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## **Making the future possible again**

When we look at the past through the eyes of the present, we find huge cemeteries of abandoned futures, struggles that inaugurated new possibilities but were neutralized, silenced, or distorted, futures murdered at birth, or even still-born futures, contingencies that determined the winning choice later ascribed to the course of history. These abandoned futures are also buried bodies, often bodies committed to wrong or useless futures. We worship or execrate them depending on whether the future they aspired to coincides with what we want for ourselves or not. That is why we mourn our dead, though never the same dead. Lest we believe that recent examples include only suicide bombers, martyrs to some, terrorists to others, two celebrations of the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife, an event that would lead to the outbreak of World War I, were held in Sarajevo in 2014. In a Sarajevo neighborhood, Bosnians, Croatians, and Muslims celebrated the king and his wife, while in a different neighborhood Bosnian Serbs were feting their murderer, Gravilo Princip, and they even erected a statue in his honor.

In the early 21st century, the concept of abandoned futures seems obsolete, perhaps even as much as the very concept of future. The future seems to have stopped in the present and to be prepared to linger in there for an indefinite period. Novelty, surprise, indetermination follow one another so trivially that all the good and bad things that were supposed to happen in the future are happening right now. The future has anticipated itself and has fallen on the present. The speed of the time that passes is the same as the speed of the time that stops. The trivialization of innovation goes hand in hand with the trivialization of glory and horror. Many experience this with

indifference. They have long given up making the world happen and therefore accept with resignation the fact the world happens to them. These are the cynics, the professionals of skepticism. However, there are two different groups of people, very dissimilar in kind and size, for whom giving up is just not an option.

The first group comprises the overwhelming majority of the world's population. The exponential rise of social inequality, the proliferation of social fascisms, hunger, precariousness, desertification, expulsion from ancestral lands coveted by multinational companies, irregular wars specialized in killing innocent civilian populations – all of this means that an increasingly larger portion of the world's population is now focusing on tomorrow instead of looking to the future. Today they are alive, but they don't know whether they will be alive tomorrow; today they can feed their children, but they don't know whether there will be food for them tomorrow; today they have a job, but they don't know whether they will tomorrow. The immediate tomorrow is the mirror in which the future does not like to look, because the image it reflects is the image of a mediocre, banal, uninspiring future. These huge populations ask so little of the future that they won't be prepared to handle it.

The second group is a minority group much as it is powerful. It envisions itself making the world happen, defining and controlling the future indefinitely and exclusively so that there is no chance of an alternative future. This group is made up of two fundamentalisms. They are fundamentalist because they are based on absolute truths, they reject dissidence, and they believe that the ends justify the means. These two fundamentalisms are neoliberalism, controlled by the financial markets, and Daesh, the radical Jihadists who claim to be Islamic. Although extremely different, even opposed, these two groups do share important traits. They are both based on

absolute truths that do not tolerate political dissidence, be it the scientific faith on the priority of investors' interests and the legitimacy of the infinite accumulation of wealth it allows, or the religious faith in the doctrine of the Khalifa, which promises freedom from western humiliation and dominion. They both aim to control the access to the most valued natural resources. They both cause tremendous, unjust suffering, claiming that the ends legitimize the means. To disseminate their proselytism, both resort to new digital information technologies with equal sophistication. Their radicalism has the same character, and the future they proclaim is equally dystopic – a future unworthy of humanity.

Is a worthy future possible between the two unworthy futures I have just mentioned: the minimalism of tomorrow and the maximalism of fundamentalism? I believe it is, although the history of the last one hundred years recommends that we approach it with due caution. Our baseline was not brilliant. The 20th century began with two major models of progressive change in society, revolution and reformism, and the 21st century begins with neither. It is worth recalling the Russian Revolution again, since it radicalized the choice between the two models and gave it practical political consistency. With the October Revolution, it became clear to workers and peasants (or the popular classes, as we would now call them) that there were two ways of bringing about a better future, which announced itself as post-capitalist, or socialist: either revolution, which entailed a (not necessarily violent) institutional breach with the mechanisms of representative democracy, a breach with legal and constitutional procedures, and sudden, dramatic changes in the land ownership system; or reformism, which involved respect for democratic institutions and gradual progress concerning workers' claims as electoral processes progressively became more favorable to them. Both models shared one and the same aim – socialism.

Today I will not be focusing on the vicissitudes of this choice over the past hundred years. I would just like to briefly mention that after the failure of the German revolution (1918-1921), the idea that reformism would be the preferred approach both in Europe and in the USA (the first world) was progressively gaining ground, while the third world (note that the Soviet socialist world gradually established itself as the second world) would follow either the revolutionary path, as indeed happened in China in 1949, or some combination of the two models. In the meantime, as Stalin ascended to power the Russian Revolution became a bloody dictatorship and sacrificed its best children in the name of an absolute truth that imposed itself through maximum violence. In other words, the revolutionary choice transformed itself into a radical fundamentalism that preceded those mentioned above. In its turn, as the third world freed itself from colonialism, it gradually became clear that reformism would never lead to socialism – it might, at the very best, lead to capitalism with a human face, like the one that was emerging in Europe after World War II. The Non-Aligned Movement (1955-1961) proclaimed its intention to reject both Soviet socialism and western capitalism.

For reasons that I had the opportunity of discussing in my last column, both models of social transformation collapsed with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The revolution became a discredited, obsolete fundamentalism that collapsed down into its very foundations. Democratic reformism, on the other hand, gradually lost its reformist drive and with it its democratic density. Reformism became a byword for the desperate struggle to maintain the rights of the popular classes (public education and health, infrastructures and public goods, such as water) that had been acquired during the previous period. Reformism thus slowly languished until it became a squalid, disfigured entity reconfigured by neoliberal fundamentalism by means of a

facelift and transformed into the sole model of exportation democracy, i.e., liberal democracy converted into an instrument of imperialism with the right to intervene in enemy or uncivilized countries and to destroy them in the name of this much-coveted trophy. However, when awarded, the trophy shows its true colors: neon-lighted ruin, transported in the cargo of military and financial bombers (structural adjustment), the latter being piloted by the World Bank CEOs and by the International Monetary Fund.

In the present state of this journey, the revolution has become a fundamentalism similar to the maximalism of current fundamentalisms while reformism has deteriorated into the minimalism of the form of government whose precariousness prevents it from seeing the future beyond the immediate tomorrow. Have these two historical failures been the direct or indirect cause of the imprisoning choice in which we live, between dystopian fundamentalisms and tomorrows with no day after tomorrow? More important than answering this question, it is crucial that we know how we get out of here, which is the condition for the future to become possible again. I will offer a possible way out: if historically democracy and revolution were on opposite sides and both did collapse, maybe the solution lies in reinventing them so they can coexist in mutual articulation. Differently said, democratize the revolution and revolutionize democracy. This will be the topic of my next column.