

The Invisible Hand of the Powerful*

We have a Europe of banks and bankers, a Europe of corporations and top executives, a Europe of police and police officers, and we shall soon have a Europe of armies and military forces, but, though there exists a European Trade Union Confederation, one cannot say that the Europe of trade unions and associations really exists. Similarly, though one loses count of the conferences where Europe is blustered about and of the academic institutions where European problems are spoken of in impeccably academic language, the Europe of artists, writers, and scientists is much less of a reality now than it was in eras past. The paradox is that one cannot criticize this Europe that is being built around and by the powerful, and which is so un-European, without risking being conflated with the archaic resonances put up by reactionary nationalism for a backward-looking reactionary nationalist (and they unfortunately do exist) and hence contributing to making this Europe seem modern, if not progressive.

One must bring (back) into action what is most European in the European tradition, namely, a critical social movement, a movement of social critique capable of *effectively* contesting

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the process of European construction, that is, with enough intellectual and political forces to produce real effects. The aim of such a critical offensive is not to void the European project, to neutralize it, but on the contrary to *radicalize* it and thereby to bring it *closer* to the citizens, particularly the youngest among them who are often described as depoliticized when they are merely disgusted with the politics that official politicians serve up, disgusted with politics by and for politicians. We must restore meaning to politics and to do this prepare projects for the future capable of giving meaning to an economic and social world that has undergone enormous transformations in recent years.

In the 1930s, Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means described the advent of the rule of "managers" over and at the expense of the "owners," the shareholders.* Today we are witnessing the return of the owners, but their comeback is only *apparent*. For owners have no more power than they did in the age of Galbraith's "technostructure." In fact, the masters of the economy are no longer the managers subject to the tyranny of rates of profit, that is, those CEOs now rewarded or dismissed (most often with stupendous severance packages) on the basis of a quarterly evaluation of the "shareholder value" they have achieved, or those executives paid on a short-term basis with a percentage of the business they bring in and who keep a daily eye on the stock market, where the value of their stock options is determined. But the masters of the economy are not the owners either, that is to say, the individual small shareholders depicted in the mythology of the "shareholding democracy."

* Adolf A. Berle and Gardiner Means, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1991 [1933]).

It is, in fact, the managers of the big institutions, the pension funds, the big insurance companies, and, particularly in the United States, the money market funds or mutual funds who today dominate the field of financial capital, within which financial capital is both stake and weapon (as are certain specific forms of cultural capital that consultants, analysts, and monetary authorities can mobilize with great symbolic efficacy). These managers possess a formidable capacity to pressure both firms and states. They are, in effect, in a position to impose the obligation, which is in turn imposed on them, to obtain from capital what economist Frédéric Lordon calls, in an ironic reference to minimum income legislation, a *minimum guaranteed shareholder income*. Present everywhere on the boards of companies ("corporate governance"), they are compelled by the logic of the system they dominate to improve the pursuit of ever higher profits (returns of 12, 15, and even 18 percent on capital invested), which firms can yield only through mass layoffs. They thus transfer the imperative of short-term profit—which, in complete disregard of ecological and, above all, human consequences, becomes the practical purpose of the entire system—onto the company managers, who in turn transfer that risk to the wage earners, notably through "downsizing." In short, because the dominant in this game are dominated by the rules of the game they dominate (the rule of profit), this field functions as a kind of infernal machine without subject, which imposes its will on both states and firms.

Within companies, too, the pursuit of short-term profit governs all decisions, particularly the recruitment policy (subjected to the imperatives of flexibility and mobility as with hires on short-term contracts or on a temporary basis), the in-

dividualization of the wage relation, and the absence of long-term planning particularly as regards the workforce. With "downsizing" a constant threat, the whole life of wage earners is placed under the sign of insecurity and uncertainty. The previous system provided security of employment and a relatively high level of remuneration by fueling demand which sustained growth and profits. By contrast, the new mode of production maximizes profit by reducing payroll through layoffs and the compression of wages, the shareholder being concerned only with stock market value, on which his nominal income depends, and with price stability, necessary to keep his real income as close as possible to the nominal. Thus has come into being an economic regime that is inseparable from a political regime, a mode of production that entails a mode of domination based on the *institution of insecurity*, domination through precariousness: a deregulated financial market fosters a deregulated labor market and thereby the casualization of labor that cows workers into submission.

We are dealing, within companies, with a rational management utilizing the weapon of insecurity (among others) to put workers in a state of risk, stress, and tension. Unlike "traditional" casual labor in the service sector and the construction industry, *institutionalized precariousness* inside the firms of the future becomes a principle of work organization and a style of life. As Gilles Balbastre has shown, some telesales or telemarketing companies, whose employees have to telephone potential clients at home in order to generate sales, have put in place a work regime that in terms of productivity, control and supervision, working hours, and the absence of career prospects amounts to a veritable service-sector Taylorism. By contrast with the unskilled workers of factory Taylorism, the employees

are often highly qualified. But the prototype of the unskilled worker of the "new economy" is the supermarket checkout girl whom bar-coding and computerization have converted into a genuine assembly-line worker, her cadence timed, clocked, and controlled across a schedule determined by variations in the flow of customers: she has neither the life nor the lifestyle of a factory worker, but she occupies an equivalent position in the new structure.

These companies, which offer no security to their employees and contribute to instituting a consumerist vision of the world, herald an economic reality akin to the social philosophy inherent in neoclassical theory. It is as if the instantaneist, individualistic, ultrasubjectivist philosophy of neoclassical economics had found in neoliberal policy the means of its own realization, had created the conditions for its own verification. This *chronically unstable system* is structurally exposed to risk (and not just because crisis, linked to speculative bubbles, hovers over it constantly like the sword of Damocles). One sees in passing that when Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens extol the advent of the "risk society" and make the myth of the transformation of all wage earners into dynamic small entrepreneurs their own, they are merely instituting as societal norms those rules imposed on the dominated by the needs of the economy (from which the dominant are careful to exempt themselves).

However, the main consequence of this new mode of production is the establishment of a *dual economy* (which, paradoxically, has many features in common with the dualistic economy I observed in Algeria in the 1960s, with, on the one hand, an enormous industrial reserve army, made up of a sub-

proletariat with no employment prospects, no future, no plans, either individual or collective, and hence condemned to millenarian dreaming rather than revolutionary ambitions, and, on the other, a small privileged minority of secure workers with a regular wage). The duality of income and status is growing continually. There are more and more low-level service jobs that are underpaid and low-productivity, unskilled or underskilled (based on hasty on-the-job training), with no career prospects—in short, the *throwaway jobs* of what André Gorz calls a "society of servants." According to economist Jean Gadrey, quoting an American study, of the thirty jobs that will grow fastest in the next decade, seventeen require no skills and only eight require higher education and qualification. At the other end of social space, the *dominated dominant*, that is, the managers, are experiencing a new form of alienation. They occupy an ambiguous position, equivalent to that of the petty bourgeois at another historical stage in the structure, which leads to forms of organized self-exploitation (average annual working hours are increasing in the United States, with a correlative decline in leisure time: executives earn a lot of money but do not have the time to spend it). Overworked, stressed, and threatened with dismissal, they are nonetheless chained to the company.

Whatever the prophets of the "new economy" may say, this dualism is nowhere so apparent as in the *social uses of computing*. The advocates of the "new economy" and of the Silicon Valley vision tend to regard current economic and social changes as an inevitable effect of technology, whereas they are the product of the economically and socially conditioned social uses made of that technology. Contrary to the illusion of un-

precedented novelty, the structural constraints built into the social order—such as the logic of the transmission of cultural and academic capital, which is the precondition for the true mastery of the new tools, both technological and financial—continue to bear on the present and to shape what is novel and innovative. Statistical analysis of the use and users of information technology shows that there exists a pronounced divide between the “interactors” and the “interacted,” based on the unequal distribution of cultural capital and hence, ultimately, on the school system and the familial transmission of capital. The modal information technology user is a thirty-five-year-old highly educated English-speaking urban male with a high income. And the virtuosi capable of writing their own programs have little or nothing in common with the new workers of the informatics production line such as the telephone operators who work in shifts round the clock to staff the hot-line for twenty-four-hour access providers, or the “Net surfers” building up directories, or the “integrators” doing copying and pasting—atomized, isolated occupations shorn of any form of union representation and fated to rapid turnover. Similarly, in terms of economic and financial use, there is an opposition between those with Internet connections, who have computers and software that enable them to trade and do their banking on-line from home, and those lacking that access. And the facts clearly give lie to the myth that the Internet would change relations between North and South: in 1997, the richest 20 percent of the world’s population represented 93.3 percent of Internet users, while the poorest 20 percent made up 0.2 percent. Whether at the level of individuals or nations, the “immaterial” rests on very real structures, such

as education systems and laboratories, not to mention banks and firms.

In the richest societies, this dualism is based for the most part on the unequal distribution of cultural capital, which, apart from continuing to determine the division of labor to a large extent, constitutes a very powerful instrument of *sociodicy*. The ruling class no doubt owes its extraordinary *arrogance* to the fact that, being endowed with very high cultural capital (most obviously of academic origin, but also nonacademic), it feels perfectly justified in existing as it currently exists, the living paradigm of the new conquering bourgeois being Bill Gates. The educational diploma is not merely a mark of academic distinction; it is perceived as a warrant of natural intelligence, of giftedness. Thus the “new economy” has all the characteristics required to appear as the “brave new world” (in Huxley’s sense). It is global and those who dominate it are often international, polyglot, and polycultural (by opposition to the locals, the “national” or “parochial”). It is immaterial or “weightless”: it produces and circulates weightless objects such as information and cultural products. As a consequence, it can appear as an *economy of intelligence*, reserved for “intelligent” people (which earns it the sympathy of “hip” journalists and executives). Sociodicy here takes the form of a *racism of intelligence*: today’s poor are not poor, as they were thought to be in the nineteenth century, because they are improvident, spendthrift, intemperate, etc.—by opposition to the “deserving poor”—but because they are dumb, intellectually incapable, idiotic. In short, in academic terms “they got their just deserts” (one thinks here of the phantasm of *The Bell Curve*). Some economists such as Gary Becker may find an incontrovertible

justification for the rule of the "best and the brightest" in a neo-Darwinism that makes the rationality postulated by economic theory the product of the natural selection of the most capable. And the circle is completed when economics calls on mathematics (which has itself become one of the major instruments of social selection) to provide the most incontestable *epistemocratic* justification for the established order. The victims of such a powerful mode of domination, which can appeal to a principle of domination and legitimation as universal as rationality (upheld by the education system), are very deeply damaged in their self-image. And it is no doubt through this mediation that a relationship—most often unnoticed or misunderstood—can be traced between neoliberal politics and certain fascistoid forms of revolt among those who, feeling excluded from access to intelligence and modernity, are driven to take refuge in the national and nationalism.

(If it is difficult to combat the neoliberal vision effectively, this is because, though conservative, it presents itself as progressive. As a result, it is able to deflect all critiques, especially those that point to the destruction of the social conquests of the past, by dubbing them conservative or even backward-looking. Thus governments that claim to embody social democracy can dismiss under the label "red-brown," as "extremists" of the far left and the far right both those who criticize them for renouncing their socialist program and the victims of that renunciation who reproach them for what they believe to be their socialism.)

Neoliberalism aims to destroy the social state, the "left hand" of the state, which, as can easily be shown, safeguards the

interests of the dominated, the culturally and economically dispossessed, women, stigmatized ethnic groups, etc.* The most exemplary case is that of health, which neoliberal policy attacks from two directions, by contributing to an increase in the incidence of illness and the number of sick people (through the correlation between poverty and pathology: alcoholism, drugs, delinquency, industrial accidents, etc.) and by reducing medical resources and the provision of care (take the example of Britain and Russia, where life expectancy has fallen by ten years in ten years!

In some European countries, such as France, we are witnessing the emergence of a new form of multipurpose social work *accompanying the collective shift toward neoliberalism*: on the one hand, this provides work, in the manner of the *Ateliers nationaux* in an earlier era, for people with devalued academic qualifications (many of them wholehearted, committed people) by setting them to supervise others in a homologous position; on the other hand, it keeps the academic rejects out of mischief by offering them make-work, making them wage earners without wages, entrepreneurs without an enterprise, continuing students with no hope of qualifications or degrees. All these programs of social supervision, which foster a kind of collective self-mystification by, among other things, blurring the boundary between work and nonwork, between study

* [Translator's note] For Bourdieu, the "left hand" of the state is the "set of agents of the so-called spending ministries which are the trace, within the state, of the social struggles of the past, as represented by the ministries of labor and social rights, education, public housing, and health." They are opposed to the "right hand" of the state, represented by the ministries of finance and budget (Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance* [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999], p. 2) as well as the repressive arm of the state (police, courts, prison, military).

and work, etc., and a belief in a sham universe whose symbol is the idea of the "project," rest on a "charitable" social philosophy and a "soft" sociology that regards itself as based on "understanding" and which, purporting to adopt the standpoint of the "subjects" it wishes to set in action ("action sociology"), ends up endorsing the mystified and mystifying vision of social work (by contrast with a rigorous sociology which, from that standpoint, is doomed to appear deterministic and pessimistic because it takes account of structures and their effects).

In the face of such a complex and refined mode of domination, in which symbolic power has such an important place, one must invent new forms of struggle. Given the particular role of "ideas" in this scheme, researchers have a key part to play. They have to provide political action with new ends—the demolition of the dominant beliefs—and new means—technical weapons—based on research and a command of scientific knowledge, and symbolic weapons, capable of undermining common beliefs by putting research findings into an accessible form.

The European social movement that needs to be created has for objective a utopia, namely, a Europe in which all the critical social forces, currently very diverse and dispersed, would be sufficiently integrated and organized to be a force of critical movement. And there is something utopian about such a movement itself, so great are the linguistic, economic, and technical obstacles to such a gathering. The multiplicity and diversity of movements that pursue some or all of the aims we propose for ourselves are, in fact, the first and foremost justification for a collective undertaking aimed at unifying and integrating them, without monopolizing them or taking them

over, by working to help the individuals and organizations committed on this front to overcome the effects of competition. The first task, then, is to offer a *coherent set of alternative propositions, developed jointly by researchers and activists* (while avoiding any form of instrumentalization of one by the other), capable of unifying the social movement by overcoming the divisions between national traditions and, within each nation, between occupational categories and social categories (especially that between workers and the unemployed), the sexes, the generations, and those of different ethnic origins (immigrants and nationals). Only the enormous collective work required to coordinate the critical activities, both theoretical and practical, of all the social movements born of the desire to fill the gap left by the depoliticizing political action of social democratic governments will enable us to invent the structures of inquiry, discussion, and mobilization at many levels (international, national, and local) that will gradually inscribe in minds and in things a new manner of doing politics.