

CAPITALISM AND UTOPIA IN THE SOCIAL THEORY OF ANDRÉ GORZ

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Some recurring themes in contemporary social theory are the themes of modernity, rationality, and capitalism. Among several other themes, these refer to the central problems of contemporary society. André Gorz is among those thinkers who, while trying to understand the transformations of capitalism, is included in a type of thinking, recurrent in contemporary social theory, marked by an inheritance normative of modernity, which we can also designate as the quest for human emancipation.

Gorz's interpretation of Marx's thought is included in this attempt at a theory with normative content, but does not exclude the presence of other influences, as distinct as Weber, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. The work category, which has reached in contemporary sociology the status of an effectively central problem for both contemporary theory and political practice, is present in the various moments of Gorz's thought-making, and here we will emphasize some works that go from *Adeus ao Proletariado* (1987) to *O Imaterial* (2003 b).

In Gorz's later books it is possible to grasp elaborate thinking about the present stage of capitalism as well as a social theory aimed at understanding the transformations of Western society. But unlike other theorists of contemporary society, such as Habermas, Bourdieu, Giddens, Beck, and many others, Gorz's thinking has manifested, over the past twenty-five years, the insistence on the need for a more accurate understanding of the role of human labour in the constitution of advanced capitalism. Gorz's contributions to the sociology of work has a wide range of analysis that allows us to understand him as one of the main theorists of contemporary society and capitalism.

Unlike many authors who remain attached only to Marx's thought to understand capitalism, Gorz also uses Weber, as Habermas did, to show that both human work as a sociological category and the mechanisms of the historical development of capitalism, have to be marked out by those two exponents of classical social theory, thus moving away from a certain

dogmatism still reigning among those who claim to be orthodox Marxists. The influence of Weber on Gorzian construction is manifested at different times, but it is quite clear when we bring to the centre of the debate the concepts of modernity and rationality as fundamental to understanding contemporary society.

Faced with those who defend the centrality of work in the constitution of capitalism, Gorz presents a position that moves from an anthropological approach of human work to situate it as a historical and analytical problematic, implying this position both in a confluence and in a criticism of one's own thinking. It is in this way that work, as a specific manifestation of human action, must first be understood within the historical frameworks of development of modern industrial society, which in its turn can only have its full sociological elucidation when undissociated from the understanding of the role of rationality and rationalization in its constitution. In other words, to understand the work is to enter the debate about modernity itself and the role of rationality in its formation.

Although we know that since the *A Ética Protestante* (Weber 1982) and *Economía y Sociedad* (Weber 1969) the understanding of rational action has moved to the center of any elaborate interpretation of capitalism, this reception of Weber, especially among those who study sociology of the work, continues to support certain theoretical difficulties that begin in the first quarter of the century. These have been sharpened in the last three decades. Such difficulties relate, on the one hand, to how to understand social classes in an advanced capitalism, and on the other, due to a rationality that has overshadowed the subject, how to think of any utopia in the face of an omnipresent capitalist domination.

In thinking about human emancipation, Gorz is confronted with a difficulty that has arisen in critical social theory for more than fifty years, especially the Marxist tradition, which is the need to understand the historical destiny of the modern industrial proletariat, especially in the last three decades.

At the epicentre of the emancipatory project and Marx's social theory, the proletariat loses in this historical period not only its status as a collective subject necessarily destined to revolutionize the relations of production, in what refers primarily to the transformative consciousness of the working class, it is difficult to

identify the proletariat itself as a structurally identifiable class in capitalist economic relations. Thinking about the proletariat under the new conditions of capitalism implies understanding the transformations that exist in the world of work and the new forms of domination that accompany such transformations. The accelerated advance of the productive forces and the emergence of post-industrial capitalism are the well-known manifestations of such changes, but their consequences and the possibility of thinking about a new utopia, consists in the first place, in the way in which Gorz interprets the modern society and capitalism.

Like Habermas (1987), capitalism is understood not only as the commodity-producing system whose purpose is the private appropriation of wealth, but as the kind of rationality that accompanies it, rendered irrational, concerning the role of development of modernity. Marx conceived of human labour as the ontological core through which we learn not only the realm of necessity and the processes of domination, but also as the starting point for thinking about emancipation and human freedom. Gorz, like Hannah Arendt (Gorz 2004), shows us that all economic work is characterized by a specific form of rationality, always geared towards the market or the exchange value. This means that all economic work is intended for heteronomy. In this case, the well-known theory of instrumental rationality resurfaces in Gorz's thinking as a comprehensive nucleus of human action within the framework of the civilizational process itself. It is no longer enough to think of human emancipation only as the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and the construction of a socialist society guided by the collective appropriation of such means; the emancipation passes through the abolition of the own work like the articulating nucleus of the human sociability.

The phenomenon of alienation is no longer understood only as the inherent contradiction of the process of wage labour, but heteronomy refers to the type of rationalization that accompanies work with economic purpose, whether salaried or not. As we shall see in the current stage of western societies, there is an intense modification of labour relations in the very constitution of capitalism. For Gorz there is a complete antinomy between work and autonomy, and the latter can only be found in activities that take

place outside this rationality. As we shall see next, this rationalization in 21st century capitalism points to the prominence of immaterial labour, which concomitantly manifests a new stage of capitalism and an exacerbation of that rationality, or irrationality, which accompanies modernity.

The book *Adeus ao Proletariado* (Gorz 1987), after twenty-five years of its publication, has to be seen not only as a provocative thesis to those who believed, and of many who still believe, in a working class that is capable of constituting itself as a collective subject that appropriates power. Over the last twenty years Gorz's thought has matured to understand the current stage of modernity and the reasons for the crisis and overcoming of capitalism. The crisis of modernity, in this sense, is not only a crisis of reason, but of the historical options that present themselves in the face of forms of domination that go beyond wage labour, the fetishism of the commodity and of the social classes themselves.

Going along a theoretical path of his own, Gorz approaches the central theses that characterized the critical theory of the *Frankfurt School*, that is, the articulation between rationality, modernity, and domination, as the guiding axes of contemporary capitalism. But different from those, Gorz insists on the urgent need to understand the role of labour in the mutation of capitalism, and especially in the need to start from this understanding, to elaborate a utopia different from that which has always encouraged the Marxist tradition, and at the same time does not refer us to different forms of pessimism, quite in vogue in contemporary social theory, especially from post-structuralist and postmodernist perspectives.

When the main leaders of the Russian Revolution came to power, they kept the same parameters of social division of labour and ideologization of productivity at work as a condition for the construction of a new society in the structure of socialist industrial production, somehow they were reaffirming ideology of labour as domination of nature by man, where the suppression of capitalist economic relations would be a firm step towards the constitution of a society without the force of alienated labour. However, the Gorzian thesis of economic rationalization shows us that it is labour itself, capitalist or socialist, when sustained by an economic purpose that engenders heteronomy and limitation of

the freedom of individuals. A liberated society necessarily passes through the abolition of labour itself, or more feasibly, through its gradual reduction, until human beings can produce their lives through a different rationality.

By the late 1970s, Gorz had clearly detected the unsustainability of a syndicalism and a "left" political practice in which the socialist utopia remained virtually unchanged in relation to the ideals forged at the end of the 20th century. The theoretical core of such criticism reaffirmed a problematic already in vogue since Adorno and Horkheimer (1985); that capitalist domination no longer has its exclusive foundation in class domination, but capitalist domination can only be understood, especially in advanced capitalism, as something that refers to the specific movements of economic rationality.

For Marx, capitalist domination is fundamentally class domination. The proletarian is the waged worker who produces the capitalist wealth and finds himself left out of the result of his work as well as the way in which he is constituted. This class domination, and concomitant alienation of the proletariat, is understandable within the framework of a theory of value. What constitutes value in turn is the human labour time employed in the production of commodities. It is known, then, that it is the working time that measures the value of the commodity, constituted of the abstract work, and that it provides the formation of surplus value. For Marx, in short, it is the time of human labour employed in the production of commodities, the founding nucleus of capitalist wealth itself.

Time for Marx thus appears not only as an abstraction that operates at the level of a Philosophy of History and through which it is possible to speculate on the course of humanity, or as in Hegel's case, of the Spirit, but time is a category of political economy, something whose objectivity manifests itself through the human *praxis* that forms a materialistically interpreted history, an objectivity that is expressed by human action, which is inseparable from the very concept of value. Time is thus a category of social theory and the understanding core of capitalist society.

Gorz (1985, 2003b) will seek in the *Grundrisse* of Marx elements of a critique of capitalism that in many

ways anticipates the current tendencies of capitalism, while at the same time modifying classical reflection on temporality, as in the case of the emergence of a production of value that no longer values labour, but value-knowledge. For the moment, it is only necessary to look at the fact that both in the sphere of industrial society and in what is now called postindustrial, the question of time and temporality plays a fundamental role in Gorz's social theory, and remains something possible of a deeper treatment by sociological theory.

It is not only a critique of the Philosophy of Marxian History, which resorts to human work to found, by the notion of proletariat, the figure of a human redemption associated with non-alienated work, but there are also other aspects through which temporality is central to Gorz's investigations.

On the one hand, on the level of political economy itself, the way in which time is the condition for the creation of value and wealth, but on the other hand, time also refers to an effort to understand human actions in a spectrum of experiences which are also constitutive of capitalism. Human actions that take place outside of experience and working time, situated in what Gorz and Habermas call the world of life, will be the condition of possibility to think of human emancipation. It is in this way that thinking about the category of "time" is shown as theoretically relevant to understand what Gorz understands by autonomy, and in what way we can still constitute a utopia.

In elaborating a theory based on a dual view of society, Gorz states that working time, such as the time workers spend in the factory, is the measure not only of value creation, as is clear in Marxian thought, but it also propitiates the heteronomy of individuals, especially workers. From *Adeus ao Proletariado*, Gorz goes on to argue that emancipation is no longer a liberation at work but a liberation from work. The rupture of that process which Marx and Gorz himself saw as alienation can no longer be achieved by starting from working time, but rather from the time of non-work, as well as that work which can no longer be measured temporarily (Gorz 2003b, 25).

This also indicates that autonomy must be sought in a cultural sphere where ethical values and standards that set limits and hamper the power of economic rationality are erected; the heteronomy that characterizes it

cannot be completely eliminated, but diminished, in that it reduces working time, without evidently reducing income.

Gorz understands that a new utopia must be elaborated based on two fundamental axes: the reduction of working time and the possibility of a universal minimum income. The quest for such a utopia no longer passes for the supposed proletariat as the subject of transformation history, as Gorz believed in an earlier stage of his thinking. But there are other convictions in his thinking that have not changed much over the past thirty years, and such are concerned with the influence of phenomenology on his conception of society. We defend here the idea that the question of temporality manifests itself through a phenomenological bias that marks the whole theoretical production of Gorz.

Time is treated not only as the measurable economic category of value production, as it is apprehensible in the critique of Marxian political economy, but is also dimensioned as a philosophical category, as a parameter through which human existence and freedom are thought. Time at work is for Gorz who imprisons and produces heteronomy, and free time that opens many possibilities of a life endowed with meaning.

The time of not working is filled by activities such as leisure, sports, family experiences, cooperative actions, etc., or even by work activities that do not have the purpose of creating value. Just as Marx had alluded to the possibilities that open up in a society that would break with the capitalist division of labour (Marx 1986), Gorz maintains that a future society capable of autonomy must provide individuals with an expanded possibility of experiencing of non-work.

Although not made explicit by Gorz, his conception of autonomy also refers to the concept of experience, but the latter is thought of as a category that alternates between philosophical discourse, or existential phenomenology, and sociological discourse. It is about thinking what is happening in the world of life. Unlike Habermas who thinks the world of life as the place where individuals, in the dimensions of society, culture and personality, intersubjectively share patterns of values that make mutual understanding possible, for Gorz the world of life expresses certain lived experiences that are not always apprehensible by sociological categories.

The world of life is not, therefore, that sphere of action in which spontaneous interactions are based on the solidity of normative standards bequeathed by modernity, but it is the time and space of life in which social integration, as opposed to functional integration, is mediated by the conflict between individual behaviours and institutionalized norms. The influences of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre are manifested in Gorz. The notion of autonomy of the individual assumes a character not only of Kantian or Marxian character, to recall two milestones of enlightenment also present in Gorz, but emphatically a perspective of phenomenology. That is, the freedom of individuals does not depend solely on principles of universal rationality, or a change in the mode of production, but that individual and everyday experience must also be open to experiences of nonconformity not subsumed by institutionalized rationality patterns (Gorz 2003a, 171).

It is through experiences not only collective but also singular and existential that individuals experience expressions of nonconformity in the face of the omnipresent power of economic rationality. The more extensive, therefore, the time of non-work, the greater the possibilities of becoming autonomous subjects, as occurs in the conception of Habermas, but with different characteristics, because for Gorz the world of life makes possible the formation of an ethics and a culture not determined by functional integration processes.

The difference between the *Lebenswelt* of Gorz and Habermas is largely a questioning of the very scope of sociology as a science, in its capacity to grasp the fullness of the social phenomena that take place in this sphere. The apprehension of such experiences for a social theory, in a certain sense, incurs a revitalization of the philosophy of existentialism when the problematic in question ultimately deals with the problem of human freedom.

As in Adorno's social theory, where singular experiences manifest almost unconscious examples of resistance to the administered world, the Gorzian utopia presupposes individual experiences as the index of a possible autonomy. It happens that in both cases mediated by quite different theoretical foundations, in which the epistemological bases that inform the thought of Gorz are much closer to the phenomenology than of the dialectical tradition, but where also, by

means of a Habermasian look, for example, this type of conception is not only a sociological deficit, but also a normative one, when we think of the possibilities of political unfolding of such actions.

However, unlike thinkers such as Adorno and Horkheimer, this Gorzian valuation of individual experiences does not invalidate the elaboration of a political project that proposes structural reforms for society, claims that can and should also be sustained by collective actions and demands. On the contrary, Gorz's whole social theory is based on the proposition of political alternatives aiming at the constitution of a new utopia, in which this reduction of working time and the existence of a basic universal income are indispensable questions as to the possibility of a society autonomous, and that in a way, could be already in gestation in the society of immaterial labour.

Is there room for some sort of utopia in the phase of cognitive capitalism and immaterial labour? Probably, responding to the problem of utopia has become even more difficult in the face of the current mutations of capitalism, and it is precisely from such mutations that Gorz engages in his latest book, *O Imaterial*. If *Adeus ao Proletariado* represented a modification in the author's positions, *O Imaterial* may represent a new kind of change.

Gorz's social theory has been shown at different moments as an effort to understand the transformations that are taking place in capitalism in recent decades. Such transformations in their most recent form have received from Gorz, as well as authors such as Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt and Maurizio Lazaratto the designation of cognitive capitalism, or more precisely, a capitalism founded on immaterial labour.

For Gorz, immaterial labour is increasingly replacing the material production of goods and commodities, causing the whole scope of the critique of Marxian political economy, the value theory, to be questioned at its fundamental core, precisely the time of labour as the basis of value. The changes analyzed by Gorz significantly alter not only the use of Marxian categories, but according to our understanding also the thought of Gorz himself.

The immaterial work represents the set of activities of both industry and services that are guided by activities of cooperation, communication and use of

the intellect that has in knowledge its fundamental basis. Thus, in Gorz's view, in a phase of capitalism in which knowledge is the central element of production "in the knowledge economy, all work, whether in industrial production or in the service sector contains a component of knowledge whose importance is growing" (Gorz 2003b, 9). Within the framework of a phase of economic development that other authors also call post-industrial society (Bell 1999), cognitive capitalism imposes modifications first on the work category itself: "Under these conditions, work, which since Adam Smith is taken as the substance of the value common to all commodities ceases to be measurable in units of time" (Bell 1999, 9).

The phase of capitalism that corresponds to immaterial labour stems from an exacerbation of economic rationality, especially regarding technological advancement, which leads to the limiting situation of challenging the very concept of "human." In a capitalism no longer focused on industrial production and the appropriation of working time, the processes of computerization and technological development go hand in hand with a dematerialization of society:

Capitalism dematerialized to a large extent the main productive forces: labor (and we are only at the beginning of this process) and fixed capital. The most important form of fixed capital is henceforth the stagnant and instantly available knowledge of information technologies, and the most important form of workforce is the intellect. [Gorz 2004, 13]

Knowledge and *savoir* become, for Gorz, the central nucleus in the production of capitalist wealth, where immaterial capital is rapidly replacing material fixed capital. A fundamental change concerns the very statute of capitalist domination at this stage, since it ceases to be centred on the modern figure of wage labour giving rise to a prominence of human capital. Here, we no longer deal with the worker who sells his work force and is alienated in this process, but with the worker who must acquire a set of knowledge and competences that refer to the daily life itself; that is, the qualifications that relate not only to working time but *savoirs* that goes on to include non-work time, free time.

Instead of the proletariat, the end of the labour society brings to the surface the figure of the entrepre-

neur of himself, of the individual who can only occupy a place in the market insofar as he deals with competences that lead to the plane of his own individuality characteristic of a company, configuring what Gorz calls "I Business Corporation". The self-entrepreneur is the manifestation of human capital, which refers to the different human capacities and largely informal forms of *savoir* that individuals develop daily in processes of social interaction. But such *savoir* becomes appropriated by cognitive capitalism. It is in this sense that diversified preparatory courses, readable information in diverse readings, learning of other languages, domains of Internet use, rules of etiquette, knowledge of music, films and sports, knowledge of clothing patterns, diverse forms of leisure – and the list is almost endless – of individual activities developed outside working time that represent forms of personal and human learning that eventually become sources of productivity and value production appropriated by capital.

The use of intelligence, exponent for excellence of the immateriality of work, becomes the key element both for procedures proper to industrial production but also for other equally wealth-producing activities such as services, but also a whole multiplicity of activities shrouded in capitalist production that depends, as at no other time in the history of capitalism, on relative processes to consumption activities on the one hand, and the other on experiences that refer directly to everyday life, but represent a new manifestation of capital, intangible capital.

According to Gorz, the formation of the consumer through activities such as marketing and publicity, currently represent a more than considerable part of capitalist investments, insofar as the production of wealth depends directly on a subjectivity that no longer refers only to an alienation apprehensible in time and space of work, but a subjectivity that encompasses all daily life and life becoming the producer of wealth par excellence. It is no longer a result of the world of work, but rather the work that depends on a subjectivity forged in the world of life.

To deal with a theory appropriate to this phase of capitalism, Gorz uses Marx's *Grundrisse* to formulate his conceptual bases (Gorz 2003b, 15). The Marxian notion of *general intellect* already points to a possible exhaustion of value production through working time

and the amount of labour supplied (Marx 1989, 592), insofar as the advance of the productive forces, notably science and in the view of Marx himself, to occupy a central position in the productive process. Marx, therefore, foresaw a process of development of capitalism in which knowledge/*savoir* came to occupy the role of main productive force.

With the realization of a capitalism of the immaterial some questions hitherto crucial in Gorz's thought reach another level of problematization; until the book *Metamorfoses do Trabalho* (Gorz 2003a) working time was treated as the central element both for the production of value and for the production of heteronomy. In industrial capitalism, economic rationality must be limited to the detriment of an emancipatory policy that proposes the reduction of working time as a fundamental step for revolutionary reforms. In the economy of the immaterial, knowledge becomes the main productive force and manifests itself as something that cannot be measured; more than that, it is apprehensible in the dimension of everyday life, in the daily hours of non-work, in free time, becoming this time a producer of value-knowledge.

But if the free time, the cultural and daily experiences that make up the world of life are producers of a certain type of value, it also imposes economic rationality. We can remember, in a sense, what Habermas was talking about a colonization of the world of life (Habermas 1987). I understand that we still have a problematic point in Gorz's social theory with his last positions. That is, what experiences will guide the utopia of an autonomous society, since those experiences that until then could be treated as a source of autonomy have become value producers in the sense of economic rationality?

The fact is that, for Gorz, cognitive capitalism represents at the same time the crisis of capitalism. In his understanding, *savoir* cannot be apprehended as a commodity like any other, because by its specific characteristics it resists being treated as private property. Knowledge/*savoir* can be transmissible indefinitely and by its nature must be treated as a collective good because of collective work. *Cognitive* capitalism tries to take private ownership of this knowledge, which has become cultural or human capital, but at the same time it is possible to perceive movements, such

as free *software*, which point precisely to the difficulties of a capitalism that has knowledge as its principal value.

It is possible to conclude, then, that the reinvention of utopia for Gorz involves the proposition of measures relating to working time and universal basic income, but on the other hand, we are faced with two difficulties: the first concerns the fact that with the end of the proletariat another social stratum emerged in its place when we consider a capitalism that remains in its structure characterized by those who produce and those who appropriate wealth, but such a stratum is not visible as a proposer of the new utopia. The second inseparable question is that knowledge as the main producer of wealth has a communist potential, because it resists being privately appropriated, but at the same time it points to a subjectivity that, from the point of view of autonomous reflection, seems to be converging as never before in the history of capitalism to an absorption by the standards of economic rationality.

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