as well as the weaker Occupy protests in North America and northern Europe—and the Turkish and Brazilian protests of 2013. These eruptions brought both middle-class and popular youth onto the streets, and in some instances their parents as well, against corrupt, exclusivist, socially polarizing capitalist systems. They did not manage to encroach on the power of capital, though 2011 brought two governments down. Yet they may prove to have been dress rehearsals for the dramas to come.

Discourse about the new middle classes has grown into an avalanche over the past decade. In and about Africa, Asia and Latin America it is predominantly triumphalist—about Eastern Europe, often more cautious—proclaiming the arrival of mass markets of solvent consumers. Whether right or wrong, class discourses are always socially significant, so the global surge of middle-class discourse is a noteworthy symptom of the 2010s. For the most part it does not point to any critical social dialectic; on the contrary, it generally applauds the triumph of consumerism. The working class is vanishing from Chinese and Vietnamese Communist Party documents, while in German-led Europe the ideal of an ‘entrepreneurial society’ has replaced the mid-twentieth century self-image of the ‘wage-earner society’. Political commentators generally see the middle classes as a promising foundation for ‘sound’ economics and liberal democracy, though thoughtful economists, particularly in Brazil, have stressed the fragility of ‘middle-classness’ and the ever-present risk of poverty to which many are exposed. In the US, by contrast, the prevailing tone is of worry about the middle class’s decline in economic status and social weight. Western Europe has not followed quite the same pattern: the notion of the middle class here has always tended to be more circumscribed than in the Americas or Asia—including post-Maoist

China—because of the established discursive presence of a working class. Outside Europe, the new conception of the middle class now encompasses the vast mass of the population which stands between the very poor and the wealthy, with the poverty line frequently set as income or expenditure of \$2, \$4 or \$10 a day, while the upper limit excludes only the richest 5 or 10 per cent.

In contrast to the industrial working class, the heteroclite aggregate known as the ‘middle class’ is the bearer of no specific relations of production, and harbours no particular developmental tendencies, apart from discretionary consumption. Yet however it is defined, the middle class—or substantial parts of it—has already demonstrated its ability to become a significant political actor, its salience growing with the decline or disorganization of the industrial proletariat. The rising middle classes of the Global South merit particularly close attention, for they can be crucial in determining political options.

Precisely because of the social indeterminacy of the middle classes, their weight may be thrown in different, indeed opposite directions. The mobilized middle class was a major force behind Pinochet’s coup in Chile, while its Venezuelan counterpart supported a failed attempt to overthrow Hugo Chávez in 2002, and the well-heeled ‘Yellow Shirts’ of Bangkok brought down the government in Thailand six years later. As twentieth-century European history shows, the middle class is no intrinsic force for democracy. However, it has also been a source of pressure for democratic change, playing an important role in Taiwan and South Korea during the 1980s—alongside industrial workers—and in Eastern Europe in 1989. It was a central force in Cairo and Tunis in 2011, and a supporter of popular street protests in Greece, Spain, Chile and Brazil in 2011–13. The volatility of middle-class politics is vividly illustrated by the sharp turns in Egypt, from acclamation of democracy to adulation of the military and its mounting repression of dissent, effectively condoning the restoration of the *ancien régime* minus Mubarak.

But critical interventions by middle-class forces can manifest themselves in the electoral arena, too. In 2012 Mexico City, with a population the size of a mid-level European state, elected a left-wing mayor for the fourth consecutive term; the successful candidate, Miguel Ángel Mancera, won almost 64 per cent of the vote, suggesting an inclusive popular bloc. In India, the trajectory of the Aam Aadmi (Common Man)

Party remains to be determined. The spectacular advance of the AAP and its leader, Arvind Kejriwal, was due to a novel alliance that linked middle-class anti-corruption protestors with a set of concrete proposals on access to water and other public services that could benefit broader layers. The new party swept leafy New Delhi, as well as nine of the twelve 'scheduled caste' constituencies, to take the capital's government in late 2013—only to step down 49 days later, as legislative efforts to curb graft stalled for lack of central government approval. In Indonesia a reformist candidate, Jokowi, won the governorship of Jakarta in 2013 against both the local establishment and a vicious sectarian-religious campaign—his chosen running mate was a Chinese Christian—on a platform of extending education and health services, as well as promoting 'entrepreneurial urbanism'. Here, too, the strength and effectiveness of the class alliances—their ability to deliver tangible improvements for the popular masses—remain to be seen.

### *Critical themes*

Capitalism—and industrial capitalism in particular—has been the subject of cultural critique ever since Blake denounced its 'dark Satanic mills'. For a long time, the system simply sailed past such complaints, but '1968' put an end to such insouciance. The movements symbolized by that year did not make much headway against capitalism itself, but they had a major impact on social relations: eroding patriarchy and misogyny, delegitimizing institutional racism, chipping away at deference and hierarchy—in short, promoting existential equality, above all in Europe and America. However, these cultural transformations have largely been absorbed by advanced capitalism, with the informality of high-tech industries, a surge of female CEOs, the mainstreaming of gay rights and same-sex marriage, the social figure of the 'bourgeois-bohemian', and so on.

Movements based on a cultural critique of capitalist society have either called for the limitation and regulation of capitalist development, or have posited alternative ways of life. There seem to be opportunities for at least four kinds of significant critical-cultural movements in the decades ahead, spanning both the 'limitation' and the 'alternative' approaches. Historically, the most important limitation-argument has centred on the threat to social cohesion posed by unbridled capitalism. Of more

recent vintage is the environmental question, with industrialization's unintended consequences for the ecosystem gyrating ever further out of control. Among the 'alternatives', the relevance of socialism is currently suspended, but other visions are clearly discernible, more akin to communism in the original Marxian sense than to the industrial socialism of the twentieth century. At present, two such movements can be identified, at least in embryo, both offering the promise of a quality of life superior to that of capitalism. The first, best articulated in Germany, starts from the experience of developed countries, and has a 'post-growth' emphasis. The second presents a geo-social alternative, deriving its force from the non-capitalist South. We'll look at each of these in turn.

Firstly, social cohesion is much less vital for the ruling elites of today than it was for their counterparts in previous centuries. Conscript armies have largely been replaced by mercenary ones; the mass media have helped to make domestic elections 'manageable'; prevailing economic wisdom holds that the sentiment of international investors counts for more in delivering growth than developmental unity. For Northern elites cohesion implies, if anything, pressure upon immigrants to assimilate better, in the name of 'integration'. True, there is an official EU concern with social cohesion, but in practice this is seen mainly in geographical terms, with the funding of development projects in poorer regions. During the present crisis, with the imposition of harsh austerity on the populations of southern Europe, there has been little official concern about rising levels of social exclusion. Clearly, national cohesion is no longer considered the key to imperial power—as it was in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the revolution-from-above of Meiji Japan, and less successful attempts by regimes from Qing China to the Ottoman Empire, saw it as the basis for modern geopolitical strength. After the Second World War, nationally cohesive capitalist development was the aim of the elected rulers of Japan and the military ones of Taiwan and South Korea alike, resulting in industrial societies that, in the capitalist world, were second only to European welfare states for their low levels of economic inequality. For the PRC's rulers, social cohesion remains a decisive criterion of political performance. The extraordinary inequality spawned by China over the past 35 years—so different from the egalitarian, rapid-growth trajectories of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan—renders its self-image as a 'harmonious society' untenable. This may also become the case in other parts of the South.



Nevertheless, social exclusion, inequality and dislocation remain a potential foundation for critiques from below, as the recurrent protest movements of the past few years have shown. Actually existing capitalist societies are not fully comprehended by the logic of *Capital*: they also encompass non-capitalist areas, including public space and public services. At present, capitalism is bent on invading all spheres of social life—restricting, if not necessarily abolishing (yet) everything public. These intrusions generate currents of resistance, defence of what is public or non-commodified. Recently there has been a global spread of this type of protest movement: against privatized higher education in Chile and other parts of Latin America, against the commercialization of Istanbul’s public space, and more muted but nonetheless broad resentment at the marketization of schools and care services in Sweden.

The commodification of social relations and neo-liberal undermining of any notion of public interest or sense of social responsibility have provided huge opportunities for corruption. Even in states previously governed by a strong, though now reviled, public-service ethos, like Sweden, shady public–private business deals have become endemic. In the South, where massive corruption is systemic in most countries, including China and Vietnam, ‘clean hands’ campaigns are common yet have little impact. Occasionally their scale grows more serious, as with the Delhi protests, launched in 2011 by Anna Hazare after the blatant looting that attended the 2010 Commonwealth Games, which mutated into the Aam Aadmi Party. Defensive movements against corruption and the commercial exploitation of public space and public services are likely to grow, both because the provocations will multiply, and because citizens are now less deferential, more knowledgeable and easier to mobilize by means of social media. In 2013, Turkey provided an exemplary case. Unless they become part of wider socio-political configurations, however, these protests—along with those against indebtedness and house evictions—will remain within the limits of the capitalist system.

Environmentalist critics of capitalism organized as a social movement in the 1980s, which still carries a good deal of weight. Arguably, the ecological challenges of climate change, urban pollution, plunder of the oceans and depletion of water reserves have re-started the Marxian grand dialectic between the social character of the productive forces and the crisis-generating nature of existing property relations: a dialectic suspended in the North by de-industrialization and the triumph of

financial capitalism. The impact of this critique will probably depend on its ability to develop a collective regulative responsibility, while abstaining from sacrificial no-growth demands. One crucial issue is the disastrous pollution of Chinese cities—including, spectacularly, Beijing—and of urban centres elsewhere in Asia. In China, pollution is also destroying large areas of arable soil. By raising demands for public regulation, environmentalism could link up with critiques of unbridled capitalist finance. That we have seen few such alliances underlines the weakness of the North Atlantic left—not to mention the still largely unchallenged Chinese obsession with economic catch-up.

A critique of consumerism could take a new generational form. ‘1968’ was a young people’s movement—‘don’t trust anyone over thirty’. In the Mediterranean and Chilean protests of 2011, or the Brazilian upsurge of June 2013, by contrast, young people were often joined by their parents. The devastating crisis of neoliberalism in Argentina at the dawn of the twenty-first century generated vigorous street protests of retirees trying to defend their pensions. A critical movement could emerge from the ageing populations of Europe and Japan, particularly among the seniors of the ‘1968’ cohort. These might be protests primarily concerned with the quality of life—serenity, security, aesthetics—rather than economic growth and capital accumulation. But so far this potential has acquired little empirical substance. It is unlikely to gain much traction outside Europe or Japan, except perhaps in the Plata region and among indigenous ‘first-nation’ minorities. Consumerism is likely to remain the principal cultural dynamic.

The Global South’s critique of North Atlantic capitalism, articulated by the World Social Forum movement, and has been further developed by the Portuguese scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos in his *Epistemologies of the South* (2013). This is likely to have increasing influence, with the geopolitical shift of planetary power; but it is also likely to meet entrenched resistance, and not only from Northern elites. Consumerism is seducing vast new strata in the South, worshipping in the mushrooming shopping malls. Santos and others open up a critical space that should shake the cultural arrogance of the North. Their problem is that they are mainly addressing those set to lose out from their message: the moderns of the North. Yet the Southern mirror that the WSF movement has held up to Atlantic capitalism is likely to be incorporated into critical Northern thought—as it should be.

In sum: pre-capitalist populations, fighting to retain their territory and means of subsistence; 'surplus' masses, excluded from formal employment in the circuits of capitalist production; exploited manufacturing workers across rustbelt and sunbelt zones; new and old middle classes, increasingly encumbered with debt payments to the financial corporations—these constitute the potential social bases for contemporary critiques of the ruling capitalist order. Advance will almost certainly require alliances between them, and therefore the inter-articulation of their concerns. Which way—or ways—the new middle classes in Africa, Asia and Latin America swing will be a vital determinant.

A rising middle class represented the vanguard of capitalist development in nineteenth century Euro-America; no longer. Finance capital and the multi-national corporations have long since usurped that role. Instead, the middle classes have to take sides in sharply polarized societies, either with the oligarchs against the poor, or with the people against the oligarchs. Any viable critique of twenty-first century capitalism will have to enlist a major portion of the middle class, by addressing some of its core concerns and seeking to articulate them in a critical, egalitarian direction. This would entail respect for the classical middle-class values of hard work, self-reliance, rationality and fairness. The compatibility of these concerns with popular demands for inclusion and equality, and their incompatibility with the practices of reckless financial elites, crony capitalists and corrupt or authoritarian regimes, will need to be articulated. The middle classes—in particular their salaried and professional components—are also potentially open to cultural critiques of capitalism, especially to environmental and quality-of-life concerns. However, given the fickleness of middle-class politics, any progressive turn will require the mobilization of a major popular force among the first two social currents mentioned above: invaded or outcast pre-capitalist populations, and workers defending themselves in the sphere of production.