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On Pessimism and Optimism in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic

The global crisis caused by the SARS-Cov-2 virus pandemic can be seen in different ways. Some see it as an inevitable catastrophe: whether they perceive it as God's punishment for our sins or as a revenge of our planet for the misdeeds of the human race. On the other hand, some see it as an opportunity: whether to enlarge the scope and profitability of their businesses or to expand their influence and power. However, as any other kind of crisis, this one also represents a turning point; and so for most people it is becoming clear that the manner in which it is going to be resolved is crucial for the future of all of us. Thus, the burning question is: are we supposed to be pessimistic or optimistic about its resolution? Since the outcomes are never given in advance, it might be wise to seek an answer in the famous motto of Antonio Gramsci: pessimism of the intellect – optimism of the will. He used this maxim in a letter to his brother while he was incarcerated, and since we all feel more or less imprisoned, maybe we can now understand it better. Therefore, it would be useful to revisit the entire passage from that letter:

[Y]ou were in the war... It seems to me that in similar circumstances, a man ought to be so deeply convinced that the source of his own moral forces is in himself – his own energy and will, the iron coherence of ends and means – that he never despairs and never falls into those vulgar, banal moods, pessimism and optimism. My own state of mind synthesizes these two feelings and transcends them: my mind is pessimistic, but my will is optimistic. Whatever the situation, I imagine the worst that could happen in order to summon up all my reserves of willpower to overcome each and every obstacle. Since I never build up illusions, I am seldom disappointed. I've always been armed with unlimited patience – not a passive, inert kind, but a patience allied with perseverance.

(Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, Quartet Books, London, Melbourne and New York, 1979, p. 159)

Although it can be said that today the whole of humanity is waging a war against one virus, this is not entirely accurate. It would be more precise to say that there is a war against the spread of the virus as well as a struggle to find cures and vaccines that would enable the human immune system to fight it efficiently. We are all, whether we like it or not, participants in this war; and yet we don't participate in it equally. Some of us are on the front line: they are nowadays called "necessary" workers. However, those immediately exposed to contagion also include large numbers of people who cannot afford the luxury of isolation: whether because they are compelled to work for their basic needs or because they have no adequate housing, food supplies or access to running water. Still, those at the rear have also an important task in this war: to protect those at the front by keeping a safe physical distance – not the much-misused social one – and wearing protective masks and gloves. The motivation for such behavior doesn't have to be altruistic at all. Quite the contrary, it can be entirely self-interested: fewer infected people means a smaller possibility for each one of us to contract the disease.

However, alongside this anti-viral war, the whole of humanity is taking part in a war that has been raging for centuries now: the socio-economic one. It is obvious since all economic experts, all chambers of commerce and almost all governments are warning us that this is not only a health or medical crisis but also an economic one. Such types of crises are enabling us to see more clearly the true nature of capitalist economic – and social – system. The manner in which the 2008 financial crisis was resolved leaves no doubt that those at the top will try not only to defend but also to enlarge their privileges in today's situation. Then established bail-out strategies are promptly being employed today, and almost all governments implement them as one of the first measures taken alongside more or less pronounced restrictions of freedom of movement. Given that politicians and business elites are almost everywhere across the neoliberal world representatives of the same narrow private interest, it is obvious that those decisions are made from the standpoint of those in control of economic and monetary flows. But, when constituents hear that their elected representatives are putting the economy before the protection of lives – even when they solemnly swear that it is in our best interest, since "we all depend on each other" (sic!), then that socio-economic class war becomes glaringly

evident. Nevertheless, there are some other kinds of government ordinances, such as one-time financial aid to all citizens or various social services, which show the outcome of that war is not given in advance. Currently there is a rise in the number and success of strikes and worker's demands on different levels and various branches of economy, as well as many examples of employer's pressures ranging from verbal threats to outright repression. This goes to show that the bargaining position of the working class is improving after quite a long time. So it is clear that the course of the class war can be changed. But does that give us the right to hope that it will end resulting in a change of the existing socio-economic system? Can anyone be that much of an optimist? Or is hope of such radical change really something so unattainable and utterly utopian that it only covers up our fundamental pessimism?

This kind of manifest and superficial optimism barely hiding a deep-seated pessimism that Gramsci terms as a "vulgar and banal" state of mind is precisely what we now have to overcome. However, in the present state of affairs it is very hard to keep a cool head and think through the pressing issues, because we all feel the same fear: the one that comes from the sense of an immediately life-threatening situation. That rationally perceived fear warns us not only of the possibility that we might die from contagion, but also, even though we may avoid it, that we might be left without the means of subsistence. A lot of people when faced with such fear easily slip into a state of panic and find themselves unable to see any way out. Anyone who feels cornered in this way can only react with aggression – mostly turning to rage and hatred towards those which are least responsible for their situation (thus we have a growth in domestic violence, chauvinism and racism). Nevertheless, since we are all potentially able to rationally assess the possibilities of infection spread and the ways to protect against it, we should also be able to assess the possibilities of development of the ongoing crisis of capitalism and the ways in which it can be resolved. According to Gramsci, "pessimism of the intellect" refers to taking into account all possible outcomes, even the worst ones. Certainly, that does not free us from fear, but it surely enables us to rationally comprehend its form and scope. This may save us from disillusionment as well prompt us to get rid of some of our illusions. However, Gramsci is clearly stating that there cannot be any optimism unless we have a

clear vision of our goals, and the question of setting up our objectives is not only the most important political, but also an existential, question for the majority of humanity.

The ongoing crisis is – once again! – enabling us to confirm that neoliberal capitalism as today’s dominant economic and social principle is the primary source of catastrophic effects not only on healthcare and welfare systems but also on the entire ecology of our planet. Although demands for something that is called “democratic socialism” have been in circulation for some time now, the present situation shows that they are not necessarily limited to “retrograde leftists” or “cultural Marxists”. It is now clearer than ever that necessary medical and other kinds of systemic help can be organized only by one entity – the state. Nevertheless, since almost all contemporary states are based on capitalist privatization of all the branches of economy regulated solely by market competition with profit being its driving force, we cannot count on them to put health and material wellbeing of the people before the dictates of profit. The fact that some governments are planning to offer one-time financial assistance, even with hints of introducing a universal basic income, doesn’t mean that those countries are on the road to some kind of socialism. On the contrary, those measures are more about their attempts to prevent a more generalized discontent and mass disobedience. It is enough to compare such relief measures with the billions thrown at corporations to understand that the former are no more than crumbs tossed down from the dining tables of the rich. In addition to that, as the results of the 2008 financial crisis have unequivocally shown, not only will ordinary people have to pay for both of those kinds of state assistance, but neoliberal austerity measures will continue to be enforced even more savagely. In opposition to this kind of policies there are growing demands for a very different state intervention that would nationalize today’s key spheres from healthcare, pharmaceutical production and medical supplies via water and electricity utilities to delivery services and internet access. Historical examples of New Deal and post-war Europe are reminders that the nationalization of key branches of economy does not represent a transition to socialism per se. Nevertheless, these and other examples of the existence of a social or welfare state in capitalism were not only consequences of crises of capitalism, but moreover the result of the numerousness and strength of economic and political organizations of the working

class – i.e. various wage laborers. Thus, unionizing and creating political organizations of workers represents an efficient way to compel the state to begin its transformation from a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie (as Engels put it almost 150 years ago) to a democratically controlled board for managing common affairs of all the people – which is exactly what it is nominally supposed to be.

Nevertheless, the establishment of a system of social justice means that the state must take redistributive measures for which nowadays there is not even a hint, because almost no government of any developed country dares to introduce progressive tax systems or, at least, excess profits tax. Likewise, almost no government in developing – the so-called emerging market – countries dares to abandon the strategies for attracting foreign direct investments championed by the IMF. Although such taxing models were employed in the historical examples mentioned above, the dominant neoliberal dogma dismisses them as the worst kind of heresy. Thus, not only do we have to be conscious that the struggle for redistributive justice will be complex and uncertain, but we also need to be especially aware of the things that we can do personally in this historic moment outside the state. In addition to the manifest forms of solidarity such as applauding or making noise for medical and other necessary workers, we need concrete acts of solidarity now. They are pointing to what is nowadays called “commonism” or to the centuries-long ideas of communism. Local ties created by individual acts of mutual help, as well as transnational acts created by global solidarity networks, make notions of the common good and commons more comprehensible and even more *tangible*. Thus, initiating and taking part in various self-organized actions represents our most immediate task. In that way, we can surpass our fear for bare existence not only because then we can really feel together in all of this, but also because we can rely on the concrete help of others—just as they can count on ours. As a result, we can truly achieve what Gramsci describes as the highest state of cheerful “perseverance”: the deepest conviction that each one of us possesses within herself/himself a source of will for collective action and that everything depends on our deeds of mutual help and care. This also means that everything, in the last instance, depends on our energy and our will to consistently persist in our shared goals and

collectively chosen means of their achievement. Only in this way can we never again fall into despair and “those vulgar, banal moods, pessimism and optimism.”

This text is a translation of “COVID-19 i ko šta vidi: O pesimizmu i optimizmu u vreme pandemije”, *Beton* no. 218 (<https://www.elektrobeton.net/mikser/covid-19-i-ko-sta-vidi-o-pesimizmu-i-optimizmu-u-vreme-pandemije/>)