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PREFACE

‘QUESTIONING GLOBALIZED MILITARISM’

The work of Peter Custers is important since he takes on a fundamental question which has largely been ignored in the analysis of many economists. Custers proposes in fact a political economy of capitalism which will integrate several questions relating to militarism. He treats questions of militarism as important, even decisive, elements which give direction to the accumulation of capital. This point of view contrasts with that of the majority of economists who ‘ignore the political’, the state in general, and military expenditures in particular. This audacious pioneering work deserves to be read with the greatest attention, even if it is not always easy to read. Whether or not one is convinced by one or the other of his arguments is not the point; we cannot advance in these matters without reflecting on this work. I would add that Custers himself pays attention not just to the conventional, dominant economics, but also to Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, and Baran and Sweezy who, from their side, have taken seriously the qualification of economics as political.

The debate opens with the discussion on the ‘schemes of reproduction’ put forward in Volume II of *Capital* where, as we know, Marx takes trouble to identify the conditions of dynamic equilibrium between the production of the means of production (Department I) and the production of consumer goods (Department II). Here, Custers invites us to reflect on the ‘forgotten formula of Marx’ concerning the metamorphoses of capital. The conclusions that Marx put forward regarding the overall dynamic equilibrium between supply and demand have in reality led to an ‘economistic’ (apolitical) reading which, in my opinion, constituted only a partial concern in Marx, one which was complemented by his reflections on the state, public services (and military expenditures), and the international system. The tendency to separate Marx’s economics from his historical materialism is an error which Custers does not make.

The necessary introduction of a ‘third department’ has been proposed by a number of creative Marxists. It is within this line of thought that I have simultaneously proposed from my side a reformulation of the conditions for dynamic equilibrium limited to the two departments as stated in Volume II of *Capital*, and an articulation of these conditions via the construction of three departments.¹ These propositions (known to Custers) allow us, firstly, to situate the role and the function of money (which I have termed the passive and active roles of credit), and, secondly, to respond in this respect to the arguments of Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and others in their turn. The propositions also allows us to redefine the mechanisms of the business cycle and of conjunctural change. The formulation of these propositions lastly allows us to articulate in a novel manner the ‘internal’ dynamics (‘national’) in relation to accumulation at the world level (which I have termed the ‘law of value at the world level’ complementing/contrasting with the ‘law of value *tout court*’. The whole forms a ‘political economy’ that is inseparable from historical materialism, thus inseparable from the currents of history: ‘No theory of capitalism (really existing – in opposition to the imaginary capitalism of conventional economics) outside of its history’.

To understand the world, Custers offers on all these fundamental subjects propositions which in my opinion, unquestionably constitute advances. For the conjunction ‘economy/historical materialism’ brings into play fundamental concepts with regard to use

value, the role of politics and the sense of social life, and with regard to the relations between societies that together compose the world system.

I count among these advances the concept of ‘disparate exchange’ which goes beyond unequal exchange, i.e. the relations between north and south, and in particular and rightly to the armament exports from north to south. I count among these advances also the complementary ideas which he puts forward along with the general concept of the use value of commercial goods and services by introducing the concept of ‘negative use value’. The debate is reopened regarding questions with regard to the qualification of labour (productive or unproductive) as also with regard to social utility (beyond the use value of commodities) of ‘collective goods’ (which economic qualification I do not like) produced via public services, in particular social services.

Custers has – with success – articulated his interventions in these debates, analysing in depth military expenditures and nuclear production (civilian and military). The advancements developments which he proposes by drawing attention to the central role of armament production, to state indebtedness, to the strengthening of the position of monopolies, to the orientation of military research and development, and to the theory of crises, are enormously rich.

I wish that Custers would take his analysis yet forward (in a further work, yet to come!). For the ‘third department’ is, from the start, a disparate one. Surely, one finds here military expenditures – in particular, the expenditures of our nuclear age – on which I share the point of view of Custers, namely, that we are dealing with ‘negative values’. But one also finds here all the social expenditures, the real utility of which is a function of the social system. The radical critique of capitalism demands that we resume the discussions on these questions. It demands from us that we move beyond the immediate and *vulgar* point of view, according to which ‘education and health’ (in the way in which they are organized under capitalism) would be ‘useful’ and therefore positive. It demands that we qualify this utility, which in my opinion is a function of the sense of social life as proposed (and imposed) by the domination of capital.

A last word concerning the radically ecological viewpoint of Custers: he condemns civilian nuclear production as much as nuclear production devoted to the production of criminal armaments. By taking into consideration the question of the future of energy resources which humanity will require tomorrow, we may be led to differentiate beyond Custers’ blanket condemnation. Certainly – and at this level I share the analyses of Custers – (civilian) nuclear production finds its place in the overall process of accumulation, and provides it with a very special orientation. In view of this, it cannot be put into question without questioning the sense of social life as imposed by capitalism. In proposing an alternative mode of expansion of the sources of wealth (one put in the place of the mode of development via accumulation of capital) we are confronted with all the fundamental questions being justly posed by radical ecologists. What answers can be offered to these questions? This is a theme which I would hope to see developed by Custers in his future works.

Notes

¹ Samir Amin, *L’Echange Inegale et La Loi de la Valeur* (Economica, Paris, 1988), pp. 75-84.