

**Down with all states!**

**Down with all borders!**

Elements of a radical critique of the form-state

Nation-states have not always existed. They were born with modernity - let's say capitalist modernity - and they depend on what fundamentally structures it: the form-commodity, and the fetishism attached to it.

Of course, states existed before this modernity. But it would be wrong to understand them in the same way as modern states. This counter sense, which has its source in a transhistoric vision of things, is an effect of modern fetishism, that of merchandise, which makes us understand as natural things and as having always existed some phenomena specific to capitalist modernity.

The state, money, goods - all too often these are understood along the lines of what they are in modern society. That's forgetting that each society is structured on its own model and that social synthesis is not, as in modern society, the product of form and goods. It is so true that Karl Marx, to whom we owe the complete analysis of modern society, explains in drafts prior to *Capital*, that the modern social synthesis (capitalism) is not a necessary form, that other societies have been structured in a different synthesis - and that it would be opportune not to forget it<sup>1</sup>. Marx and Engels were particularly interested in the Russian peasant commune that modern synthesis destroyed.

The conception of the state in organized Marxism was modelled on the model of war. The state was understood as the warrior apparatus of the bourgeoisie, which has a monopoly of violence, and against this state it was necessary to organize a war machine: the party.

This vision is partly fair, but on the other hand it forgets that the state, like money, like politics itself, is only an effect of the commodity-producing society. A very real effect, of course, but an effect all the same. So there are two mistakes to be made. First, to consider the State as an apparatus that has always existed, and whose bourgeois form is only an avatar. Secondly, consider the State as a form that will disappear at the same time as the society that gave birth to it.

The commodity production society has very specific characteristics. First, it produces goods in the form of merchandise, and second, it produces a social synthesis shaped by that merchandise - with a specific fetishism.

The first point is that it produces goods in the form of merchandise. This is not at all obvious. Of course, mankind has always produced goods that nature did not spontaneously provide, but this was not necessarily in the form of merchandise. A merchandise is something that comes in two forms. On the one hand, it is something that is useful for practical purposes (a shoe is used for walking, a coat to wear, a bicycle to ride), and on the other hand it is something that represents a certain value (how much money do I spend on this shoe, on this coat, on this bicycle - money that goes back to the seller and producer).

Even if, marginally, or in any case secondary, goods have existed for a long time in the form of merchandise (the merchants have existed for a long time), capitalist society is the only one in which all goods exist in the form of merchandise, or must exist in the form of merchandise. This is its historical specificity.

Thus, all resources must be merchandise (everything must be able to sell and buy), and even people

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular, in the 1857-58 *Manuscript* (known as *Grundrisse*), the pages analysing forms prior to capitalist production. In these pages, Marx twists its neck, in anticipation, to the Stalinist scheme and evokes forms of social synthesis other than the capitalist nation-state.

are reduced to being mere commodities - and more precisely, to being only vital power that can be transformed into productive power. The only thing that interests capitalism in man is his power of production, and nothing else. The only thing that interests capitalism in man is his ability to be a worker, and nothing else.

This universality of form-merchandise is found at all levels of the commodity production society - at all levels of capitalist society. And this is of course rooted in the production of these goods.

This production takes place in the workplace. But work itself is an exchange between a power of labour (paid by a salary) and the means of production without which this power remains unused (to the extent that all means of making it bear fruit have been confiscated by the capitalists). Capitalism sets up this forced exchange between a working power cut off from the means to make it bear fruit, and the means of production which the capitalist class has given itself exclusivity. A forced exchange in which the proletarians, i. e. those who have only this labour power to sell, and the capitalists, i. e. those who have given themselves the exclusive right to produce it, is also an unequal exchange. Indeed, only labour power is likely to produce goods which, in the form of merchandise, will be sold on a market and will be able to realize a value much higher than the value of the wages paid.

In reality, what is most important in a commodity is the value it brings to a market; its practical utility is very secondary or even indifferent to capitalism. This means that in a commodity, the (invisible) value is much more real than its visible practical utility. In other words: what makes the value of a commodity is its abstract side (abstract, but very real).

This makes it possible to say that this society - the capitalist society - is built on abstraction: abstract wealth and not well-being of people, abstract work and not activity as a vital principle, etc.

The confusion between abstraction and unreality has been the source of many errors within organized Marxism. The merchandise is essentially abstract, but it is real, money is essentially abstract, but it is real, and the state, too, is essentially abstract, but it is real. We live in an essentially abstract society. To say that the state is fundamentally abstract does not mean that it is illusory: it means that it is coherent with a social form that favours, not the welfare of people, but the abstract dimension of wealth, the one that can materialize in the form of money and whose canonical form is the merchandise.

What can be called *merchandise fetishism* is the fact of taking the abstract dimension of things as "real" and giving it a "concrete" dimension. And first, the fact of believing in the reality of these abstractions from which one does "things". This error, which is the error of *reification*, has its source in forgetting that if things appear to us as they appear to us, it is because of the form-merchandise, it is because of capitalist society itself.

Of course, we don't live in a ghostly world. But everything that appears to us only appears to us in the context of a specific social relationship: capitalism. Neither ideas, nor money, nor the State can be erased like illusions: the ideas we have, the money we manipulate, the State we fight: none of this can be erased with a stroke of the pen, because they are the real elements of a society that wants to "only" make us believe that these elements are not specific to a given society, but that they are eternal. "I call it fetishism" <sup>2</sup>

The state, too? Yes, so is the state. The state is also a real abstraction which, admittedly, does not hesitate to use the truncheon, but which exists only in the general framework of a society which, because it is the production of goods, favours the abstract dimension over the practical dimension,

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *The Capital* [1867].

that of people. The State protects the production of merchandise.

This privilege of the abstract dimension begins in the work. Work is the production of goods in an implementation that is itself an exchange of goods: power of work for pay (an exchange where the employee is always losing out, forced to sell himself in order not to die). To consider work as an "eternal" activity of mankind is to subscribe to the fetishism of the merchandise form.

And the national form is an element of this fetishism. The nation, this entity surrounded by borders, is linked to the need for capitalism to produce abstract wealth, accumulate it and multiply it.

Contemporary capitalist discourse continues to say that we must "conquer" new markets, that is to say, we must gain a foothold in territories that are also national, and we must displace the goods produced by other capitalists, and impose our own goods. This is the spirit of capitalism: capitalism knows no other agreement than the complicity of thieves, and each capitalist wants to sell its goods and accumulate their value against the other national capitalists. What needs to be clarified is that in this calculation, only "abstract wealth", i. e. the value that is represented in goods or money (the general equivalent for all goods), is taken into account, therefore the notion of utility is perfectly secondary.

Destroying capitalism means taking things from the roots. Now, "the root, for man, is man himself"<sup>3</sup> and not abstract wealth. Therefore, the only radicality is to take into account, not abstract wealth, but the practical interest of men. The only concern must not be to accumulate endlessly abstract wealth, but to take into account real people and their needs.

The necessary consequence is not to take capitalist social synthesis as the eternal consequence, but to set up a new social synthesis. This social synthesis will not be based on the production of goods, but on the goods that people want to enjoy, which will be the realisation, at last, of what capitalism has only been the fallacious argument.

This social synthesis has to be invented. Some elements are given to us by Marx's study of the forms that predate capitalism, which can be seen for example in the Germanic commune, in the Russian commune. These certainly fragmented studies were forgotten by official Marxism, clinging to the Stalinist vulgate of the almost automatic succession of socialism and communism after capitalism.

This social synthesis to be invented is based on the "face-to-face" of people and the natural or produced resources that they can enjoy. There is no need for a state or borders for this, and the Spanish revolution has tried to invent such a synthesis. Studies exist<sup>4</sup>, which highlight the difficulties that the Spanish revolutionaries have had to face - which also highlight the sabotage of the Stalinists.

The revolutionaries of today have to resume these efforts. Bearing in mind that ready-made solutions do not exist and that it is a matter of inventing. People do not make borders: everyone has a place on the planet. And those who remind us a little too much that borders must be maintained probably do not realize that they speak the language of capitalism. It is in this sense that the formula "down all States, down all frontiers" is current.

At a time when Catalans want to assert their identity, it is important to remember that a national identity, and even a "regional" one, cannot be thought of in the same way as a "national" one. It is not a question of favouring a "regional identity" (?) against a "national identity", but of reminding

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of the Hegelian political law* [1843].

<sup>4</sup> We could quote, for example, the studies produced by the « giménologues ».

us that men have no homeland and that to oppose one another is still to be in the fetishism of the State, which is only one aspect of the fetishism of merchandise. "No homeland, no frontier" is the only possible watchword.