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## **Can (continental European) capitalism be overcome?**

When posed in this way, my answer to the question is still a resounding ‘yes!’. What is true for all other capitalisms also applies to continental European capitalism: because it can no longer be sustained by our planet, and because increasing inequality and social insecurity are eating away at the very core of its legitimacy, modern growth capitalism will probably cease to exist within the next few decades. At the moment, we cannot say what the post-growth societies that could replace it may look like. Change will most likely be driven forward by a mixture of external shocks (e.g. natural disasters), social movements against the compulsions of growth and competition, reforms from above, and alternatives to the dominant lifestyle already being practised today. These changes, however, will not automatically make things better. At least for the time being, we can still influence this anticipated change through participation in democratic politics. It therefore makes sense to begin working actively towards the overcoming of capitalism today, despite what seem like very slim chances of success, instead of passively resigning ourselves to this social formation’s eventual demise. Unless I am completely mistaken, we face a particular and unique set of circumstances for the overcoming of capitalism in continental Europe today.

Over the course of managing the economic crisis, a transnational disciplinary regime has been consolidated institutionally within the European Union and the Eurozone that reinforces inequalities within and between the member states of the Eurozone in particular, and as a result is increasingly reliant on authoritarian means to ensure the periphery’s compliance (Bieling 2013). The institutionalisation of this authoritarian mode of regulation (Jessop 2012) has a longer history which, through a sequence of what are ultimately constitutionally relevant reforms, amounts to the consolidation and institutional reinforcement of an authoritarian and radical free market-oriented transformation (‘crisis constitutionalism’). The objectives of this new constitutionalism include all that which I have termed the *Landnahme* of the social: the strengthening of private-capitalist property rights, the expropriation of public goods, the re-commodification of sectors and spaces of life previously protected from the market, as well as the subordination of economic activities to the rules of liberalised financial markets and

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<sup>1</sup> Tauss, Aaron (Hrsg., 2016): Das Ende des Kapitalismus denken: Perspektiven und Strategien für eine sozio-ökologische Transformation; VSA: Hamburg.

restrictive fiscal policies (Urban 2013a). This new constitutionalism was initially established through technocratic measures, effectively amounting to a withdrawal of essential realms of European politics from the democratic decision-making process. Projects such as the European Single Market, the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), financial market integration and the EU's eastward expansion drove forward a transformation that has implanted market radicalism firmly within the institutions of the EU empire.

This silent 'restauration-revolution' was further accelerated during the crisis of 2008-9, when it became both detached from its technocratic shell and simultaneously politicised, as that which had remained latent throughout the years of the credit-driven Euro boom now began to emerge. The EU states, and in particular the members of the EMU, continue to drift apart both economically and socially. This is the result of a European Stability Mechanism (ESM), which seeks to achieve social stabilisation through austerity programmes whose enforcement and execution is largely divorced from the democratic decision making processes of individual nation states. It was clear from the outset that the ESM and its pro-cyclical financial policy would create barriers to economic growth while exposing the weaker economies in particular to an interest-risk-spiral, as the latter are less able to raise the necessary funds to re-finance budget deficits and other debts. Regardless of this fact, authoritarian austerity policies were further elaborated in a bundle of measures and agreements (European Fiscal Pact, European Semester, Twopack, Sixpack, etc.) and institutionally grounded (Lehndorff 2014). As a result, we now find strongly asymmetrical patterns of interrelations, conflicts of interest between member states as well as increasing conflicts overall, articulated in a downright antagonistic debtor-creditor-relationship (Bieling 2013: 40).

The crisis-constitutionalist transformation of the EMU and the EU as a whole has significantly altered the rules by which member states must act. Certainly, this will not be remedied by the Juncker Plan, named after the current head of the European Commission. Indeed, what has become clear thus far is that austerity does not lead out of the crisis, which is why the Juncker Plan purports to operate on the basis of investment programmes. Nevertheless, it represents at its core an attempt to turn market radicalism à la Milton Friedman into the compulsory standard of European politics within the Eurozone. In a first step, Juncker plans to introduce a common European liability for banking deposits and to allow the rescue fund ESM to grant the European Single Resolution Fund (SRF) a credit line, without making any contractual alternations. This 'Europeanisation', however, is to be

combined with a radical free-market programme that affects all members of the EU: ‘The loan securitisation market is to be revived and the rules for securities simplified. Juncker wants to solve the problem of diverging competitiveness by compelling all countries to improve competitiveness. In this regard he is primarily looking at wage reductions and labour market deregulation, as well as limiting pension contributions by, among other things, extending the average length of working life [...] In addition to Juncker’s liberalisation agenda, he wants to reduce the state’s influence on the economy by keeping government budgets tight. They should not be permitted to run large deficits anymore and become obligated to pay back debts with current receipts. This will create a compulsion to financial modesty. Additionally, bank access to government loans is to be capped, which is intended to lower demand.’ (Handelsblatt, 6 June 2015).

Furthermore, the Juncker Plan intends to make investments during crisis situations only in those countries which abide by European fiscal rules, that is to say: deregulating the labour market, maintaining (or introducing) wage ceilings, and investing in workforce training (ibid.). In this way, any economic crisis of a member state would automatically be met with a deregulation programme. Thus, the Juncker Plan would amount to a radical free-market project of the Friedmanite type, seeking to reorganise the European Union along the lines of the US-American model of capitalism. The crisis management currently underway in Europe is being conducted in this very spirit. The effect of this programme will be that the forces of growth remain generally weak. Lasting economic stagnation is therefore possible, or even probable. Europe will have to learn how to deal with relatively low growth rates quickly (Piketty 2014b: 47). The associated learning processes, however, can have very different, and even contradictory, social implications.

### **What can – what should – happen? Three scenarios**

In the long term, three paths of development seem conceivable. They are (1) the emergence of a hierarchical society with politically enforced forms of exploitation, bearing what could be described as neo-feudalist characteristics, (2) a successful revitalisation of a (now ‘green’) capitalism, or (3) the emergence of non-capitalist post-growth societies, although the contours thereof remain necessarily vague at this stage. Let us take a closer look at the different scenarios.

(1) *An order of exploitation without or with only very little growth:* One possibility is the emergence of an order of exploitation which is no longer based on the compulsion to permanent economic growth. Such a transformation becomes probable should economic growth fail to materialise over a longer period of time, re-distribution from top to bottom be blocked and capitalist *Landnahmen* be forced to draw on already existing substance. In such a scenario, that which remains latent throughout ongoing primitive accumulation may become dominant. A finance-capitalist oligarchy deploys its wealth in order to maintain an order of exploitation primarily by means of extra-economic coercion and violence, that is to say, via the enforcement of secondary exploitation. Projects intended to open up new markets for capital, as are currently being advanced in the form of the proposed free trade agreement between the EU and the USA as well as the EU and Canada (TTIP and CETA), can only be implemented to the detriment of competing economic and geopolitical interests. This tension will manifest itself in rivalries over mineral deposits, scarce resources and spheres of influence, and thus constitutes a tremendously dangerous development. As a consequence of the logic of conflict, such rivalries can reinforce global tendencies toward anti-democratic and indeed civilisation-threatening geopolitical escalation, as we have already seen in the guise of a renewed confrontation between East and West (Ukraine), ethnic nationalism consuming and destroying entire countries (Yugoslavia), the right-wing populist ‘tsunami’ in Europe (e.g. Marine Le Pen and the Front National), or, in a totally different form, as organised terrorism justified by religious fundamentalism (Daesh). As Hannah Arendt illustrated in her analysis of totalitarianism, a worst case scenario is possible in which surplus capital teams up with supposedly redundant sectors of society to provide an impetus to an expansive capitalist spirit which gradually detaches itself from socio-economic interests completely, so as to fully commit itself to the accumulation of political power – a force that operates according to territorial principles and which can only be implemented through the drawing and re-drawing territorial boundaries.<sup>2</sup> In today's capitalist centres, however, it tends to be the relatively secured groups of wage earners who practice exclusive solidarity (Dörre/Happ/Matuschek 2013: 222-228), by which they dissociate themselves from ‘above’, but particularly from ‘below’ and from the ‘other’. These groups demand zones of protection and demarcations which, should the need arise, may have to be enforced by an authoritarian capitalism. Resembling its imperialist predecessors, such a capitalist state would also base itself on the accumulation of political power. Yet the unlimited accumulation of power permanently ‘needs more material to devour in its never-ending process’, as it is insatiable, and even ‘the

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Deppe describes such a scenario as ‘authoritarian capitalism’ (Deppe 2013).

last victorious Commonwealth cannot proceed to “annex the planets”, it can only proceed to destroy itself” (H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Cleveland & New York: World Publishing Company 1962, pp. 146-147).

(2) *Green Capitalism*: A possible alternative to these apocalyptic visions are neo-Schumpeterian or neo-Keynesian projects of technology- and efficiency-based green capitalist *Landnahmen*. Such projects have already been put forth in the form of the digitalisation of industrial production (‘industry 4.0’) and the associated problematisation of the concept of growth (E. Brynjolfson/A. McAfee, *The Second Machine Age. Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies*, New York 2014), the credo of ‘smart growth’, or assorted variants of a Global Deal or Green New Deal (cf. R. Fücks, *Smart Growth: The Green Revolution*, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2013; N. Stern, *The Economics of Climate Change. The Stern Review*. Cambridge 2007; M. Müller/K. Niebert, *Epochenwechsel. Plädoyer für einen grünen New Deal*. Munich 2012). There can hardly be any doubt that technological and organisational innovations such as, for example, the transition to renewable energy sources as well as the improvement of overall energy efficiency and efficacy, are urgently needed if civilisation is to respond to the coming ecological threats adequately. It would thus be a mistake to reject strategies which rely on ‘green’ growth such as the Green New Deal outright, as some currents within the growth-critical movements do. For as we have learned from European climate policy (utterly insufficient as it is), even moderate ecological reforms only become a viable political option when a substantial degree of social pressure is present. For the emerging economies of the Global South, moreover, they represent ‘a stepping stone towards more fundamental options in the longer term’ (D. Pillay, ‘*Marx and the Eco-Logic of Fossil Capitalism*’, in: M. Williams/V. Satgar, (eds.) *Marxisms in the 21st Century: Crisis, Critique & Struggle*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press 2014, pp 143-165, see p. 162). Any sustainability strategy worthy of the name, however, would be heavily reliant on state intervention, movements of civil society, democratic control of financial markets, public ownership, a revaluation of reproductive labour, a new balance between the Global North and South, egalitarianism and reduced overall consumption. The question is, would a society that exhibited all these features still be a capitalist society? Could it still remain a social formation in which the capitalist social order permeates, dominates and hierarchises all sectors of society?

A healthy dose of scepticism is appropriate here. Ultimately, we cannot escape the fact that a social system which relies on an inscribed growth imperative will at some point collide with the reproductive capacities of a planet whose resources are finite. It may become easier for us

to abandon the growth illusion once we realise that, as Joseph Schumpeter analysed, creative destruction has long become the creative *preservation* of indefensible and unsustainable social relations. Growth capitalism has become a kind of treadmill that continues to function only because more and more people are forced to expend more and more energy just to avoid falling off it (Rosa 2005). Anyone who is serious about the goal of the sociological classics, that is to say, serious about achieving a ‘betterment of society’ (Eßbach 2014) must mount a fundamental challenge to the treadmill itself. This will only be possible if the rest of society, meaning everything and everyone outside of the interests of private profit, exerts its influence regarding the questions of the ‘what’, the ‘how’, and the ‘what for’ of production and reproduction.

(3) *Democratic Post-Growth Society*: A transformative perspective that aims for all the aforementioned can only emerge from a comprehensive critique of exploitation and alienation that combines radical democratisation and ‘substantive equality’ (J. B. Foster et al., *The Ecological Rift*, p. 398) into an ecologically sustainable project of emancipation. Sustainable is that which ‘stands fast, which bears up, which is long term, resilient. And that means: immune to ecological, economic or social breakdown’. Sustainability is mainly rooted in the ‘basic human need for security’ (U. Grober, *Sustainability. A Cultural History*, Totnes (UK): Green Books 2012, p. 16) – an insight that can hardly be reconciled with a system incapable of distinguishing improvement from destruction or progress from wastefulness.

The only task that remains for sociology, at least for now, may very well be the designation of certain coordinates which could serve as points of orientation for social forces seeking to transform the current system. The *first coordinate* is a conscious social rejection of the imperative of permanent economic growth. However, an ethically-inspired critique of growth which claims that the argument about ‘the fair distribution of an assumed yield from human performance’ is allegedly really only about ‘the appropriation of the spoils that, from an ecological perspective, should have never been created in the first place’ (N. Paech, *Liberation from excess: The road to a post-growth economy*, Munich: Oekom Verlag 2012, p. 35; similar: H. Rosa, ‘*Klassenkampf und Steigerungsspiel: Eine unheilvolle Allianz. Marx’ beschleunigungstheoretische Krisendiagnose*’, in: R. Jaeggi/D. Loick (eds.), *Nach Marx. Philosophie, Kritik, Praxis*. Berlin 2013, pp. 394-411), defines the transformation objective in a rather problematic way. Aside from the fact that Marx by all means ascribed all struggles over wages, working hours and living conditions – i.e., which do not directly challenge capitalism as a system – with the potential of rendering tangible the system’s limits and thereby triggering collective learning processes, such arguments also simply fail to get at the

core of the growth dilemma. Demands for wage hikes or reductions in working hours, should they be successful, come at the cost of a loss in profits, while their effect as growth drivers – if there is any at all – is indirect at most (distributional struggles as ‘productivity whips’). Conversely, wage sacrifices, which the German trade union movement also underwent for many years not least due to its own weakness, inevitably lead to an escalation of the capital surplus absorption problem. What is on offer from advocates of austerity is certainly not a path into a ‘reductive modernity’ (Sommer/Welzer 2014), in which the poisoned pie that is to be shared would simply shrink. On the contrary: the subaltern classes’ restraint during distributional struggles only leads to more surplus private capital. Under current conditions this simply means that capital which is urgently required, for instance, for ecological infrastructural investments which yield little profit, instead flows into the financial sector, thus increasing overall systemic instability. This is possible because the lobbying power of the financial market corporations is still strong enough to curb even the smallest steps, such as the introduction of a financial transaction tax planned by some EU countries, to the extent that they ultimately do very little to restrict the freedoms of investors.

In this sense, even purely economic struggles within the system address much more than ‘just’ unfair relations of distribution. They aim to limit the power of that social mechanism which ensures that the growing wealth of the few entails the poverty, misery and precarity of the many. Contrary to the claim that the collapse of the financial markets primarily harmed the owners of significant financial wealth, it was actually the poorest of the poor, among them a disproportionately high number of women, who were hit the hardest by the crisis of 2008-9. In Mexico, Ecuador or Haiti, where entire sections of the population depend on remittances from overseas relatives, the laying off of construction workers or household servants can lead to widespread malnutrition and even starvation. But we need not turn to the Global South or the European crisis-ridden countries alone: in Germany, the life expectancy of a long-term unemployed individual with no chance whatsoever of finding regular employment again is on average ten years lower than that for society as a whole. In other words: in extreme cases, the crisis-induced production of inequality can in fact turn out to be a question of life and death – even for the underprivileged in affluent societies. For this reason alone, an ethically-grounded critique of growth may not simply dismiss questions of distribution, even if projects that, for example, pursue the reduction of regional as well as global poverty do not necessarily exhibit any system-transforming qualities.

To be absolutely clear: the search for standards of a good life and a critique of capitalism founded upon them serves an important social function in heavily contested tests of worth.

The same is true for conscious, political consumption guided by the pursuit of sustainability, which may in fact spawn new combinations of producer and consumer power. These potentials for critique and these power resources, however, remain confined to micro-social relations and fields of action beyond production. An ethically-inspired critique of growth, however, is utterly counterproductive if it focuses primarily on the greedy materialism of the lower classes while simultaneously presenting the ruling elites as unfortunate victims of capitalist alienation. Such variants of critique are likely to drive even wage earners already critical of the consumerism of capitalist life into the camp of the ecological counter-revolution (Dörre/Holst/Matuschek 2014).

A purportedly radical critique of growth that is socially blind and neglects the pressing issue of equality is barely distinguishable from an intelligent neo-conservatism that exploits ecological crises as justification for declining prosperity and mounting inequality (Cf. M. Miegel, *Exit. Wohlstand ohne Wachstum*, Berlin 2010). To ensure against neo-conservative usurpation of our argument, we require a *second coordinate* – namely, a culture of ‘substantive equality’. Class-specific inequalities in their interconnections to the axes of gender and ethnicity repeatedly function to amplify and intensify ecological crises. Ecological threats are generally concentrated in the poorest countries. A climate-induced sea level rise will initially pose a problem for countries lacking the financial resources to develop protective measures for their populations. Extreme weather, which is expected to increase in both frequency and intensity, wreaks havoc in the slums of the world's mega-cities. Moreover, the increased strain on natural systems, which is largely a product of Western consumption patterns, is also distributed unequally. As a general rule, it is safe to say that the higher the income, the bigger the ecological footprint. Moreover, benchmarks toward ecological sustainability are far more difficult to meet in countries with more pronounced class-specific inequalities. Inequality fosters positional consumption – driven not least by the fear of losing touch with or decoupling from social norms, or missing an opportunity for upward social advancement. The desire to distinguish oneself from others, as well as the activities of the advertising industry as a whole, as well as unequally distributed decision-making powers as far as investment, products and production methods are concerned mean that consumers do not really have much choice in how they live their lives. If they could, they would soon realise that a large portion of a society's energy consumption occurs in the productive sector, the lion's share of emissions with a climatic effect are produced by private companies and waste is also mostly amassed by industry. For these reasons, the notion of extensive consumer sovereignty, which seeks to implement changes to the system primarily via changes to

individual lifestyles, is just as implausible as the related assumption that ecological destruction could be countered primarily through conscious and measured consumption as well as personal and collective sacrifice.

‘Substantive equality’ implies the opposite of levelling down; it does, however, entail much more than the equality of social status or at least equality of opportunity associated with the national welfare state (Dubet 2014). A culture of ‘substantive equality’ aims – and this is the *third coordinate* – for a radical democratisation of decision-making in production, meaningful labour and social reproduction. Dominant capitalist actors can choose quite freely as to which of the diverse mechanisms of exploitation they wish to combine and utilise. Conversely, this means that a limited plurality of social antagonisms take effect which can exist in varying combinations and to varying extents. Plural relations of domination and exploitation engender heterogeneous social forces with specific and sometimes competing interests – labour movements, NGOs, cooperatives, ecological and feminist movements, initiatives for and by migrants, political parties, trade unions, charitable enterprises and many other actors – which, in an ideal scenario, could mutually reinforce one another through their respective activities within different fields of action. Currently, however, this diversity impedes the formation of collective identities of subaltern groups and limits the possibilities of establishing any sort of countervailing power. If there is to be any chance of overcoming capitalism, then the expansion of democracy represents the only remaining possibility to concentrate and cohere a multiplicity of social identities. What is needed is not a replacement but an expansion of representative democratic institutions and procedures based on the concepts of an ‘insurgent democracy’ (M. Abensour, *Democracy against the State. Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2011, pp. 47-72).

Democracy is radical when it enables oppositional forces to challenge capitalist elites on the terrain of civil society. Radical also means that democracy can no longer be understood as a purely political category, but must be re-defined as an economic one as well (E. Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism*, p. 290). Radical democracy would have to prove successful, in a comprehensive sense, as the social motor or ‘driving mechanism’ of the economy (ibid.). At the same time, it would have to aim for the redistribution of resources from the highly productive industrial sectors to the allegedly less productive reproductive sectors. Such a redistribution financed through taxation would be the precondition for a break with the capitalist principle of replacing human labour power with machines, especially in the area of person-oriented services. Societies that were to conduct a revaluation of care work and care workers within the framework of a comprehensive democratisation strategy would set an

example for the possibility of post-capitalist post-growth societies, as they could only grow socially (due to the relative resistance of person-oriented services to rationalisation), and thus more slowly and in a different way. Labour productivity would only be increased gradually and not at the expense of living labour and social reproduction. Economic growth would no longer be an end unto itself, but merely a consciously applied means that serves the purpose of creating meaningful work that satisfies real human needs.

### **How and with whom can change occur?**

The prospect of a transformation based on a transition to selective, socially and ecologically sustainable growth, ultimately transcends – or at least points to the necessity of transcending – capitalism. Capitalist companies and internal capitalist markets could continue to exist, even for longer periods of time, but they would necessarily be contained and limited by movements for the ‘re-conquest of land’ and put to use by sectors for whom the capitalist social order no longer applies. Deliberations related to such a scenario may seem harmless and evolutionist or even reformist, yet they ultimately are only possible through the application of ‘revolutionary *Realpolitik*’. What is needed is a transformative politics capable of exploiting windows of opportunity for qualitative leaps. Even though the anticipated decay of capitalism will likely entail a series of multi-dimensional, asynchronous, long-lasting processes, it is nevertheless quite likely that revolutionary crises will arise over the course of the latter. In such constellations, what happens at the top of the power structure is decisive. If, in the case of financial and fiscal crises, (a) the salaries of military and police can no longer be paid, (b) elites are in disagreement over how to deal with the crisis and (c) excessive military spending creates additional barriers to action (for example), then favourable opportunity structures for oppositional social movements emerge. Revolutions are usually not the direct consequence of economic crises, but rather arise in the wake of government collapses. This is also true for future scenarios, which will probably be shaped by ‘the narrower mechanism of state breakdown, the state-centred fiscal crisis, elite deadlock, and ensuing paralysis of state enforcement apparatus’ (Collins 2013: 59). However, revolutions do not represent humanity’s ‘salvation’, in the sense that they do not mark the end of history but rather allow for a new historical course to be set, that is to say, they allow for qualitative leaps that would otherwise take decades to occur within a short period of time.

Thus far, we find no indication that such a window of opportunity for revolutionary leaps is opening in Europe. The European crisis is primarily one of the EU, of the EMU and of the

European institutions, but not one of the capitalist formations as such. Nevertheless, there are indeed some developments which, measured by the criteria outlined above, could potentially coalesce and trigger a revolutionary or a renewed restorative-revolutionary crisis. The interests of the few creditor countries and Germany in particular on the one hand, and those of the indebted crisis countries on the other, have already become antagonistic in some respects. In contrast to the endlessly repeated notion that Germany is paying for the ‘lazy Greeks’, it is actually the case that Germany, Europe’s most important creditor, is also the greatest beneficiary of the crisis. For the more the crisis in Greece worsens, the more attractive German government bonds become. Because the European Central Bank (ECB) is flooding the market with cheap money, Germany is able to replace expiring government bonds with new bonds at a lower interest rate. According to the *Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung* (Institute for Economic Research) (IWH 2015), the German treasury has managed to save at least 100 billion Euros over the past four and a half years as a result. This is significantly more than the roughly 90 billion Euros that Greece owes Germany for the ECH, ESM and IMF ‘rescue packages’, including the third one. Germany will continue to profit from the crisis, even in the case of a total Greek payment default.

So why should a creditor state make any concessions to the debtor, especially if bad news from Greece is good news for German fiscal policy? Because of the former’s interest in stabilising the European banking sector and the Eurozone, one might respond. This argument, however, would entail acknowledging that the billions of Euros that were sent to Athens in the form of credits and loans were neither granted for ‘altruistic’ reasons, nor did they do much to help ‘the Greeks’. And whoever admits that the rescue efforts were really for the sake of protecting banks and investors’ interests risks eroding the legitimacy of a European politics that points the figurative ‘gun’ of austerity at the crisis countries’ heads while simultaneously and callously accepting the reality that majorities of their populations will descend into immiseration and precarisation. Debtor-creditor relationships are only one example (albeit a very significant one) of the escalating conflicts of interest between European states, which raises the question of the future of the European economic and monetary union across all political camps. If it is indeed the case that prosperity in the creditor countries depends on privation in the debtor countries, then we can safely state that Euro-capitalism is becoming a cannibalistic system. The supposed profiteers of the crisis, above all Germany, prosper at the cost of a European periphery which they themselves helped create and which they have, moreover, driven into debt servitude through austerity policies (Calhoun 2014, p. 175). Nevertheless, divisions and fissures between European elites concerning fundamental

questions (economic policy, the need to reform the European institutions) remain. Despite the defeat of the SYRIZA government and an agreement that effectively turns Greece into a protectorate of the ‘institutions’ and the creditors, the politics of austerity continues to be met with resistance from left-oppositional movements (SYRIZA, Podemos). At the same time, it is triggering a nationalist counter-reaction that seeks to retain the national welfare state by limiting access for migrants and that rejects any redistribution in favour of weaker countries whatsoever.

So far, a blueprint for overcoming the European crisis has not been found. It remains to be seen whether the Eurozone will survive in its current form (given the possibility of a Grexit or Brexit), while a renewed financial crisis may now hit already weakened and even more financially vulnerable countries. Furthermore, geopolitical tensions or transnational refugee movements may lead to social dislocations out of which windows of opportunity for qualitative leaps may yet emerge. More importantly, it seems that the interests of the capitalist elites in the few European creditor countries (first and foremost Germany) can only be enforced by driving the countries on the losing side of the equation further into debt servitude. Such a cannibalistic capitalism can engender situations in which politics becomes unpredictable. The European Left needs to be prepared for this, and can learn from the experience of the Greek party coalition SYRIZA. The left minority within SYRIZA, parts of which have since left the party, justifiably holds fast to its critique of the austerity regime. It does not, however, have an answer to the problems that returning to the drachma would create. It would therefore be a mistake for the Tsipras government and SYRIZA to simply abandon their governing responsibility. As political conditions are unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future, it is imperative to make use of any and every possible scope of action to lessen the pressures on the poorest of society. In doing so SYRIZA deserves all conceivable support, both inside and outside of Greece. This remains true even if the party should lose its leading position in the government following new elections. While in government, SYRIZA must come to terms with something that could have implications for any future left-wing governments across Europe: namely, that austerity constitutes the basic framework in which the chances of realising positional gains for alternative political concepts must be explored. Or, to put it more pointedly: the Euro is not the most decisive issue for the European Left. After all, what happens to the Euro does not primarily depend on what the Left does. Rather, its job is to cautiously take very specific decisions at various levels of action within the multi-levelled European system as to what the best way to achieve territorial gains for a progressive alternative, for transformative politics, might be – and to do so under rapidly changing

conditions. Obvious problems aside, SYRIZA and Podemos provide some lessons on maintaining strategic flexibility even under adverse conditions. The main goal of the European Left in the medium term could be to achieve debt relief or at least a restructuring of debt that includes all of the crisis countries. For if measures are not taken to resolve or at least soften the virulent creditor-debtor antagonism, the Eurozone will have no future. Convening a broad council of European trade unions and left-wing parties to prepare a debt conference resembling the one which brought about debt relief for Germany following 1949 could indeed represent an important political signal in this direction.

That said, it would still only constitute an initial step towards more far-reaching, fundamental changes. Which forces could seize windows of opportunity to initiate a democratic transformation that overcomes capitalism? A four-camp heuristic as suggested by Immanuel Wallerstein may serve as a basic point of orientation. Wallerstein distinguishes between the forces of the ‘Spirit of Davos’ and those of the ‘Spirit of Porto Alegre’. He attributes the ‘Spirit of Davos’ to both camps of the ruling elites, who stand for a repressive variant of society (scenario one) or a vision of green capitalism (scenario two), respectively. Ultimately, both wish to preserve the main features of the old system (hierarchical structure, exploitation, social polarisation), be it through repression or via reforms and innovations. The oppositional ‘Spirit of Porto Alegre’ also contains two camps, both of which seek distinct paths towards a new society – a society that is relatively democratic and egalitarian and has not yet existed in human history (scenario three). Within this group of subaltern forces, Wallerstein makes a distinction between one camp which stands in (or at least leans towards) the tradition and continuation of the old Left and labour movement (vertical organisation of the struggle for power) and another camp of libertarian currents and movements which instead places its focus on self-organisation (functional decentralisation) and fundamentally rejects economic growth as a goal of emancipatory politics (Wallerstein 2014: 45 f.).

The four-camp schematic only provides a very rough orientation; it does, however, correspond to socio-structural reality. Wide sections of the finance-capitalist elite and their associated ‘service classes’ can be assigned to the repressive and radical free-market camp. The reform camp includes cultural elites and those sections of the middle classes who reproduce primarily via the acquisition of academic titles. The still relatively integrated working classes (the core workforces in the export industries, for example) largely belong to the progressive productivist camp. The growth-critical camp in turn is largely composed of a

socially and ethnically heterogeneous precariat, which resembles more a loose coupling of different class factions rather than a 'class in the making' (Standing 2014: 31).

Social changes that affect the systemic core of capitalism will likely require cross-camp alliances. It will not suffice to bring both camps of the 'Spirit of Porto Alegre' into a mutual dialogue – though this alone may already prove very difficult indeed. The struggle for hegemony in the affluent societies can only be waged successfully by the subaltern camp if it integrates camps from within the ruling elite that are willing to implement reforms. Basically, each of these groups of forces represents the apex of a 'magical triangle' of anti-capitalism – socio-ecological innovations (green capitalism of the ruling classes), substantive equality (the camp of reform-oriented progressive productivism) and a break with systemic growth compulsions (the libertarian camp of self-organisation, decentralisation, sufficiency and ecological revolution). Radical democracy, as it were, represents the common field of reference in which tensions arising between non-compatible objectives and preferences within the triangle must be reconciled. An historical bloc of social forces and political formations seeking to overcome capitalism in favour of a better social order will not act according to the politically disastrous pattern of 'class against class'. Such a reductionism ignores that classes as such can never act, as they are not homogeneous collective subjects. Those who act are representatives of different classes, social movements, parties, trade unions, NGOs, women's movements, migrant federations and other social actors, but are ultimately individuals capable of making their own decisions. Having said that, these actors never actually act on behalf of 'pure' class interests, but rather based on their own convictions, value judgements, notions of justice, multi-layered everyday philosophies, all in a context of diverging lines of conflict. It should, however, be added that cross-camp or cross-class alliances forming an historical bloc also require a 'spirit of separation' (Antonio Gramsci). They must act as real antagonists in order to actually challenge the power elites from the repressive camp. How could this succeed? A satisfactory answer is not so simple. Nevertheless, with view to the expansive dynamic and destructive force of capitalist *Landnahmen*, I would like to propose four core projects which taken together aim to destroy the modus operandi of capitalist *Landnahmen* so as to replace it with other, more democratic coordination mechanisms.

The *first core project* is one that is both ideological in a positive sense and provides orientation. It aims at a gradual replacement of the still hegemonic spirit of expansive and competitive growth capitalism. Attempts at a collective understanding as to what the right to a good life could look like, a Buen Vivir (Acosta 2015), by all means point in the right direction. Public debates about the right to a good life may prove instrumental in reclaiming

the utopian dimension of political action which the political Left has lost, at least since the collapse of the eastern European state socialisms (ibid., p. 45). Blueprints for a good life, as diverse as they may be, form the basis for an already widespread everyday critique of the ‘always more and never enough’ attitude which members of all camps recognise from the workplace, but also from other areas of life. A principle of competition which has taken on a life of its own is identified as the main driving force of society, the destructive impact of which is felt in different contexts. This expansive principle of competition is known, for instance, from workplace routines and is described and criticised by workers and employees in various ways. One characteristic experience is that every ‘victory’ in the game of competition is only temporary. As soon as a competitive advantage has been achieved, the company already announces a subsequent rationalisation programme. Once more, the company needs to improve its competitive position, and once more this means that work must be completed even more quickly and efficiently. The insatiability of competition penetrates all spheres of society and is even encroaching on the lives of children and adolescents. Society seems to have degenerated into an accumulation of individual contests; the principle of competition appears insatiable. It permanently produces winners and losers. It takes effect in more or less all social spaces of experience and limits the quality of life, even in the eyes of executive managers, to an almost unbearable extent (Dörre/Happ/Matuschek 2013).

This everyday critique of the principle of competition represents a bridge between individual experience and subjective images of society. Additionally, this cognitive bridge mediates between experiences in the ‘small world’ of the workplace, the private world of the family, and attitudes towards the ‘outer world of society’ (compare Dörre/Holst/Matuschek 2014: 543-554). Yet this ‘spirit of the right to a good life’ will only become an antagonistic force capable of changing society if it attacks competitive growth capitalism for what it really is – an order of exploitation which makes (self-)alienation and subordination to the abstract purpose of capital production the precondition for participating in society. The problematic of exploitation, however, will have to be reformulated to match contemporary conditions if it is to serve as an effective mobilising issue. Tackling this problem is the task of the *second core project* which seeks to overcome both primary and secondary forms of exploitation by creating new forms of social ownership. If relations of power and exploitation are to be seriously engaged with, then it is imperative to make a distinction between labour power and a multiplicity of labour capacities. Paid wage labour, unpaid care work, pro-active self-directed labour, and activities exclusively in pursuit of individual self-fulfilment all represent distinct labour (or action) capacities, respectively. These must be linked to one another within

a ‘balance economy’ and coordinated through navigational labour (*Steuerungsarbeit*) (Negt and Kluge, 2014). A loss of control due to such an occupation occurs socially, sector by sector, organisationally as well as individually every time material and time resources necessary for balancing out the different labour capacities are withdrawn. Negt and Kluge speak of a ‘balance imperialism’ that operates via the ‘withdrawal of coordinating energies’ (Negt and Kluge, 2014). It is precisely this coordination imperialism that lies at the heart of the *Landnahme* of the social outlined here. As a result of the demands of flexible production and reproduction, ever more activity is required to coordinate various spheres of life and work activities. From this need arises an exploitation problematic that goes beyond the private appropriation of unpaid work time within the capitalist production process. The compulsions created by flexible modes of production and their time regimes seize upon and privatise unpaid navigational labour, which in turn becomes increasingly necessary as institutionally guaranteed social navigational labour – which would allow for a more long-term life planning – disappears. This problematic, the (secondary) exploitation of coordinating or navigational labour, should be at the heart of any contemporary critique of exploitation. Some sort of regulatory threshold, such as minimum wages and/or unconditional basic income, will mitigate this problematic at best. The new relations of exploitation can only be ended if the heteronomy in the productive sector and the latter’s dominance over other spheres of life is successively limited.

In order to achieve all this, we cannot avoid posing the question of ownership, albeit in a new way. Both capitalist private ownership of the means of production as well as socialist state ownership have proven inadequate to cope with the major challenges facing society. That is why particularly in society’s key sectors (energy and water management, financial sector, and soon agriculture) we require new forms of collective ownership that turn employees into co-owners. In the longer term, large corporations – seeing as they already function as social institutions – ought to be transformed into employee-owned companies subject to a democratically legitimated collective will. That said, we can already find some forms of collective self-ownership today (Wesche 2014) – energy cooperatives, self-help networks, non-profit organisations and the initial steps already being taken towards a solidary economy. Just as in the debate about the commons (Helfrich 2014), such organisational forms articulate a social desire for new forms of ownership – forms which combine collectivity and individual claims to ownership and which integrate individual property into social property in a way that does not dissolve individual ownership entirely.

New forms of social self-ownership require – this constitutes the *third core project* – a democratic mode of regulation which could be described as New Economic Democracy (Urban 2013b, Dörre 2012b). Concepts of economic democracy add at least three pillars to the new forms of ownership: (1) An expansion of direct democratic participation of workers and employees at all levels of decision-making in economic organisations, (2) the facilitation of a true market economy in the area of petty commodity production, but also as coordination mechanism for employee-owned companies, as well as (3) an inductive democratic framework for planning development including voting on alternative plans in the form of universal, equal and free elections, which at the same time does not suffocate decentral actors' activities but keeps them within sensible action corridors through the use of incentives and sanctions. Without such planning elements as, for instance, emission accounts resp. balance sheets (as an instrument for capping and reducing greenhouse gases), the urgently needed replacement of fossil fuels with renewable energy sources will be just as unreachable as the no less urgent need to use finite natural resources in a more sustainable manner. Such a development planning may indeed require material sacrifices and the curtailing of individual negative freedoms – this can only be legitimate, however, if the respective decisions are taken in a democratic manner and with maximum participation at the various levels of region, community, company, workplace. In an economy planned in such a way and simultaneously coordinated in a decentralised manner, markets may still function as an important allocation mechanism. There may also still be companies who continue to pursue profit. But democratic coordination of the economy would subordinate them to a social order that would no longer be capitalist.

A new economic democracy would have to – as a *fourth core project* – promote sharing and redistribution. When posing the ownership question anew in this urgently needed debate, it makes sense to do so in terms of tax policy as well, as Thomas Piketty has suggested. Progressive taxation, particularly an inheritance tax, would turn the right to own property into a temporary right. This logic, which proceeds from the assumption that property owners also carry a social responsibility, would make various policies of gradually implementing redistributive measures conceivable: a tax on fossil fuel profits, redistribution of global oil revenues, political control of sovereign wealth funds (SWF), a progressive income tax, democratically managed central banks, global and transparent tax administration, a onetime capital levy on all owners of significant financial wealth, and the use of the funds gathered from said levy to pay for global investments in climate protection, fighting hunger and absolute poverty, opening up access to basic goods such as primary education in the countries

of the Global South. The fact that such measures were not implemented a long time ago is due less to any kind of steel cage of political bondage that forecloses social change than to a lack of political will (Piketty 2014b: 72).

Nevertheless: starting points for all of the core projects of a transformative anti-capitalist strategy described here can be found in contemporary societies. If combined, even the partial realisation of just some of the mentioned goals would already lead to changes in society. The critique of the capitalist treadmill subverts the ideology of limitless growth and insatiable competition. It motivates resistance in everyday life and strengthens the legitimacy of non-capitalist milieus. Re-distribution and a culture of ‘substantive equality’ increase overall willingness to share with others. This is particularly essential with regard to Europe, for the European project only has a future if it is based on the conviction that the stronger economies should support the weaker ones. ‘Support’ means providing the necessary funds to rebuild devastated crisis economies. Initial steps towards social self-ownership and democratic control of the economy may help generate a social order of solidary cooperation which initially helps to limit the appeal of the capitalist principle of profit so as to eventually dominate it entirely.

Each of the projects mentioned here leaves enough leeway for a democratic experimentalism that explores different paths towards – let us call by its name – democratic and socialist post-growth societies. This would be a neo-socialist perspective which, as Erik Olin Wright argues (2010), would entail the strengthening of social power *vis-a-vis* economic or state power and thus an expansion of democracy in society more generally. The prospects for a neo-socialist society beyond growth imperatives and the diktat of competition may not look particularly good at the moment. In order to even aim for such a society, however, there is one thing that is utterly necessary among the fragmented Left: the tendency towards sectarianism and the proclamation of eternal truths must end. Socialist politics can take place in many social fields. It can start from a critique of destructive lifestyles just as well as from conflicts over wages or practical assistance to refugees from the Global South. It is possible in opposition as well as from the government bench. What is crucial is that it is conceived of as the undertaking of a transformative process that aims to transcend. Behind the demands for higher pay, say, by striking child care workers in Germany lies the desire for appreciation and social recognition of their activities. This desire ultimately aspires to a fundamental reshaping of society, its reproductive sector and the funding thereof. To realise this goal is not only important for the women and migrants working in this sector, but is also in the interests of the parents and children involved. To point out these connections means engaging in transformative socialist

politics. And it is certainly better to practise such a politics than to go down without a fight in the face of a system whose gradual decay is increasingly eroding the material basis of any potential course correction towards a 'betterment of society'. A plural Left that is nevertheless tied together by common projects and which learns this lesson has the future on its side. Should sectarianism, isolation and dogmatism continue, however, then even a dying capitalism will survive the neo-socialist option that is plausible today.