

Nations and Capitalism: a socio-historical perspective¹

It has become essential to explore the critical thinking behind globalisation, according to which the current economic processes are so unprecedented that the diverse forms of the political economy would be, generally speaking, of little help in understanding the current situation. This argument is hardly convincing; neglecting political processes is surely one of the causes. We will endeavour to understand the reasons behind these representations of the economy which overlook the question of hegemony. Quite apart from any denunciatory position, the hegemony of the United States is an undeniable fact, as was British hegemony. For those looking in from the outside, America (the United-States) and Great Britain still represent the path to universality and well-being. The lack of legitimacy of Capital and the fall of the rate of return towards the end of the 1960s certainly called this cultural characteristic into question. And yet, during the 1990s neoliberal practices propelled American policies across the globe like never before. However, at the start of the twenty-first century, the misguided strategy of the ruling class in the United States and its allies opened up, once again, the field of possibilities, as seen before in the 1930s and 1960s. The 2008 crisis of American Capital followed by the stagnation in Europe confirms this hypothesis. Donald Tusk, current President of the European Council, recognised this fact² in his comments regarding the battle of July 2015 looking to overthrow the Greek government who refused the deflationary policy imposed on the continent by the creditor nations (primarily Germany thanks to its neo-mercantilist policy).

We are driven by three convictions. Firstly, in an institutionalist fashion, we must rid ourselves of all teleology: this is a common thread which can be found in the work of such different thinkers as T. Veblen³ or K. Polanyi⁴. Then, it is useful to point out the weight of utopias in certain historical transformations, which is another attribute of the thinking developed by Polanyi and his school. Furthermore, it is necessary to refuse the naturalization of social processes, which inscribes us in Marxist intuition. It is therefore through a political economy *in* history that we wish to bring to light the periodization of capitalism, after having proposed the *possibility* of this. In some respects, the viewpoint developed here is partly in line with that which is sometimes referred to as “Political Marxism” in the sense that we believe that there is no such thing as a “mode of production” in opposition to social factors⁵. The early works of P. Dockès encourage us to recognise the importance of class struggles, beyond economic determinations, in order to explain the socio-economic dynamics. This Marxist debate of the 1970s, in which we see a sort of “politism” contrasted against a certain “economism”, must today be reformulated, and implies, as suggested by

¹ This paper has been translated from French by Elizabeth Daw. This text draws inspiration from the article appearing in the publication *Actuel Marx* in 2008 entitled “Le Capital et la question nationale” (Nations and Capitalism); incorporating various developments relating to the 2008 crisis and the current crisis regarding the position of Greece in the European Union in 2015. We would like to thank Alain Guéry, Alice Martin and Nicolas Pons-Vignon for their reading of the first version of this paper.

² Peter Spiegel, “Greece: Donald Tusk warns of extremist political contagion”, *The Financial Time – FT.com*, 29/07/15. “For me, the atmosphere is a little similar to the time after 1968 in Europe [...] I can feel, maybe not a revolutionary mood, but something like widespread impatience. When impatience becomes not an individual but a social experience of feeling, this is the introduction for revolutions”. See : <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f6872342-2bd2-11e5-acfb-cbd2e1c81cca.html#axzz3hHwFAiss>

³ F. G. Dufour draws particular attention to the fact that “*contemporary historical materialism*” has been extracted from the old teleological ideas (p. 453) which accompany the approaches founded on the supposed determinism of “individual choices” (in the case of analytical Marxism) or “productive forces” (in the case of orthodox Marxism). This inflexion of Marxism is in accordance with the theories at the root of institutionalism, which were not so well supported. See F. G. Dufour, “Historical Materialism and International Relations”, in J. Bidet & S. Kouvelakis, *Critical companion to contemporary Marxism*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2008.

⁴ See the numerous unpublished texts (in English) by this author in M. Cangiani, J. Maucourant, *Essais de Karl Polanyi*, Paris, Seuil, 2008.

⁵ E. P. Thomson, *La formation de la classe ouvrière anglaise*, Paris, Gallimard Seuil, 1988, cited in the volume by F. G. Dufour and Sébastien Rioux. See “La sociologie historique de la théorie des relations sociales de propriété”, *Actuel Marx*, 2008, 1, pp. 126-139. Dufour and Rioux explicitly claim, in this respect, the influence of the works of Polanyi in the creation of this new school of thought.

F. G. Dufour and S. Rioux, the definitive abandoning of the concepts of “superstructure” and “infrastructure” as, for example, “**l’institutionnalisation par le droit des relations entre les différentes composantes d’une classe dominante joue un rôle décisif dans la compréhension des luttes politiques fractionnant le tissu social**”⁶.

In this way, the political and economic dynamics which structure the transnationalisation of Capital will be brought to light; finally the question of the current meaning of national autonomies will be evoked. In so doing, we will bear in mind that capitalism needs both the State to prosper and a discourse which masks this intervention on its behalf. Can liberalism (and thus neoliberalism), in its desire to present the “market” as self-regulatory, be seen to be a discourse of the State in the service of capital? In this respect, it is not just a political doctrine, it becomes ideology. For all that, even in a Marxist analysis, the State cannot be brought back purely as an instrument for the service of the dominant class, as it is also through the State that peoples politically organised in nations have already countered Capital⁷. The State serves as both the instrument and the battlefield for class struggles.

Certainly, societies with a State, including the very earliest ones, must be viewed as class societies, completely separate from societies without a State and without classes which can be identified by anthropologists⁸. Indeed, despite the incessant fights between factions⁹, the dominance of one class who mercilessly exploit the vast majority of the population is a time-old phenomenon¹⁰. Nevertheless we must take note of one prominent fact: the industrial revolution brought with it, in a lasting way, politics in the sense of M. I. Finley¹¹. In fact, the “bourgeois democracy” went on to incorporate the dominated classes into the political community. The form of this incorporation may have evolved over time, notably because of the very fact of class struggles. Since then, capitalism has well and truly used the State to develop but it has not reigned over it without sharing its power. Over the last two centuries, in various countries, certain periods have been marked by State intervention, under pressure from the dominated classes and with certain success, against the power of the Capital. To talk suddenly of a “class State”, or, similarly, to imply that the State would have disappeared seems erroneous. In terms of the current period, this error would above all deprive the dominated classes of one of its most powerful tools. It is for that reason that we consider it important to bring back the question of sovereignty, differently to the way in which certain Marxist authors such as M. Hardt and T. Negri have done so before. It is also possible that our approach differs from that which can be found in F. G. Dufour and S. Rioux’s theory of “social-property regimes” as the notion of *sovereignty*, to which we refer here, differs from the notion of *domination*.

Periods¹² of capitalist development: the visible hand of the State breaks the chains of the market

The role of representations in the building of a society must be recalled in order to report the arrival of the liberal capitalism of the 19th century, as ideological thinking is initially linked to political and economic logic. The following developments favoured the European nations and their imaginary, in which we are still living, for better or worse. The substance of this imaginary, which has become an ideology, can be described as follows.

Westerners are commonly represented themselves as Modern Men, who created a society where economy, politics, culture and morality are autonomised in the distinct areas or institutions of social life. The market becomes an instrument of this differentiation between social spheres,

⁶ See the previous article as well as F. G. Dufour, “Historical Materialism and International Relations”, in J. Bidet, S. Kouvelakis (dir.), *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2008.

⁷ The idea of the nation as a political organisation of the people is developed notably by R. Descimon and A. Guéry, in “Un Etat des temps modernes ?”, in A. Burguière, J. Revel, *Histoire de la France*, Paris, Seuil, 2000, pp. 361 sq.

⁸ Pierre Clastres *La société contre l’Etat*, Editions de Minuit, 1974 and, by the same author, the *Préface* to **Marshall Sahlins** *Age de pierre, âge d’abondance*, Gallimard, 1976.

⁹ See **Norbert Elias**, *La dynamique de l’Occident*, Calmann-Lévy, 1975.

¹⁰ Georges Duby *Guerriers et paysans*, Gallimard, 1973.

¹¹ **Moses I. Finley** *L’invention de la politique*, Flammarion, 1985 (the French translation of his *Politics in the Ancient World*, 1983).

¹² Highlighting certain periods in capitalist development does not mean that the structure of one period disappears entirely in the subsequent periods.

because the “free market” would not be compatible with the structural interference of the other spheres. The “free market” reflected the emergence of the Sovereign Individual, which erased the political institution of the social community. Market freedom only reflects the autonomy of the Individual. The social question could therefore be resolved by the spontaneous emergence of new markets: it was enough to break the old constraints which had prevented the arrival of the Free Individual to the Market. In this way, these Modern Men made the legal, political and cultural worlds subordinate to the representation of the Market, that is to say a self-regulating system of markets. However, as we will see, it is through violence that the State creates the free markets, and the visible hand of the power of the State is thereby hidden in favour of the supposed “invisible hand” of the Market. Furthermore, beyond the definite role which nationalisms can play in the rise of national capitalism, if the hegemonic State is British, the ruling classes will be willingly anglophile; if the hegemonic American State seems threatened, as it was the case in 2001, these classes will declare themselves to be American. Nowadays, in 2015, it is not an accident that the ruling classes of the eurozone are very germanophile.

The “new economy” of the 19th century. The emergence of capitalism implies that work was transformed fictitiously into merchandise. The “imaginary institution of society”¹³ invalidates the liberal dogma: it is the very visible hand of the State, or of its justice system, which we call on to accord the “rights” of the rich and powerful to “freely” exploit nature and society for their own profit. Such interventions were presented as “modernisation”. The 19th century world is therefore the scene for a singular experiment in history, of which its contemporaries are aware. Bagehot and Cairnes make specific reference to the triumph of the practices resulting from the liberal theory on the old state of things¹⁴; Nassau Senior went into raptures declaring “*Nous sommes dirigés par des philosophes et des économistes*”¹⁵. This phrase, as an admission, underlines the hidden trait of liberalism: it seems much more dogmatic and interventionist than we tend to think¹⁶.

It is only once capitalism is established that liberal interventionism becomes less pressing and limits itself to actions aimed at maintaining. This puts the so-called liberal non-interventionism into perspective: **“Le tenant de l’économie libérale peut donc (...) faire appel à la force violente, à la guerre civile, pour instaurer les conditions préalables à un marché autorégulateur”**. In this way, the liberal State does not create the “natural freedom” which was so important to Smith, but institutes it through many forms of violence. Polanyi wrote clearly on this issue which has been tackled by many, from Marx through to Weber, which qualifies the workers of the capitalist society as “formally free”, being “*in fact constrained by the pangs of hunger*”¹⁷. But the liberal imaginary can only collide with reality and from there call on the capacity of institution and action of this entity which it itself criticises: the State. Initially, the implementation of liberal norms requires a heavy regulatory device. Subsequently, in an unforeseen manner, *spontaneously*, a “counter-movement” of “social protectionism” emerges from the very depths of society, which makes capitalism tolerable, for a time. It is this “*double movement*” which expresses the dialectic suitable for a liberal society. It is why Polanyi can write the phrase which shocked so many liberals: **“Le laisser-faire était planifié, la planification ne l’a pas été”**. Society’s new methods of self-protection, taking the form of collective arrangements sanctioned by the State, assure its viability for a given time and space.

We understand that capitalism is doomed to expand, more extensively and then more intensively, because it could be destroyed by a cloud of social interventions of all shapes and sizes which are its paradoxical condition of possibilities. The counter-movements have increasingly embarrassed the *partial* capacity of the self-regulation of the market system. It is this unfortunate

¹³ See C. Castoriadis, *The imaginary institution of society*, Blackwell Publishers, 1998 (1975 for the French edition).

¹⁴ Cited by J. Stanfield, *The economic thought of Karl Polanyi*, Londres MacMillan, 1986, p. 104-105.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ At the risk of contradicting his evolutionism, Hayek claimed the importance of an ideological struggle : **“Si l’idéal de l’Etat de Droit est fermement enraciné dans l’opinion publique, la législation et la juridiction tendraient à s’en rapprocher de plus en plus. Mais si on représente cet idéal comme irréalisable [...] il disparaîtra bientôt”** (F. Hayek, *La présomption fatale*, Paris, PUF, 1993, p. 206, cited by C. Vivel, *Le concept d’institution chez Hayek*, DEA, Centre Walras, 1999, p. 146).

¹⁷ M. Weber, *Histoire Economique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 298.

memory which pains neoliberal consciences. As regards the end of the 19th century, *“les droits de douanes (...) les cartels et trusts, les embargos sur l’immigration (...) sont autant de freins pour le fonctionnement du système concurrentiel (...) et nuisent gravement au mécanisme autorégulateur du marché”*¹⁸. In reality, the capitalist markets are only “regulatory” at the expense of a *“hécatombe de vies humaines”*¹⁹. Fundamentally, the capacities of regulation result almost always in the initial intervention of social forces which have organised the framework in which the market regulations will be carried out. It was in this way that, necessarily, social determinations increasingly restricted economic flows: a phenomenon which culminated in the 1930s with the “Great Transformation” (*i.e.* the end of the first “market society”), in which the methods went from New Deal to Nazism. The Great War only postponed the grave difficulties caused by the capitalist logic.

Cultural determinations are important in understanding the nature of capitalism, which did not really take shape until the 19th century. At this time, a systemic coherence was constructed which meant that *“the livelihood of man”* (to use Polanyi’s wording) depended strongly on the functioning of the markets. Organising the exposure of the population’s most primary needs to the hazards of the market is a decisive trait of the liberal West. In order to accomplish this, the West has constructed a *policy*. It is clearly the British Empire which assured this *“sacred mission of civilisation”*, founding a global network of trade routes. The fact that the expansion of the West already implied the sacrifice of entire peoples, as Polanyi noted regarding the fall of the Ottoman Empire, did not trouble, as a rule, the Western conscience. In this way, the British Empire created a space which claimed to be that of progress against retardation. It is useful to remember Marx’s observations on the primitive accumulation of capital: this fight began in England itself, where, from the 15th to the 18th century, the social war of enclosures was implemented to assure the privatisation of land which was nothing more than expropriation.

The British Empire thereby supported the first great wave of the creation of a liberal capitalism, between 1815 and 1914, integrating the flow of finances, goods and services, thanks to the gold standard system, which was in fact a Pound Sterling standard. As for the labour force, the era of imperialism (1880-1914) saw a freedom of migratory movement like never before, and which has certainly not been equalled since²⁰. However, behind the appearance of a cosmopolitan capitalism lies the highly political reality of the process: without British policy, the creation of this new world for the contemporaries at the end of the 19th century would not have been possible, a sentiment which was reaffirmed by the widespread anglophilia of the ruling class. It was the war of 1914-1918 followed by the Great Depression of the 1930s that shattered this liberal capitalism.

Before this collapse, firms were not yet the vectors of movement in the opening of national economies. This period can be characterised as raising an *“international configuration”*: foreign investments were dependent on foreign exchanges and not the systematic outsourcing of production organised according to a global logic. The manner of this international division of work was based upon the *“differences of sector productivity existing between each national territory”*²¹. Even though there were international aspects to finance well before 1914, the structuring of systems of production was still far from the movement we are familiar with today.

The era of national capitalisms. Retrospectively, the period between 1930 and 1980 could appear, from a neoliberal point of view, to be a digression in the rise of liberal capitalism which, overflowing from an international configuration, could have led to a transnational future. Nevertheless, the 1930s resituated the economic dynamic on a national foundation and created a long-lasting restraint on the financial sphere. This period, from 1930 to 1980, did not create a time of an artificial State, which would have been the fruit of the arbitrariness of those in charge and the malignance of populism in all its forms. On the contrary, this period sanctioned the *Great Transformation*, in Polanyi’s terms, that is to say the objective recognition of the impossible

¹⁸ K. Polanyi, *La grande transformation, op. cit.* p. 195.

¹⁹ K. Polanyi, “Syllabus of a lecture on marxian philosophy”, Box 5, Archives Karl Polanyi, Karl Polanyi Institute of Political Economy, Montréal.

²⁰ A. Laurens, *La question de Palestine – T. 1*, Paris, Fayard, 1999, p. 143.

²¹ C.-A. Michalet, *Qu’est-ce que la mondialisation ?*, Paris, La découverte, 2002, pp. 26-27 (notre traduction).

regulation of the economy and society by the Market. This major transformation resulted from the violence imposed on the social fabric up until 1914 and the contradictions of the very organisation of societies at the time.

The capitalism of the 1930s was much less liberal than that which had gone before. The various “corporative transformations”, to use Polanyi’s own expression, whether democratic or not, appeared to be necessities for the governments at the time. Eventually, both those opposing and defending capitalism shared Hitler’s conception: democracy was not compatible with private property²². This same conviction spurred on the American Supreme Court judges as they tried to oppose the New Deal, long-awaited by the American nation in the 1930s. All interference in the system of free enterprise was, for these judges, so unbearable that they wanted to quash the political wishes expressed by the American nation in its support of Roosevelt.

After the victory against Nazism and Japanese militarism, American hegemony could have assured British heritage and deepened a capitalism claiming to be universal, as if the *Great Transformation* had never happened. At this time, Polanyi was already commenting on the failure of the New Deal, adding that the great period of liberal ideology in the 19th century had profoundly shaped the American mentality. As a consequence, the interventions of the 1930s had, according to him, **“aussi peu affecté la position du capitalisme libéral que l’avaient fait en Europe, avant 1914, semblables évolutions vers l’interventionnisme et le socialisme”**²³. If we judge it by the social democracy of which it was a herald²⁴, the New Deal was a failure. However, as will be shown, this failure was not accompanied by the establishment of a “universal capitalism”. Political and economic factors prevented this full return to liberal capitalism which would have simply changed the “visible hand”, passing from a British to an American hegemony.

Indeed, the fragility of the European economies would not have been compatible with the shock of a rapid liberalisation of international flows of capital and the breadth of the Soviet threat was not without consequence in the power balance between labour and capital. In this respect, the consolidation of social rights and the continued rise in wages were crucial in the fight against Soviet influence, which allowed for Fordism. This was characterised by the relatively self-reliant aspect of the growth, which allowed for the emergence of State control over national capitalisms. In certain parts of the Third World, the United States favoured an astronomical debt from some allies and accepted marked government intervention, with diverse policies for the promotion and protection of national capitalisms, in such a way as to encourage prosperity to blossom in places where it was strategically useful. However the eradication of the Soviet Empire led to a rupture relating to the period from 1945-1980.

Contemporary capitalism. The political and cultural content of capitalism which was developed for a quarter of a century must not be overlooked. It is necessary in order to understand the current economic dynamics. The crisis of the social capitalist order, in both its economic and cultural dimensions, visible towards the end of the 1960s, legitimised, in the eyes of the worried wealthy classes, the increased power of neoliberal thinking, driven notably by M. Friedman and F. Hayek, who produced a set of justifications for the reconfiguration of social relations²⁵. In the 1980s, the political implementation of mass unemployment allowed for the return of the domination of Capital. By the end of the decade, the destruction of the centrally planned economy, which was established between 1917 and 1950, provided the possibility for the return of Capital in a way it had ceased to dream of since 1914. The *“reactionary utopia of Wall Street”*, denounced by Polanyi in 1945, has become dominant today with the United States at its head as a new vehicle for liberal globalisation, giving the illusion that the years between 1930 and 1980 were of an exceptional character.

²² In 1934, **“Hitler déclare que la cause principale de la crise actuelle est l’incompatibilité totale du principe d’égalité démocratique en politique et du principe de propriété privée des moyens de production en matière de vie économique”**; (K. Polanyi, “The essence of fascism” in L. Lewis et alii, *Christianity and social revolution*, New York, Books for Libraries Press, 1972, pp. 391-392).

²³ K. Polanyi, “Universal capitalism and regional planning”, *The London Quarterly of World Affairs*, 1945, (10), 3. p. 87.

²⁴ **R. Reich, *L’économie mondialisée*, Paris, Dunod, 1993, p. 34.**

²⁵ Neoliberalism was without a doubt first an ideology (G. Arrighi, “A la recherche de l’Etat mondial, *Actuel Marx*, n° 40, 2006), before effectively becoming a stage of capitalism (G. Duménil, D. Lévy, “Néolibéralisme : dépassement ou renouvellement d’un ordre social”, *ibid*).

A transnational capitalism was therefore established over the course of thirty-five years²⁶, driven by the transnational firms, which is de-structuring a number of nations. To qualify this capitalism as *transnational* and not *global* allows us to avoid certain ambiguities. *Transnationalisation* has in effect a political content, that of American hegemony: “*Since the 1970s, Wall Street has been relentless in its desire to reduce the obstacles to its penetration of national markets*”²⁷. More generally, one must denounce the “academic blinkers” which make “globalisation a purely technico-economic force, not only separated from political State controls but actually pitted against them”²⁸. It is therefore hard to confirm that globalisation designs in an appropriate manner the processes which structure contemporary capitalism. Yet it is true that the current configuration was not that known by the international world economy under British hegemony or by the national economies of the time of Fordism.

The success of Fordism led to the strong growth of global trade, which attained a level superior to that of national production. Initially, the increased opening up of national economies did not pose the delicate problems of macroeconomic regulation; the effectiveness of the Fordian regulation being still intact. Exploitation of the gains from trade and of the riches of others, on an ever-increasing scale, could still be maintained without damaging the macroeconomic system of regulation; on the contrary, they were driving it. However, in the mid 1970s transnationalisation was accelerated by financial globalisation, enabled by the explosion of the Bretton Woods system, the petrol crisis, the growing Southern debt and the eruption of public deficits (notably American). Globalisation, like transnationalisation, is therefore not as recent a concept as some would think, making its debut well before the 1990s. It is however true that certain key elements accelerated the dynamics of contemporary capitalism: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Eastern European countries’ march towards capitalism, the maturing of “new information and communication technologies”, the dismantling of the defences which had made the emergence of dynamic capitalisms possible in the South and the appropriation of life. However, it must be noted that the pretensions of Keynesian economics and Fordism were already becoming problematic before these moments which marked the notable expansion of Capitalism.

The transnationalisation of the goods markets and the mobilisation of an unskilled workforce on a global level was a process which was already well underway in the 1960s; which is the reason why de Bernis, at the start of the 1980s, thought that Europe was not a coherent sphere for the accumulation of capital. The process of transnationalisation was carried out through the construction of a systemic coherence where goods, commodities and technologies were mobilised like never before by market processes or big companies. In the transnational regime, access to global outlets rests therefore on the all-out mobilisation of financial resources, technologies and the workforce. Yet, as underlined by F. Chesnais, the mobility of capital, which is so essential for this transnational system, is achieved through direct foreign investments, participating in the increase in public and private debt, which over time breaks the national accumulation system²⁹.

However, the recognition of transnationalisation does not mean that national and regional governments do not hold any responsibility in this politically alienating process. In this way, European governments, instead of playing the game of an internationalisation which is profitable to the nations of Europe, organise the transnationalisation of European economies through the unfailing support of the national champions who mobilise this process. We are heading towards a very clear bending of financial and banking laws towards neoliberal demands; non-standard forms of employment are becoming the norm and laws are increasingly made by far-off commissions who have but one aim: to create a disinvestment in public affairs in order to promote the reign of a techno-bureaucracy affirming its neutrality. In short, one is naturalising the European market and the global market. The transformations of capitalism have a cultural and political character as decisive as economic determinism.

²⁶ See L. Hoang-Ngoc, B. Tinel, “La régulation du “nouveau capitalisme”. Analyses positives et recommandations normatives comparées”, *Economie Appliquée*, LVIII, n°1, 2005.

²⁷ P. Gowan, “Le régime dollar-Wall Street d’hégémonie mondiale”, *Actuel Marx*, n° 27, 2000, p. 75 (our traduction).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁹ F. Chesnais “Les contradictions et les antagonismes propres au capitalisme mondialisé et leurs menaces pour l’humanité”, *Actuel Marx*, n°40, 2006.

States and nations in contemporary capitalism

For certain authors, such as A. Negri who knew, better than the others, how to sum up the atmosphere of the time, the contemporary period is marked by the eradication of the Nation State in the figure of the “Empire”³⁰. Opposition to American imperialism subsequently raised a revival of “sovereignist” nostalgia! The arrival of an economy founded on knowledge and networks would be the ultimate reason for the liquidation of the figure of the sovereignty. Yet, one could see this atmosphere, which spread to a growing part of the left, brewing before the Great War, in the pronouncements of the very liberal Mises, who had already stated that “sovereignty was a ridiculous illusion”!³¹ Contrary to the “liberal-libertarian” temptation which exists across the left, we argue that the State remains a means of countering the force of Capital and that internationalism is the only alternative to globalised capitalism.

Governments: obstacles to liberation by contemporary capitalism? The idea that the contemporary transformation of productive forces renders the peoples demands for sovereignty null and void does not only mean the return of the old liberal clichés but the revival of that which was most problematic in orthodox Marxism. Dismissing, de facto, the role of social and political struggles, the followers of “cognitive capitalism” attribute the current problems to an incompatibility between the techno-organisational dynamics and the institutions. They advocate federalism as the political model to help us rise out of our socio-economic stagnation and think the present “reticular” forms of organisation announce the end of the wage system. The figure of the mobile individual would not be showcased, upset as they are by the concepts which strongly favour the idea of the nation and traditional social protection³², hence the cause of the current difficulties which are notably expressed in the singular praise of the *Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe*³³. Differing authors such as Y. Moulier-Boutang and L. Boltanski³⁴, inspired the discourse of this liberal “left”, who dare, from time to time, to call themselves radical, in order to gain media attention, and give life to these false oppositions which are lapped up so readily by the press of the “vested interests” (following Veblen’s words).

Nevertheless, this discourse poses a methodological problem: where do we situate ourselves? As positive? Or normative? Or even more prescriptive? At first sight, the founding values of the “*new Great Transformation*” (according to Moulier-Boutang) are those of passion and freedom, opposed to the quest for money and the glorification of work. However, it is not that simple, as there is always the danger of taking the rationalizations of the actors involved at face value. The speeches of these actors on their own practices are only a part of the social life which completely escapes them. Besides the empire of the new masters of the “free” (this world of micro-computing which is a source of such inspiration for the theorists of “cognitive capitalism”) represents such a tiny fraction of humanity that it is dangerous to make daring forecasts based on the practices and discourse of this specific population. The problem is therefore that the “liberal-libertarian” left confuse their desires with reality. It is understandable that one would want the death of the State as the sign of a new communism. But it is quite simply wrong to claim the *death* of public regulations: the novelty does not reside in their disappearance but in the tendency to remove

³⁰ The concept of imperialism would be dismissed in favour of an Empire which is not linked to any particular State but “*the sovereign power which rules the world*”, the legal form of which would be provided by the American Constitution. Regarding history and European ideology, the accession of this Empire would cause a rupture as it would not be characterised by any particular *place*. This would be the end of the opposition between centre and periphery. The emergence of sovereignty without a territory, which the American federal model would allow for, would herald the death of the territorial and omnipotent Nation State (M. Hardt, A. Negri, *Empire*, Paris, Exil, 2002, pp. 15 et 319; the authors return to this idea in *Multitude*, Paris, 10/18, 2004, particularly in the chapter on sovereignty).

³¹ K. Polanyi, *La Grande Transformation*, op. cit., p. 251.

³² These *Turbo-Bécassine* and *Cyber-Gédéon* who populate the world, hardly satirically, paint a picture of our future as described by Gilles Châtelet in *Vivre et penser comme des porcs*, Folio, 1998.

³³ This same treaty has now been reintroduced without recourse to a referendum and, despite the opposition expressed by 55% of our citizens in 2005. The leading parties on both left and right have validated it through a pure parliamentary procedure, which says volumes about both the state of politics in Europe and the ideas of those who are happy that such procedures can be employed in the name of “Europe”.

³⁴ An inspiring critique of the works of L. Boltanski is made by C. Gautier, “La sociologie de l'accord : justification contre déterminisme et domination”, *Politix*, n° 54, 2001.

them completely from citizen's control. In reality, neoliberalism wishes to instrumentalise public regulations for Capital profit. Nevertheless the breadth of this redistribution remains manifest in Europe; the same applies for all these regulations still escaping the great "European" gust. The many recriminations of all kinds of modernisation are a sign of the inertia of certain social and economic phenomena which we cannot shake off to this day.

Furthermore, the theory behind the "Empire", which must take the place of theories of imperialism, is based upon the fact that the national capitalisms are so strongly integrated in the American economic complex that it is not possible to distinguish between the different nations. According to this hypothesis, economic and financial bases being henceforth shared, the political structure will necessarily be both unified and stateless. Through this wish, posing as a hypothesis, we erase the national identities of transnational firms. The current debates surrounding sovereign funds, which the IMF have taken part in, are a good example that political distinctions have a strong influence on the economy. Except for bypassing reality, the State and the American nation have not been dissolved into a form of imperial government on a global scale. In this respect, the dissolution of the very idea of the nation is not desirable, except in proving that any political organisation of the people would be useless. As long as a people wish to exist, they will form a nation. The liberal left should consider the lessons taught by peoples who wish to exist, from Palestine to Kurdistan, especially in this crucial year, 2015, when this proto-State must fight against Erdogan's Turkey, ISIS and Al-Qaeda. In actual fact, "*sovereignty means, for a given community, the idea of the valid rights at their core (...). The nation-state offers a neutral solution resting on a simple territorial base. It is the only way compatible with diversities, be they religious, ethnic or otherwise*"³⁵. Contemporary capitalism is not the instrument of freedom that they would have us believe. Rather than following the (so-called) "progressive" cultural values which that capitalism promote, more often emancipation results from the political and cultural constraints which are opposed to all forms of capitalism. There is no "ruse of reason" making contemporary capitalism work for the creation of a common world; in no way whatsoever does the transnationalisation of economies lead to the founding of a global politics, save by vesting the socio-economic analysis with prophetism.

But we should not mourn the efficiency of the lost Fordist regulation. The system of Fordism was, and is still, precisely a foil to those who wish for a democratic constitution of the economic system. But we can nevertheless wonder about the meaning of the celebration of the end of Fordism and public regulations. And when A. Negri writes that "*Capital is in the minds of the people*"³⁶, it seems that here we are dealing with a prophecy which strives, more or less consciously, for self-realisation. If this proposition must be taken seriously, then our time, marked by the "*ontological transformation of labour*"³⁷, would be one of the end of Capital as a social relation. We would therefore live through an *anthropological transformation*: the emergence of the Age the Common, an unprecedented time where social cooperation would define the economy. The old opposition between private and public would be invalidated and the ambitions of State interventionism would thereby be eliminated. Yet in 1869, A. Blanqui was already writing that "*all the problems successively presented throughout history have had a communist solution*"³⁸! The *common* described by A. Negri can be interpreted as a form of solidarity economy, which is not very novel³⁹. One must be wary of the emergence of the *common*, if this justifies the liquidation of the *public*, at a time when the *private* is all powerful.

What can and must remain of the nations. Why not consider that a certain number of the legacies left by history are worthless? Nation, as the political organisation of the people, is a core which it is advisable not to overlook in the name of a misunderstood universalism. A common world cannot be constructed with the negation of important form of collective membership! The dream, formulated notably by A. Caillé and A. Insel⁴⁰, of a "European Republic" keeps quiet on

³⁵ J. Sapir, *Les économistes contre la démocratie*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2002, pp. 188-189 (our translation).

³⁶ Negri cited by M. Husson ("Communisme et temps libre", *Critique communiste*, 152, 1998) which demonstrates the weakness of such an argument.

³⁷ See, for example, A. Negri et C. Vercellone "Le rapport capital/travail dans le capitalisme cognitif", *Multitudes*, 2008, 32, 1, pp. 39-50.

³⁸ A. Blanqui, *Maintenant, Il faut des armes*, La Fabrique éditions, Paris, 2007 (our translation).

³⁹ A. Caillé, "Présentation", *La Revue du Mauss* (20), 2002 p. 13.

⁴⁰ A. Caillé, A. Insel, "Quelle autre mondialisation ?", *La Revue du Mauss*, 20, p. 152.

this question. These authors talk of the hold of the “social representations” of “nationalism”⁴¹, which we suppose to be some form of attachment to the idea of the nation of which the characteristic would be the absolute negation of any kind of supranational life. But which conception of the nation decided that? Why do these authors stigmatise the idea of the nation while affirming that “*the effects of internationalisation are globally positive whereas the effects of globalisation are entirely negative*”⁴². Do they want a contradiction in terms: internationalism without nations? Finally, in a surprising affirmation, which would shock people of the Middle East and Central Asia, the authors maintain that the United States “*has won enduring titles recognised around the world*” and that their culture is based on “*democratic, humanist and pluralist*” ideals⁴³. However this democratic American ideal primarily has a place in their State. In addition, as for values issue, certain European nations have often surpassed the reference to tolerance and arrived at secularity. It is true that this is currently threatened by forms of relativism which are well adapted to the transnational market!⁴⁴

The right of the Southern countries to use their States to meet their social aims is often discussed in contemporary debate⁴⁵. However, this stimulating reflexion must be supplemented by the acknowledgement that certain Northern countries also have some legitimacy in defending certain types of social relations. In this respect, D. Plihon, raising the questions of interdependence which it is very hard to manage, wrote: “*In order to find room for manoeuvre, countries must be able to protect themselves*”⁴⁶. Thus, the idea of the nation as progressive immunity in the face of a globalised market is not outdated. Considerations regarding the nation must have a consequence on our way of envisaging States in the progressive initiative of the transformation of social relations. Why, as wished by some of the opposition to “liberal globalisation”, would one want to liquidate the States or try to take away the power held by public regulations? Would one want, in that way, to eliminate all forms of conscious coordination? These questions have an answer which also holds true for the Northern countries: « *in the Southern countries, all coherent national development projects pass through a control on the movement of capital (...). The State must be defended, not as an incarnation of the nation against the cosmopolitanism of Capital, but as the only instrument allowing any control of capital* »⁴⁷. That which liberal capitalism has done, a democratic will can undo and do differently. In terms of taxation and financial regulation, it is possible to give back to the State the resources it has abandoned. As for European Union and Eurozone, it is obvious that fiscal and budgetary policies can easily become more efficient compared to the current deflationary framework; it is also possible to make the European Central Bank democratic.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169-170

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 150 (our translation).

⁴³ And just like those of the European nations (we suggest ...).

⁴⁴ To discredit the idea of nation, A. Negri decided to write that it was the cause of Auschwitz (“*Empire et multitudes dans la guerre*”, in R. Herrera, *L'empire en guerre*, Paris, Le temps des cerises, 2001, p. 156). He was forgetting that a singular historical layout makes for a certain conception of the nation which played a lethal role. It is indeed absurd to claim that the concept of a “territorial sovereignty”, developed in England and France, is equivalent to that of “universal sovereignty”. See L. Dumont, *Homo aequalis II*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 38. We note here that T. Mann, around 1914, after having recalled that the democratic regime did not suit Germany, added: “*the world people of the mind [...] aspire to be one global people [...] the world people of the reality, and if necessary (...) through a violent breakthrough*” (cited by L. Dumont, *ibid.*, pp. 83-84, our translation). It is therefore clear that discussion of the essence of the concept of the nation must take into account certain national specifics.

⁴⁵ See *Actuel Marx*, n° 42, 2007 : *Amérique latine en lutte. Hier et aujourd'hui*.

⁴⁶ D. Plihon, “Une autre mondialisation”, *La Revue du Mauss*, 20, 2002, p. 109 (our translation).

⁴⁷ M. Husson, “Le fantasme du marché mondial”, *Contretemps*, 2002 (our translation).