

Resume on Radical Social Transformation – July 7th, 2023

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Part I – Emile Ike

The following remarks represent a resume of the International Summer School in Critical Theory that took place in Berlin early July. Although the observations made here are not an attempt at synthesis, we hope that our combined perspectives nonetheless provide some sort of panorama of the themes that have been central throughout the week. I would like to start off by sketching out the historical and social-theoretical context that forms the background of many of the problems we've been discussing. Starting with Karl Marx's texts, we had a discussion about the passive and active elements in the dynamics of historical change. Marx's analysis centers around an analysis and critique of capitalism, paying close attention to subjective and objective conditions for radical social transformation, in the sense that he's trying to identify possibilities as well as structural barriers and obstacles to social change (*The Eighteenth Brumaire*, 106-109). On the traditional interpretation of Marx's account, the proletariat is understood as the subject capable of carrying out social revolution with universalist aspirations. In his more political writings on France, the proletariat moreover appears to be identified with an industrial and waged working class spatially concentrated in factories and urban centers (*The Civil War in France*, 334). The classical Marxist account thus appears to be premised on a particular phase of industrial capitalism, and ought to be reassessed in light of changing objective and material preconditions.

Herbert Marcuse's *Essay on Liberation* might precisely be read as an attempt at such a re-assessment written in 1969, at a historical pivot point in the development of capitalism. On the one hand, Marcuse's text clearly carries the stamp of its time, in the sense that it is tied to assumptions about a well-functioning and affluent society; an assessment that seems far removed from the present reality and conjuncture, which is characterized by deteriorating living conditions. Yet at the same time, Marcuse's text also appears timely, in the sense that it addresses alternative revolutionary subjectivities, and even points beyond itself as it already identifies some of the material tendencies that would soon become a reality in the period after the '68 cycle of struggles. As capitalist societies entered a phase of stagnation and decline as a result of global waves of de-industrialization in the 1970s, there has been a historical transformation of capitalism that can be observed in a wide array of phenomena including the increasing financialization of social reproduction and the proliferation of extractivist modes of capital accumulation, as Veronica Gago has pointed out (Gago 2023, 12). On a global scale, formal employment in the form of wage-labor and work performed for wages is constituting less and less of a social norm in contemporary capitalism, as more and more people come to rely on informal economies and instruments of financial debt in order to gain access to the conditions of social reproduction. In other words, access to the means of life is less mediated by the wage and increasingly by taking on more debt, as Gago argued so convincingly (Ibid, 5-6). This changing class composition also expresses itself in new figures of subjectivity that we've been discussing throughout the whole week such as the marginalized, the excluded, or those rendered surplus to the requirements of capital, having neither the jobs to survive within capitalism nor the means to survive outside of it.

It should perhaps not come as a surprise, then, that this changing class composition also comes with new repertoires of protest and struggle, such as the anti-racist rebellions in France we're witnessing today, the feminist strike movements in Latin America, but also the abolitionist struggles against police violence and mass incarceration in the United States. Once we take into view the long history of colonialism, combined with the observation that differentiation along racialized and gendered lines is actually internal to dynamics of capital accumulation, it becomes possible to see these struggles as having an anti-capitalist character by definition, because they attack carceral logics of violence that are indispensable for the reproduction of capitalist society (as was also discussed in a plenary session on Frantz Fanon and Walter Benjamin). At the same time, some people might have the worry that these riots and rebellions retain somewhat of a politically underdetermined character, in the sense that there might be a need to channel and direct these forms of social unrest and discontent in a more emancipatory and progressive manner. In a discussion on Rosa Luxemburg with Alex Demirović, we asked about the role of more classical organizational forms such as the party and union and their relevance to contemporary political education and socialist strategy.

These more traditional approaches, however, might in turn be met with worries of paternalism. Indeed, it might be questionable whether social agents can have unmediated epistemic access to objective conditions, i.e. independently from actual struggles that are taking place on the ground. In this sense, people like Luxemburg have emphasized that the objective preconditions for revolution have to be produced and generated by social struggles and movements in the first place (Luxemburg 1986, 69). We hence end up with a classical dilemma: new struggles and subjectivities are required in order to change the world, but maybe the world needs to be changed in order to make room for such a new sensibility in the first place. Some sort of dialectics of organization and spontaneity seems to be required in order to break this deadlock and to escape this circularity, which is what Luxemburg and Fanon seem to have had in mind with their insistence on the open-ended and contingent character of struggle. An obvious starting point to address these issues would then be to look at specific struggles that already exist, and to see how these social movements disclose objective social conditions whilst simultaneously constituting new subjectivities in the process itself.

Part II – Sonia Maria Pavel

I would like to capture some tendencies that I have noticed in the approaches of the contemporary critical theorists whose work we have learned from in the past week.

1. The first has to do with their approach to the question of **revolutionary subjects**. It seems that both the question they are asking and their methodology for answering it have evolved from earlier generation critical Frankfurt School theorists. They are not starting from the assumption that there is a revolutionary subject that must be found in the world, but rather interested in how people and groups *become* agents of social transformation through engagement in social struggles and movements. In other words, they are attentive to the *processes of subjectivization* that agents undergo when they change their social relations to meet their needs. Veronica Gago refers for this reason to the “workers of the popular economy” to account for a political subject formed through an organizational process, as opposed to a given class subject or an “ideal” subject of historical change (Gago 2023, 4). Urging us to resist the expectation that all will be solved as a result of an objective revolutionary situation, Alex Demirović similarly points out that even if such conditions obtain they do not magically endow agents with skills to reorganize production, distribution, decision-making (Demirović 2012, 22). These skills are hard won. As Robin Celikates put it the

other day in reference to Rosa Luxemburg's work, the revolution is a living political school. However, it would be advisable to reach that educational stage at least knowing how to read and write.

For this reason, theorizing proceeds according to a different **methodology**. Contemporary critical theorists do not start with principles for how change happens and then look towards social realities to see how they fit or can be made to fit into those categories. Instead, they look at particular situations, the problems and unmet needs people are confronting, and the work they have done or are doing to change their social relations. This involves finding ways to meet needs – we have talked about designing and co-designing solutions, finding new resources, building social networks, technology, and infrastructure. But these are specific to concrete struggles – strategies that might work to deal with climate change through law and policy might prove ineffective in the context of social reproduction. They are also specific to historical and cultural contexts – in one context the social reproduction crisis might be better dealt with through chapter-based social movements that build new networks of interdependence and solidarity, while in others the feminist strike might be the most promising route.

I interpret this approach of focusing on concrete experiences and locations of struggle as continuous with that of Marx – who was perhaps the keenest student and theorist of the problems, demands, and movements of his day. As Christian Schmidt has pointed out in our discussions, in the passages we read, Marx pays careful attention to the concrete social and political issues of the Paris Commune: land taxes paid by peasants, journeymen bakers' nightwork, closed workshops and factories, school fees, the great endowments of churches.

2. The question then arises of how focusing on these concrete, seemingly isolated needs and demands can have radical **transformative effects**. This is not to say that what we should care about in struggles for survival is their possibility to be revolutionary. Even when they do not have transformative effects, we should avoid, as Alex Demirović argues, adopting a critically intended materialist approach that devolves into an instrumentalist cynicism: yes, people are suffering but we should only address the hardships of the here and now in light of the “bright promise” of revolutions to come (Demirović 2012, 20). But there are reasons to believe that fighting to addressing unmet needs, caring for, and depending on each other can be transformative.

As Sally Haslanger puts it, meeting our needs can have profound effects on the broader system and its dynamics (Haslanger, BL1, 16) Transformative social movements depend on interventions at the meso- level, the level of social practices, that take into account the need of individuals, what they value, how they make sense of the world, and build upon existing relations to change relations (Ibid, 16). And as Gianfranco Casuso argues, meeting the needs and demands of the excluded, which are not even recognized as real or valid by society, necessarily will lead to transformation, revealing contradictions and limitations in the social order, and resignifying what is considered socially valuable (Casuso 2021, 6). “The struggle for emancipation has, thus, an inherent constitutive role which consists, precisely, in the creation of new ways to get the approval of those demands that remain unheard in society and, therefore, do not exist.” (Ibid, 6)

This echoes Marcuse's idea that the new sensibility – an affirmation of life and the vital need to abolish injustice - emerges “in the struggle against violence and exploitation where this struggle is waged for essentially new forms of life.” (Marcuse 1969, 25)

The shift from quantitative changes to qualitative ones, which Rahel Jaeggi has been emphasizing in our discussion, can thus occur seamlessly. Marcuse talks about the transformation of social relations in order to meet people's needs as having aesthetic and ethical dimensions – “the art of preparing (cooking!), cultivating, growing things, giving them a form which neither violates their matter nor the sensitivity” (Marcuse 1969, 32).

But just as Marx was reluctant to write recipes for the cookshops of the future, contemporary critical theorists do not tell us in advance what forms of life can result from these reconfigured social practices. To borrow Sally Haslanger's language from the Benjamin Lectures, we do not fully comprehend what the possibilities are before becoming agents of possibility (Haslanger, BL3, 18).

Part III – Patricia Cipollitti Rodríguez

I'll begin by considering an aspect of the active dimension of transformation we've mentioned: the idea of **transversality**. A process of subjectivation that transformative agents must undergo, it seems, involves a shift towards understanding themselves in relation to others—and understanding why they must join others in struggle. Solidarity grounded in such understanding contrasts with political alliances merely based upon a temporary convergence of interests. In this respect, Sonia stressed that the social-historical position of groups is not a given but must be politically articulated.

What does the process of articulation look like? Of course, a traditional Marxian move has been to reveal that and how capitalism has socialized production; and to articulate the specific labor-based form of global human interdependence. Feminist strikes in Argentina, on Verónica Gago's reading, emphasize the tasks of organizing everyday life—the labor of social reproduction—that is an indispensable component of this picture of interdependence. This recognition has enabled, there, an expanded yet differentiated articulation of the “working class” that's responsive to the restructuring of class relations under contemporary material conditions, including not just unpaid social reproductive workers but also unemployed, underemployed, informal, and precarious workers. Witness, here, just one expression of the dialectic between active and passive dimensions of social transformation.

In his comments at the plenary, Gianfranco Casuso offered a helpful reminder of why the Marxian category of the proletariat continues to be relevant. The proletariat is the universal class in the specific weak sense that: they can't improve their situation without improving all of society, and the situation of many other groups. This is the same sense of universality by which the Combahee River Collective understood their situation as black women. In their words: “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective 1983). The idea is not so much to narrowly specify the singular “revolutionary subject” group who bears this feature of universality at any given historical moment. Rather, it is to approach transversal articulations aiming to build the broadest possible analysis of 1) our interdependence upon each other; and 2) the myriad forms of structural domination that mediate our interconnections. We may thereby understand how we can improve our situation while improving that of the whole society. To echo Emile just now, one urgent task of critical theory is to provide tools for articulating existing struggles together.

A caveat. Yesterday we briefly discussed Luxemburg's idea of a "vanguard" that communicates to the masses "the inevitable advent of this revolutionary period, the inner social factors making for it and the political consequences of it" (Luxemburg 1986, 69-70). Given the political baggage that the idea of a "vanguard" has accrued, however, we may consider describing critical theory's task of transversal articulation as what Linda Alcoff calls "rearguard" theorizing, whereby we understand ourselves "not inventors or originators so much as those who give philosophical articulation to the ideas embedded in the praxis and lived experience of the activist oppressed" (Alcoff 2012, 62).

Let's re-ask the question, how should we approach the task of social transformation? Marx and Luxemburg argue that different forms of struggle pertain to different historical moments. Gago emphasizes the variety of forms that unfold sequentially and simultaneously as movements make demands of power, achieve gains, fail, negotiate with power and with each other, and generate autonomous alternatives. She and Alex Demirović stress the importance of reflection upon how this unfolding dynamically alters political and social conditions for processes of change. This, along with Sally Haslanger's idea that society is itself a complex dynamic system, suggests not only that there is no one-size-fits-all recipe, but also that a multi-pronged effort is in order. We return to Marx's idea of a self-reflective proletarian revolution that interrupts itself continuously in its own course.

I conclude by considering **interstitial change**, at some points called prefiguration. These are proposals, as Erik Olin Wright describes, "to build new forms of social empowerment in the niches, spaces and margins of capitalist society, often where they do not seem to pose any immediate threat to dominant classes and elites" (Olin Wright 2010, 211). Anarchists understand this mode as "building a new world in the shell of the old."

Interstitial efforts assume a more open-ended posture on what emancipated society looks like than traditional Marxism. As such, they acknowledge both historical-epistemic and political problems with being overly prescriptive about what should be done.

Transformation, according to Alex, is a process of seizing upon the political power and social capacities that struggles already possess to enact improvements that, in an anticipatory register, offer opportunities to try things out, recognize weaknesses and contradictions, and develop capacities to deal with them (Demirović 2012, 29). Critical theory could support struggles in reflecting upon limits, dangers, and contradictions with a view to historical conditions; and in working through the ambivalent results of interstitial efforts. In other words, it could facilitate social learning in these contexts. We should think carefully about practices, especially regarding communication and participatory democratic decision-making, that likewise facilitate social learning.

Problems with the interstitial mode include, first: how do we scale up and achieve massive organization? For which issues is chapter-based organizing, as Sally suggested, particularly effective; and what other mechanisms of dissemination make sense? Second: there are serious material constraints to interstitial efforts, beginning with access to resources. What do current material conditions and social relations lend themselves towards, and what do they inhibit? Finally: it's clear that not just anything goes. Today we emphasized how in Benjamin, Fanon, and Marcuse we perceive the idea that a truly qualitative break would mean an end to domination in all its forms. It is imperative to continuously reflect on interstitial initiatives from this perspective, to avoid re-entrenching domination and seek ruptural moments on the local level, as was mentioned earlier. Generating broad solidarities, too, helps enjoin a wide and plural variety of perspectives that can enrich this process of critical reflection with their experiences.

Despite a traditional Marxist insistence upon the radical novelty of the communist form of life, we are not starting from scratch. Indeed, we commit violent erasures when we think this way. Globalized capitalist society is not homogenous but contains multiple forms of life within it. We've considered, for example, indigenous communities in Latin America that do not see themselves primarily as workers, and who are not necessarily experimenting with brand new alternatives to capitalism but experiencing an interrupted continuity with historical forms that have been transformed and reshaped through colonial and capitalist incursions. This here and in many other communities around the world. Again, we arrive upon the importance of transversal organizing—though of course problems of translation and intelligibility across cultural horizons arise in this context. We are also prompted to consider the questions of violence and history from this morning, and what contemporary processes of decolonization, and decoloniality, transformation require.

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