

## EDITORIAL

# Labor, democracy and class struggle

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Debased and discredited as never before, labor, democracy, and class struggle have been undergoing an intense process of erosion. Jobs available to the majority of the population have become increasingly precarious, intermittent, and unprotected; democracy, reduced to empty rituals and false rhetoric, has lost credibility; class struggle has gradually faded from the horizon of dispersed and atomized workers. Yet, these three spheres – interconnected and complementary – constitute the very basis of human and social life. Thus, when labor is penalized and disorganized, political action and the exercise of democracy are also compromised. The principal agent of this dissolution is the destructive logic of the neoliberal (dis)“order”, maintained by the formidable apparatus of the military–industrial complex. Beyond wars and devastation, the mounting economic, political, climatic, migratory, and health crises engendered by this system deepen the decay of labor, sap the foundations of democracy, and weaken the struggles and organizations of the people. Even more troubling is the realization that, although this scenario exposes ever more clearly how capitalism creates class divisions, deforms labor, and is antithetical to democracy, political apathy and a sense of powerlessness continue to spread throughout society. The blatant exhibition of force and devastation appears to cast a hypnotic and paralyzing spell over the masses. For this reason, indifferent to the loss of hegemony, the masters of the prevailing “order” reinforce their economic, technological, and military supremacy, resorting ever more frequently to arbitrariness and to sophisticated forms of fascism disguised as democracy to legitimize themselves.

It was already said that “The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production [...]” (Marx-Engels, 1998, p. 48)<sup>i</sup>. This inseparable conjunction of powers determines not only the forms and conditions of labor but also the structure and function of the prevailing democracy – one that endures only as long as the dominant class remains safe. Thus, by appropriating the surplus value produced by workers, the capitalist class also expropriates the people’s decision-making power, reducing citizens to mere extras periodically called upon to legitimize their own domination. Today, this totality of power has grown even more omnipotent and pervasive through the monopoly of sophisticated technologies that ceaselessly manufacture mass consent. These technologies not only discipline bodies through unstable and exhausting jobs but also shape emotions, the unconscious, and the imagination, prescribing standardized behaviors and forms of sociability. In a stark irony, the very nations that



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boast of pioneering modern democracy and of being “beacons of civilization” have become the most blatant embodiments of its antithesis. In fact, they close borders, build walls, foster racism, promote new forms of colonialism, ravage the planet, spread fear and insecurity, and multiply surveillance and repressive apparatuses to control the masses and administer the very disorder they themselves produce.

A reaction to this ruinous system has been emerging from a group of countries of the so-called Global South, gathered primarily within the BRICS bloc, established in 2009. Their bold positions repudiate colonialism and imperialism and outline the design of a new world architecture based on multipolarity, economic and technological cooperation, the self-determination of peoples, and respect for diversity. Nevertheless, even with significant numbers in terms of population, GDP, and industrial, scientific, and technological investments, this project remains insufficient. As occurred in Western democracies and even in socialist countries, economic development, social benefits, and the expansion of consumption—though necessary—do not guarantee the realization of democracy in its effective sense: the socialization of economic, political, and cultural power. To achieve this goal and to build a civilization that transcends capitalism and turns the planet into a “common home,” it is not enough to rely on plans imposed from above. It is necessary to unleash a set of initiatives aimed at enhancing the subjectivity and political protagonism of the popular masses in constructing a democracy capable of distributing the wealth produced by all, universalizing rights, and caring for nature. To enable individuals to engage in “qualified work and the exercise of citizenship”, it is essential to promote “an intellectual progress of the masses” (Gramsci, Q 11, §12, p.1385)<sup>ii</sup> and to create conditions for workers and popular strata to constitute themselves as conscious, autonomous, socialized, and creative subjects – thereby becoming agents that can democratically determine and direct society’s course.

In this regard, the analyses developed by Hegel, Marx, and Gramsci are fundamental. Hegel shows that, in producing, constructing objects, and transforming nature, human beings constitute themselves as conscious subjects and social beings. Labor, therefore, is not merely a means of sustenance but a formative process of both the human and the social, an essential activity responsible for both material production and the constitution of the world—a fundamental source of creation and socialization (Hegel, 1996, §199)<sup>iii</sup>. In the famous dialectic of “Lordship and bondage” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 1992, pp. 126ss)<sup>iv</sup>, labor is presented as a process of consciousness-building and self-production through which humanity, by objectifying itself in the world, opens the path toward the recognition of others and social responsibility. Thus, following J.J. Rousseau, Hegel also maintains that we are free within society insofar as we are equals in common freedom, as parts of a whole built through the participation and labor of all, in a universality guaranteed by the State as the “organic totality of the people,” in contrast to the domination of “disproportionate wealth in a few hands” (Hegel, 1996, §§244–246)<sup>v</sup> and the false community of atomized individuals massified by utilitarianism.

While Marx recognized the constitutive essence of labor as captured by Hegel, he reframed this insight through the lens of the proletariat, a real subject embedded within capitalism’s contradictions. In his analysis, the system’s commodification of labor power engendered the alienation of human beings from their products, from nature, from themselves, and from each other. (Semeraro, 2013). In line with the wealth amassed by the bourgeoisie through colonialism, slavery, and “primitive accumulation” (Marx, 2003, pp. 825ff),<sup>vi</sup> Marx exposes how the capitalist mode of production within the modern industrial system subjugates wage laborers through an unequal contract, coercing them “to sell themselves and their humanity” and turning them into machines for producing commodities whose value far exceeds the time devoted to production and the expenditure of physical and mental energy. Consequently, “surplus value”, the unremunerated additional value produced by workers, is capitalized by the owners of the means of production, which allows them to accumulate limitless from their untouchable private property and expand their capacity for further investment. Impoverished by precarious living conditions, rendered disposable and mutilated in their creative activity, workers are placed in a society where “With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men” (Marx, 1968, p. 75)<sup>vii</sup>. In the face of this process that divides society into classes, corrupts labor, and dehumanizes humanity, Marx insists on the necessity of political organization and class struggle to combat capitalism’s destructive nature and to create a new society of “self-governing associated producers”, thereby transcending the bourgeois model of “democracy” shaped by the modern caste of the “community of the masters” (Losurdo, 2005, p. 216).

Gramsci, while assimilating the thought of Hegel and Marx, forged his political formation through engagement in the workers’ struggles of Turin and the democratic self-management practices of the factory councils. From this fundamental experience, he developed many original reflections, later deepened in the

*Prison Notebooks*. In “Americanism and Fordism,” analyzing “new methods of work are inseparable from a specific mode of living and of thinking and feeling life” (Q 22, §11, p. 2164)<sup>viii</sup>, he acknowledges the technical and scientific advances, innovations, and efficiency of the new system of production but shows that the worker continues to be “dispossessed and nullified in his free and creative activity” (p. 2165). Behind the façade of “a new type of civilization,” Gramsci notes, “the social structure and class divisions remain unchanged” (p. 2180). For him, the modernization of labor must be accompanied by critical thinking and workers’ protagonism, who should be qualified with the most advanced scientific and technical knowledge and trained in self-discipline and political organization. These are the necessary conditions to “create a producer’s mentality, the mentality of the creator of history” (Gramsci, 1987, p. 238)<sup>ix</sup>, enabling workers to appropriate the productive process and to participate in the democratic construction of society. Thus understood, labor –beyond qualified learning for production – becomes an activity that engenders the “workers’ democracy”. This conception is fundamentally opposed to the capitalist system, where “the complexity of the common work eludes the individual, and in his consciousness his labor becomes so devalued that it appears easily replaceable at any moment” (Q 9, §67, p. 1138). Developing Marx’s concept of “praxis”, Gramsci advocates the integral formation of the human being, the full development of individual potentialities, and the inseparable relationship between humanity and nature, individual and society, material and intellectual labor, structure and superstructure, since one cannot separate “homo faber from homo sapiens” (Q 12, §3, p. 1550) nor dissociate productive activity from politics. Therefore, “the intrinsic democratic tendency cannot merely mean that a manual worker becomes qualified, but that every ‘citizen’ may become a ‘ruler’” (Q 12, §2, p.1547). It is thus necessary to integrate labor, science, technology, economy, philosophy, politics, education, and culture – inseparable components to enable workers to become the leaders of society, “organizers of all the functions inherent to the organic development of an integral, civil, and political society” (Q 12, §1, p.1522).

In contrast with this view, the current digital revolution and the development of robotics, presented as means to reduce working time, unify society, and emancipate the population, once again favor the restructuring of capitalism, generating an unprecedented concentration of power and worsening the conditions of mobile, disposable, and deterritorialized workers (Antunes, 2008, pp.47–52)<sup>x</sup>. In the Brazilian context, low wages, limited prospects, the spread of subcontracting, and exhausting work schedules (six days of work and one day of rest) have driven an increasing shift from formal employment regulated by the labor legislation (and its associated benefits) to informal jobs and digital platforms, in an illusory pursuit of flexibility and autonomy. Today, it is more evident than ever how the flexibilization of work produces devastating consequences not only on personal and family life but also on the social fabric, national cohesion, and collective identity. This alarming reality reflects a loss of trust in institutions and democracy itself, as indifference and aversion to politics grow, unions are weakened, parties lose direction, and traditional forms of class struggle prove ineffective. This is especially true when one of the most strategic arenas of this struggle takes place in cyberspace, dominated by the oligopoly of big tech corporations that manipulate data, determine the flow of information, and shape the results of “democratic” elections appropriated by parliamentarians who mostly engage in lucrative dealings, protect themselves through corporatism and impunity, and perpetuate the tradition of democracy’s “broken promises” (Bobbio, 1989, pp.10–12)<sup>xi</sup>.

The recovery of the creative essence of labor, democracy, and class struggle will not occur through accommodations within the dominant system or through harm-reduction policies; nor through “nationalism that considers the great popular masses as cattle” (Q 6, §135, p.799).<sup>xii</sup> There is an urgent need to articulate and reinforce, at both national and international levels, the struggles of the working classes and their political and union organizations, integrating them with a wide array of social movements, cultural initiatives, and popular groups engaged in combating inequality, racism, discrimination, xenophobia, environmental degradation, and cultural uniformity. The subversive and creative force of “people’s power” remains vast, though scattered among diverse forms of resistance and insurgency in Brazil, Latin America, and throughout the world. What is lacking, however, are consistent poles of unification to channel and make this constituent power effective, overcoming “sporadic and incoherent rebelliousness” (Q 8, §25, p.957)<sup>xiii</sup>.

Beyond some occasional victories, Marx warned that the “real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers” (Marx & Engels, 2009, p.18). Gramsci points in the same direction when he states that “the decisive element in every situation is the permanently organized force” (Q 13, §17, p.1588), not only at the national level, which is its starting point, but also internationally,

since “the proletariat is the international class” (Q 14, §68, p.1729) and “the real progress of civilization occurs through the collaboration of all peoples” (Q 11, §48, p.1470), especially those colonized and marginalized who suffer most from social and environmental catastrophes.

The profound crisis that currently strikes at the heart of the imperial system – built upon the predatory extraction of nature’s and labor’s wealth – has generated the expansion of fascism worldwide, fueled by a sophisticated “hybrid war” waged through advanced military technologies, algorithmic control of social media, ideological institutes, think tanks, NGOs, reactionary churches, lobbies, repressive forces, and cultural activities permeating all sectors of society. Weakened and discredited, democracy faces grave dangers, as do the workers and popular forces, now scattered and unprotected. Confronting this wave is no simple task, yet it is an indispensable endeavor if humanity is to avert socio-political and environmental collapse and to build another kind of civilization. Without fear, one must remember that, paradoxically, it was in dangerous and highly tense circumstances that history’s great changes and popular revolutions emerged. Beyond scientific and technological progress, the foremost challenge of our time is to organize and advance class struggles on both national and global scales, reclaiming the power that rightfully belongs to the people and reviving the vital meaning of labor, democracy, and politics.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Nota do tradutor (N.T.): na versão traduzida foi utilizada como referência a edição em língua inglesa MARX, Karl; ENGELS, Frederick. **The German Ideology**. Paris: Foreign Language Press, 2022. A citação em questão está na página 35.

<sup>ii</sup> N.T.: Tradução livre. Os Cadernos do Cárcere só foram publicados em língua inglesa até o número 8. Por este motivo, todas as citações deste Editorial que fazem referência aos Cadernos do Cárcere posteriores ao número 8 resultam de tradução livre.

<sup>iii</sup> N.T.: na versão traduzida foi utilizada como referência a edição em língua inglesa HEGEL, G. W. F. **Outlines of the Philosophy of Right**. Translated by T. M. Knox. Revised, edited, and with an introduction by Stephen Houlgate. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. A citação indireta em questão está nas páginas 191-192.

<sup>iv</sup> N.T.: na versão traduzida foi utilizada como referência a edição em língua inglesa HEGEL, G. W. F. **Phenomenology of Spirit**. Translated by A. V. Miller, with Analysis of the Text and Foreword by J. N. Findlay. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. A citação indireta em questão está nas páginas 111-119.

<sup>v</sup> N.T.: na versão traduzida foi utilizada como referência a edição em língua inglesa HEGEL, G. W. F. **Outlines of the Philosophy of Right**. Translated by T. M. Knox. Revised, edited, and with an introduction by Stephen Houlgate. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. A citação em questão está na página 221 -222.

<sup>vi</sup> N.T.: na versão traduzida foi utilizada como referência a edição em língua inglesa MARX, Karl. **Capital: A Critique of Political Economy**. v. 1. Introduced by Ernest Mandel. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books, 1976. A citação em questão está na página 873ff.

vii N.T.: na versão traduzida foi utilizada como referência a edição em língua inglesa MARX, Karl. **Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844**. Translated by Martin Milligan. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988. A citação em questão está na página 71.

viii N.T.: na versão traduzida foi utilizada como referência a edição em língua inglesa GRAMSCI, Antonio. *Selections from the prison notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: ElecBook, 1999. A citação em questão está na página 597.

ix N.T.: na versão traduzida foi utilizada como referência a edição em língua inglesa GRAMSCI, Antonio. **Selections from political writings (1910-1920)**. Selected and edited by Quintin Hoare. Translated by John Mathews. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977. A citação em questão está na página 101.

x N.T.: na versão traduzida foi utilizada como referência a edição em língua inglesa ANTUNES, Ricardo. **Farewell to work? essays on the world of work's metamorphoses and centrality**. Translated by Murillo van der Laan and others. Leiden: Brill, 2022. O trecho mencionado provavelmente corresponde às páginas 22-27 desta edição.

xi N.T.: na versão traduzida foi utilizada como referência a edição em língua inglesa BOBBIO, Norberto. **The future of democracy: a defence of the rules of the game**. Translated by Roger Griffin. Edited and introduced by Richard Bellamy. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. O trecho mencionado provavelmente corresponde às páginas 30-31 da edição citada.

xii N.T.: na versão traduzida foi utilizada como referência a edição em língua inglesa GRAMSCI, Antonio. **Prison notebooks**. v. III. Edited and translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. A citação em questão está na página 107.

xiii N.T.: na versão traduzida foi utilizada como referência a edição em língua inglesa GRAMSCI, Antonio. *Prison notebooks*. v. III. Edited and translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. A citação em questão está na página 252.

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