

THE CHALLENGES OF MODERNITY

(Modernity: Ever on-going emancipation process)

1. Modernity is the outcome of a breaking process in human history that began in Europe during the 16th-17th and 18th Centuries but did not "end" in any way neither in its places of origin nor elsewhere. The numerous facets of modernity form a set consistent with the requirements for the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. Nevertheless, this set would also make it possible to go beyond the latter system.

Modernity is based on the demand for emancipation of human beings through their liberation from the fetters of social determination in its traditional forms of the past. This liberation called for a renunciation of the dominant forms of power recognition ----- in the family, in communities within which are organised modes of life and production and in the State ---- until then based on a metaphysical concept generally expressed in religious terms. It therefore implies separation between State and religion, radical secularisation as a condition for deploying the modern forms of politics. This separation by no means calls for abolition of faith but it implies refusing to subject reason to any dogmatic interpretation of faith. It therefore means that the search for a possible reconciliation between reason and faith should be left to the free discretion of individuals ; it refuses to lend credibility to any form of religion imposed by power or social conventionality, thereby making religion a strictly private affair.

2. The concomitant dawn and development of modernity and capitalism are not a matter of chance. The social linkages attributed to the new production system of capitalism implied free enterprise, free access to markets, and proclamation of the inviolable right to private ownership ("rendered sacred"). The economic life thus emancipated from the tutelage of the political power that characterized the regimes previous to the era of modernity is established as an autonomous domain of social life solely influenced by its own laws. Capitalism substitutes for traditional determination of wealth by power an inverse causality relationship that establishes wealth as the source of power. However, the modernity really existing to date, in other words, the type whose deployment has remained enshrined in capitalism, is ambiguous with respect to this issue concerning the relationship between power and wealth. Modernity is actually based on the separation between two spheres of social life : the one involving management of the economy that it ascribes to the specific logics of wealth accumulation (private ownership, free enterprise and competition) and the one concerning management of State power through the institutionalised practice of political democracy (civil rights, principles of the multiparty system, etc.). This arbitrary separation between the two areas of economic and political management of the society neutralises the potential liberating power proclaimed by modernity.

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3. In fact, the modernity deployed under the limiting constraints of capitalism is contradictory, as it promises more than it can produce, thereby generating unfulfilled hopes.

Modernity initiates a potential and far-reaching social progress that amounts to emancipation and is attested by the progress of political democracy, although it has been limited. It has legitimized the action of the dominated, exploited and oppressed of social classes and made it possible for such groups to gradually snatch from the power of the dominant capital, democratic rights that have never

been spontaneously produced by the logic of capitalist expansion and accumulation. It has liberated a political transformation promoting the development of class struggles and establishing between politics and class struggles the sense of equivalence underscoring the two terms. At the same time, however, it has invented and developed the means enabling it to curtail the potential power of liberating democracy.

Simultaneously, capitalism accompanied by modernity led to a development of productive forces at a rate unprecedented in history. The potential of such a development would help in finding solutions to the crucial material problems facing humanity as a whole. But the logic that commands capitalist accumulation forbids that things assume such a dimension through an ever-increasing polarisation of wealth on a scale unknown until then in world history.

4. Contemporary humanity is therefore confronted by the contradictions of such modernity--- the only one with which we have so far been familiar -- that is just the modernity initiated by the capitalist era of history. These contradictions express the destructive threefold dimension of capitalism and the form of modernity accompanying it, for that matter.

Capitalism and its modernity destroy the human being, who is reduced to the status of a commodity ; human beings being reduced to the status of a labour force bought and sold on the market. The economic alienation whereby this relegation is expressed deprives democracy of its liberating potential. Democracy is degraded and rendered meaningless whenever it is established under such conditions, that is, virtually in centres of the system, which are the sole entities benefiting from the development of productive forces. Authentic politics ---- whereby human creative potential is expressed --- is replaced by an illusive media -- which I call "low intensity democracy" show democracy of low standard, based on hollow consensus constructed and manipulated by the capital dominating the economic system.

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Supported by the logic of the short-term rationality of the economic calculation, capitalist accumulation and modernity simultaneously destroy the natural bases of social reproduction and life, as attested by the serious ecological problems and the repeated selective disasters (the mad cow is a good illustration of this phenomenon);

The global polarisation encouraged by capital accumulation on this scale annuls for the majority of the human race --- those on the peripheries of the system --- any prospect of satisfying the needs promised by modernity and consequently hampers the entrenchment of democracy even, degraded as it were in the centres of the system. For the majority of the human race, capitalism is an odious system and, for that matter, the accompanying modernity is a tragic farce.

5. The contradictions inherent in the capitalist phase of modernity annulled the rational utopia project as formulated at that time, through which the exclusive rationality of capital reproduction was actually expressed. These contradictions virtually obliged the dominant capital to place its development in a context increasingly modulated by conflicts between the requirements of the capital logic on the one hand and the logic that the system's victims managed to impose in a given place and time on the other hand. The "pure capitalism" formatted by the traditional armchair economists has to be substituted by a really existing, pragmatic capitalism adapting to market regulations imposed by social relations and to international conflicts that call into question the structures established within the global system. In this sense too, if the ideology of modernity begun with capitalism claimed "to make

a clean sweep of the past" by replacing it with the utopian ideal enshrined in the exclusive rationality of capital accumulation. Yet, in fact, capitalism had to adapt to a number of characteristics inherited from its antecedents. The really existing modernity therefore becomes a patchwork that contrasts with the consistency of its founding theoretic theses.

6. Contemporary peoples are therefore faced with the challenges inherent in the really existing capitalism and modernity. The attitudes and postures in which the different political and ideological trends of the contemporary world find expression should be appreciated by the yardstick of the nature of their response to this explicit or implicit challenge.

The dominant ideology merely seeks to ignore the challenge. Such ignorance is expressed naively, in spite of the possible sophistication of its language by the Anglo-American ideologists of liberalism. This "discourse of the replete groups" recognises individual liberty, the sole human value to which it relegates modernity. It does so at

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the price of ignoring that, in the context of capitalism, this liberty becomes the type that allows the strongest groups to impose their laws on others, that this liberty is completely illusory to the greater majority (the liberal hypothesis imagines that every individual can become a Rockefeller, as it was formerly said that every soldier had in his haversack a marshal's baton) and that it clashes head-on with the aspiration for equality that constitutes the foundation of democracy.

This same fundamental ideology is shared by all defenders of the impassable horizon, the "end of history". The most extremist elements do not hesitate to accept that society be viewed as a jungle "of individuals" or to sacrifice the possible peaceful intervention of the State for principles of a management that relegates public authority to the functions of an instrument exclusively in the service of the "winners". Their concept is not different from that of a Mafia-like capital dictatorship. Others who wish to give a human dimension to such dictatorship try to attenuate the extremism of the exclusive principle of individual freedom by diluting it in propositions that associate it with other pragmatic considerations of social justice and "recognition of differences", especially community differences. Post-modernism also comes within this context of negation of the challenge as it is expected to "accept" and "adapt" to the contemporary reality, to "manage" it solely at the lowest possible immediate level.

For the greater majority groups, this modernity in question is simply odious, hypocritical and based on the cynical practice of "double standards". Their rejection is therefore violent and this violence is perfectly legitimate. The really existing capitalism and the accompanying modernity have nothing to propose to these majority groups. However, rejecting constitutes a negative act. Efficiency demands that it be accompanied by a positive alternative proposal. It is here that the inherent inadequacies of the reflections and projects can annihilate the efficiency of the revolt and eventually include it in the de facto context of submission to the requirements of capitalism and the modernity that are said to be rejected. The main illusion is sustained by the nostalgia for the pre-modern past. This nostalgia has its defenders in the centres as well as in the peripheries of the system. In the centres, the nostalgia for the past may appear as a daydream without considerable scope, conservative expression and a means whereby the replete groups can attenuate the dangers inherent in the liberating demands by victims of the system, thereby relegating modernity to an inconsistent patchwork blending manipulated vestiges of the past and the exigencies of the present.

In the peripheries, however, the backward-looking posture stems from a violent and justified revolt of which it merely constitutes a neurotic and powerless form because it is simply based on ignorance about the nature of the challenge of modernity.

Attachment to the past is expressed in various languages, generally those given a religious interpretation from a fundamentalist perspective, which actually masks a conventional conservative option or these of ethnicity credited with specific virtues transcending the other dimensions of social reality -- especially the classes. The common denominator between all these forms lies in their attachment to a culturalist thesis whereby religious and ethnic groups might be characterised by trans-historical features that could define intangible identities. Even though they have no scientific basis, these postures are no less capable of mobilising the masses marginalised and rendered helpless by the disruptions wrought by capitalist modernity. However, by this very fact, they constitute the effective mechanisms for the manipulations that form part of the strategies reinforcing the de facto submission to the joint dictatorship by the dominant forces in the capitalist globalisation process and its local and subsidiary communication channels. Political Islam as well as political hinduism are good examples of this mode of management in the peripheral capitalism. In Latin America and Africa, the proliferation of obscurantist "Sects" supported by North America out fit, in order to block the theology of liberation, manipulates the helplessness of the marginalised groups and their revolt against the conservative official church.

As a counter point, facing the challenge of modernity implies that the contradictions of the modernity introduced by capitalism should be measured along with the conception of a vision of society capable of surpassing such contradictions and situated in the future rather than in the past. This posture implies that emphasis be laid not on the differences inherited from the past but on those that the future invention generates through its own movement (Cf. Diversity inherited from the past and diversity in the future invention).

The conservative and reactionary forces dominating the contemporary scene at the global level and in the local societies are determined to thwart the unaccomplished project of modernity, by imposing solutions that are inconsistent but effective in the short term. Such answers associate the reproduction of past appearances and the exigencies inherent in pursuing the destructive capital accumulation.

Samir AMIN