

The Structural Crisis of Politics

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1. Symptoms of a fundamental crisis

I would like to begin with a brief survey of the very disquieting—indeed, I should say, of worldwide threatening—developments in the field of politics and the law. In this respect I wish to underline that it was no less than twenty-three years ago that I became personally acquainted in Paraíba, Brazil with the painful circumstances of explosive food riots. Twenty years later, at the time of President Lula's electoral campaign, I read that he had announced that the most important part of his future strategy was his determination to put an end in the country to the grave social evil of famine. The two intervening decades from the time of those dramatic food riots in Paraíba were obviously not sufficient to solve this chronic problem. And even today, I am told, the improvements are still very modest in Brazil. Moreover, the somber statistics of the United Nations constantly underline that the same problem persists, with devastating consequences, in many parts of the world. This is so despite the fact that the productive powers at the disposal of humankind today could relegate forever to the past the now totally unforgivable social failure of famine and malnutrition.

It might be tempting to attribute these difficulties, as frequently happens in traditional political discourse, to more or less easily corrigible political contingencies, postulating thereby the remedy through changes in personnel at the next suitable and strictly orderly electoral opportunity. But that would be a customary evasion and not a plausible explanation. For the stubborn persistence of the problems at stake, with all of their painful human consequences, point to much more deeply rooted connections. They indicate some apparently uncontrollable force of inertia which seems to be able to turn, with depressing frequency, even the "good intentions" of promising political manifestos into the paving stones of the road to hell, in Dante's immortal words. In other words, the challenge is to face up to the underlying causes and structural determinations which tend to derail by the force of inertia many political programs devised for corrective intervention. To derail them even when it is originally admitted by the authors of such programs that the existing state of affairs is unsustainable.

Let us consider a few striking examples which clearly demonstrate not only that there is something dangerously affecting the way in which we regulate our societal interchanges, but worse, the observable trend is the intensification of the dangers toward the point of no return.

I wrote six years ago, for a public lecture delivered in Athens in October 1999, that “In all probability the ultimate form of threatening the adversary in the future—the new ‘gunboat diplomacy,’ exercised from the ‘patented air’—will be nuclear blackmail. But its objective would be analogous to those of the past, while its envisaged modality could only underline the absurd untenability of trying to impose capital’s ultimate rationality on the recalcitrant parts of the world in that way.”¹ In these six years such potentially lethal policy-making practices of global hegemonic imperialism have become not only a general possibility but also an integral part of the openly admitted neoconservative “strategic conception” of the U.S. government. And the situation is even worse today. In the last few weeks, in relation to Iran, we have entered the actual planning stage of a course of action which could threaten not only Iran itself but the whole of humanity with a nuclear disaster.² The customary cynical device employed in making public such threats is “neither to confirm, nor to deny them.” But no one should be fooled by that kind of ploy. In fact this recently materialized very real danger of nuclear disaster is what induced a group of distinguished American physicists, among them five Nobel Laureates, to write an open letter of protest to President Bush in which they stated that: “It is gravely irresponsible for the US as the greatest superpower to consider courses of action that could eventually lead to the widespread destruction of life on the planet. We urge the administration to announce publicly that it is taking the nuclear option off the table in the case of all non-nuclear adversaries, present or future, and we urge the American people to make their voices heard on this matter.”³

Are the legitimate political institutions of our societies in a position to redress even the most perilous situations by democratic intervention in the process of actual decision making, as traditional political discourse keeps reassuring us, despite all evidence to the contrary? Only the most optimistic—and rather naïve—could assert and sincerely believe that such a happy state of affairs happens to be the case. For the principal Western powers have, quite unimpeded, embarked in the last few years on devastating wars using authoritarian devices—like the “executive prerogative” and the “Royal Prerogative”—without consulting their peoples on such grave matters, and ruthlessly brushing aside the framework of international law and the appropriate decision making organs of the United Nations.⁴ The United States arrogates to itself as its moral right to act as it pleases, whenever it pleases, even to the point of using nuclear weapons—not only preemptively but even preventively—against whichever country it pleases, whenever its claimed “strategic interests” so decree. And all this is done by the United States as the pretended champion and guardian of “democracy and liberty,” slavishly followed and supported in its unlawful actions by our “great democracies.”

Once upon a time the acronym MAD—mutually assured destruction—was used to describe the existing state of nuclear confrontation. Now that the “neoconservatives” can no longer pretend that the United States (and the West in general) are threatened by nuclear annihilation, the acronym has been turned into literal madness, as the “legitimate policy orientation” of institutionalized military/political insanity. This is in part the consequence of neoconservative disappointments about the Iraq war. For “American neo-cons had hoped the invasion of Iraq would set in train a domino effect across the region, with the people of Iran and other oil-rich states rising up to demand western-style freedoms and democracy. Unfortunately the reverse has been true, in Iran at least.”⁵ But it is much worse than that, because a whole system of institutionally entrenched and secured “strategic thinking,” centered on the Pentagon itself, lurks behind it. This is what makes the new MADNESS so dangerous for the entire world, including the United States whose worst enemies are precisely such “strategic thinkers.”

We can see this very clearly in Thomas P. M. Barnett's 2004 book, *The Pentagon's New Map*, reviewed in *Monthly Review* by Richard Peet. To quote Peet:

September 11, 2001, was an amazing gift, Barnett says, twisted and cruel as that may sound. It was an invitation from history for the United States to wake from the dream-like 1990s and force new rules on the world. The enemy is neither religion (Islam), nor place, but the condition of disconnectedness. To be disconnected in this world is to be isolated, deprived, repressed, and uneducated. For Barnett these symptoms of disconnectedness define danger. Simply put, if a country was losing out to globalization, or rejecting much of its cultural content flows, chances are that the United States would end up sending troops there....Strategic vision in the United States needs to focus on "growing the number of states that recognize a stable set of rules regarding war and peace"—that is, the conditions under which it is reasonable to wage war against identifiable enemies of "our collective order." Growing this community is a simple matter of identifying the difference between good and bad regimes and encouraging the bad ones to change their ways. The United States, he thinks, has a responsibility to use its tremendous power to make globalization truly global. Otherwise portions of humanity will be condemned to an outsider status that will eventually define them as enemies. And once the United States has named these enemies, it will invariably wage war on them, unleashing death and destruction. This is not forced assimilation, Barnett claims, nor the extension of empire; instead it is the expansion of freedom.⁶ (emphases added) Evidently, this "vision" borders on insanity. Its brutal implications are spelled out in an interview given by Barnett to *Esquire* magazine: "What does this new approach mean for this nation and the world over the long run? Let me be very clear about this: The boys are never coming home. America is not leaving the Middle East until the Middle East joins the world. It is that simple. No exit means no exit strategy."⁷

Indeed, it hardly could be put more clearly than it is done by Barnett here and in his book. In this way we can see the gratuitous idealization of the absurd presumptions of U.S. "tremendous power" and the corresponding projection of "globalization" as naked American domination, openly acknowledging its vehicles as "death and destruction." And if anybody might think that Barnett is an inconsequential pen pusher, they will be rather alarmed by the facts. For Barnett was senior strategic researcher at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, and a "vision guy" in the Office of Force Transformation attached to the secretary of defense. Moreover, he is billed as a "vision guy" to be listened to and to be followed, in all seriousness.

Sadly, the highest echelons of "strategic thinking" in the United States are populated by such "vision guys," who are determined to add their massive paving blocks of not good but most aggressive bad intentions to Dante's road to hell. For the great Italian poet never suggested that the road to hell he was talking about is paved exclusively with good intentions. According to one of these dangerous "vision guys," Max Boot—who is a senior fellow at the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations—"Any nation bent on imperial policing will suffer a few setbacks. The British army, in the course of Queen Victoria's little wars, suffered major defeats with thousands of casualties in the First Afghan War (1842) and the Zulu War (1879). This did not appreciably dampen British determination to defend and expand the empire; it made them hunger for vengeance. If Americans cannot adopt a similarly bloody-minded attitude, then they have no business undertaking imperial policing."⁸

In this kind of aggressive "strategic vision" we are offered the open idealization of British Empire building, including its most brutal aspects. Cynically, in the name of spreading

“democracy and liberty,” the unreserved adoption of past colonial violence is recommended as the model for U.S. empire building today.

What makes all this particularly disturbing is that concerning all matters of major importance—some of which may result in the destruction of humanity—we find at the highest levels of political decision making in the United States an utterly unholy consensus. This is true despite the periodic electoral rituals for the presidency as well as for Congress, which are supposed to offer real alternatives. However, claimed differences in such vital matters are, as a rule, only pretended differences. As I commented in December 2002, well before the invasion of Iraq, “Democratic President Clinton adopted the same policies as his Republican successor, even if in a more camouflaged form. As regards the Democratic Presidential Candidate, Al Gore, he declared recently that he supported without reservation the planned war against Iraq because such a war would not mean a ‘regime change’ but only ‘disarming a regime which possessed weapons of mass destruction.’”⁹ Also, we should not forget that the first U.S. president who bombed Afghanistan was none other than the often ludicrously idealized Bill Clinton. It is therefore very far from surprising that Al Gore’s successor as Democratic presidential candidate, Senator John Kerry hastened to declare in the last presidential race, echoing the words of his Republican opponent George W. Bush, that “Americans differ about whether and how we should have gone to war. But it would be unthinkable now for us to retreat in disarray and leave behind a society deep in strife and dominated by radicals.” It is understandable, therefore, that the distinguished American writer and critic, Gore Vidal, described United States politics, with bitter irony, as a one party system with two right wings.

Unfortunately, the United States is by no means the only country which should be characterized in such terms. There are many others as well in which the political decision making functions are monopolized by very similar self-legitimizing consensual institutional arrangements, with negligibly little (if any) difference between them, notwithstanding the occasional change in personnel at the top level. I will confine myself in this regard to the discussion of one prominent case, the United Kingdom (or Great Britain). This particular country—traditionally promoting itself as the “mother country of democracy” on account of the historic Magna Carta—under the premiership of Tony Blair eminently qualifies for the same dubious distinction of “one-party system with two right wings,” just like the powerful North American state. The Iraq war was rubber stamped in the British Parliament by both the Conservative Party and “New Labor,” with the help of more or less obvious legal manipulations and violations. Thus we can now read that “Transcripts of evidence given in private by the attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, to an official inquiry suggest that the crucial advice on the legality of war, presented to parliament in his name, was written for him by two of Tony Blair’s closest allies....The former foreign secretary Robin Cook said last night that having resigned the day before the war started, he had never heard Lord Goldsmith make the legal case in cabinet. ‘I now think he never formally wrote a second opinion,’ he told *The Guardian*.”¹⁰ Naturally, the subsequent public exposure and condemnation of such practices by prominent legal experts, concerning “Bush and Blair’s illegal war,” makes no difference whatsoever.¹¹ For the vested interests of global hegemonic imperialism—unhesitatingly and humiliatingly served by the political consensual system of a former major imperialist power—must prevail at all cost.

The consequences of this way of regulating social and political interchanges are far-reaching. Indeed, they can have devastating implications for the claimed democratic credentials of the whole system of the law. Three important cases should suffice here to

illustrate the point.

The first concerns the alarm raised by a famous writer, John Mortimer, who was in the past a passionate supporter of the British Labor Party, and by no means a socially radical figure. However, in the light of recent legal and political developments, and in particular because of the abolition of the crucially important legal safeguard of habeas corpus, he felt the need to protest with equal passion, writing in a newspaper article that “now the ugly fact has emerged that New Labour’s idea of ‘modernization’ is to force us back to before the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, dark days when we hadn’t achieved the presumption of innocence....Tony Blair appears to be in favor of summary convictions handed out by the police without the necessity of any trial at all in a large number of cases. So centuries of the constitution in which we take so much pride are dismissed.”¹²

The second case shows how the British government responds to severe criticism even by the highest organs of the judiciary: by authoritarian rejection. As it was made clear recently: “A high court judge branded the government’s system of control orders against terrorism suspects ‘an affront to justice’ yesterday and ruled that they breached human rights laws....The Home Office rejected the court’s ruling.”¹³

As regards the third case, it indicates a matter of the greatest legislative importance: the authority of Parliament itself, under threat by the New Labor government’s “Reform Bill.” To quote John Pilger: “The Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill has already passed its second parliamentary reading without interest to most Labour MPs and court journalists; yet it is utterly totalitarian in scope....It will mean that the government can secretly change the Parliamentary Act, and the constitution and laws can be struck down by decree from Downing Street. The new bill marks the end of true parliamentary democracy; in its effect, it is as significant as the US Congress last year abandoning the Bill of Rights.”¹⁴

Thus the manipulation and violation of internal and international law, in the service of justifying the unjustifiable, carries with it considerable dangers even for elementary constitutional requirements. The negative changes—removing some vital legal scrutiny and safeguards from the legal and political framework of their “allies”—cannot be confined to the international (U.S.-imposed) context. They tend to undermine constitutionality in general, with uncontrollable consequences for the operation of the internal legal system of the “willing allies,” subverting their legal and political traditions. Arbitrariness and authoritarianism can run riot as a result of such highly irresponsible changes which do not hesitate to wreak havoc even on the established constitution.

Current debate in Japan offers a striking case in point:

A grave situation has arisen in which the political forces for adverse constitutional revision are actually competing with each other to draft a new constitution. The LDP [the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party] “draft of a new Constitution”...deleted the second paragraph of Article 9 of the Constitution and added a provision allowing Japan to “maintain a self-defence military” tasked to perform “internationally coordinated activities to secure the peace and security of the international community,” thus paving the way to allow Japan to use force abroad. It also contains a clause to restrict fundamental human rights in the name of “public interest and public order” which amounts to denying constitutionalism. In addition, it is also serious that the LDP draft of a Constitution makes it easier to make further adverse amendments to the Constitution by easing the requirement for the initiation of amendments by the Diet from the present two-thirds majority to just a majority of all

members of each house.¹⁵

The immediate purpose of such changes is, obviously, to make the Japanese people become the “willing” canon fodder in the ongoing and future wars of U.S. imperialism. But can anybody offer reassurances and guarantees—disregarding the painful evidence of Japanese imperialist adventures in the past, together with their internally most repressive history—that there will be no horrendous human consequences in the longer run resulting from these changes?

In the meantime so many grave problems are crying out for genuine solutions which could be well within our reach. Some of them have been with us for several decades, imposing terrible suffering and sacrifices on millions of people. Colombia is an outstanding example. For forty years the forces of oppression—internal and external, U.S. dominated—tried to suffocate the struggle of the Colombian people, without success. Attempts to reach a negotiated settlement—“with the participation of all social groups, without exception, in order to reconcile the Colombian family,” in the words of Manuel Marulanda Vélez, the leader of FARC-EP—have been systematically frustrated.¹⁶ As Vélez wrote in an open letter addressed recently to a presidential candidate: “No government, liberal or conservative, produced an effective political solution to the social and armed conflict. The negotiations were used for the purpose of changing nothing, so that everything should remain the same. All of the political schemes of the governments were using the Constitution and the laws as a barrier, to make sure that everything continues the way as we had it before.”¹⁷

Thus, when the dominant social interests dictate it, “constitutionality” and the rules of “democratic consensus” are used in Colombia (and elsewhere) as cynical devices for evading and forever postponing the solution of even the most burning issues, no matter how immense might be the scale of suffering imposed, as a result, on the people. And by the same token, in a different social context but under the same kind of deeply embedded structural determinations, even the most blatant and openly admitted violations of established constitutionality are disregarded, despite the periodic ritual lip service paid to the necessity to respect the constitutional requirements. In this sense, when the Congressional committee investigating the “Irangate Contra Affairs” had concluded that the Reagan administration was responsible for “subverting the Law and undermining the Constitution,” absolutely nothing happened to condemn, let alone to remove, the guilty president. And in yet another type of case—as we have seen in the ruling LDP government’s determination to subvert the Japanese Constitution—when the original constitutional clauses appear to be obstacles to embarking on perilous new military adventures, the dominant social and political interests of the country impose a new legal framework whose principal function is to liquidate the once proclaimed democratic safeguards and turn what was formerly decreed unlawful into arbitrarily institutionalized “constitutional lawfulness.” Nor should we forget what has been happening in a most adverse, and in its trend dangerously authoritarian, sense to British and United States constitutionality during the last few years.

As I indicated at the beginning, we cannot attribute the chronic problems of our social interchanges to more or less easily corrigible political contingencies. So much is at stake, and we have historically rather limited time at our disposal in order to redress, in a socially sustainable way, the all too obvious grievances of the structurally subordinated social classes. The question of why?—concerning substantive matters, and not simply the contingent personal failures, even when they happen to be serious, as the frequently highlighted instances of widespread political corruption are—cannot be avoided indefinitely.

It is necessary to investigate the social causes and deep-seated structural determinations at the roots of the disturbing negative trends in politics and the law, in order to be able to explain their stubborn persistence and worsening at the present time. This question of why is what I wish to pursue now.

2. The nature of capital's structural crisis

In this respect it is necessary to clarify the relevant differences between types or modalities of crisis. It is not a matter of indifference whether a crisis in the social sphere can be considered a periodic/conjunctural crisis, or something much more fundamental than that. For, obviously, the way of dealing with a fundamental crisis cannot be conceptualized in terms of the the categories of periodic or conjunctural crises.

To anticipate a main point of this lecture, as far as politics is concerned the crucial difference between the two sharply contrasting types of crises in question is that the periodic or conjunctural crises unfold and are more or less successfully resolved within a given framework of politics, whereas the fundamental crisis affects that framework itself in its entirety. In other words, in relation to a given socioeconomic and political system we are talking about the vital difference between the more or less frequent crises in politics, as against the crisis of the established modality of politics itself, with qualitatively different requirements for its possible solution. It is the latter that we are concerned with today.

In general terms, this distinction is not simply a question of the apparent severity of the contrasting types of crises. For a periodic or conjunctural crisis can be dramatically severe—as the “Great World Economic Crisis of 1929–1933” happened to be—yet capable of a solution within the parameters of the given system. Misinterpreting the severity of a given conjunctural crisis as if it was a fundamental systemic crisis, as Stalin and his advisers did in the midst of the “Great World Economic Crisis of 1929–1933,” is bound to lead to mistaken and indeed voluntaristic strategies, like declaring social democracy to be the “main enemy” in the early 1930s, which could only strengthen, as in fact it tragically did strengthen, Hitler’s forces. And in the same way, but in the opposite sense, the “non-explosive” character of a prolonged structural crisis, in contrast to the “thunderstorms” (Marx) through which periodic conjunctural crises can discharge and resolve themselves, may also lead to fundamentally misconceived strategies, as a result of the misinterpretation of the absence of “thunderstorms” as if their absence was the overwhelming evidence for the indefinite stability of “organized capitalism” and of the “integration of the working class.” This kind of misinterpretation, to be sure heavily promoted by the ruling ideological interests under the pretenses of “scientific objectivity,” tends to reinforce the position of those who represent the self-justifying acceptance of the reformist accommodationist approaches in institutionalized—formerly genuinely oppositional—working-class parties and trade unions (now, however, “Her Majesty’s Official Opposition,” as the saying goes). But even among the deeply committed critics of the capital system, the same misconception regarding the indefinitely crisis-free perspective of the established order can result in the adoption of a self-paralyzing defensive posture, as we witnessed in the socialist movement in the last few decades.

It cannot be stressed enough, the crisis of politics in our time is not intelligible without being referred to the broad overall social framework of which politics is an integral part. This means that in order to clarify the nature of the persistent and deepening crisis of politics all over the world today we must focus attention on the crisis of the capital system itself. For the crisis of capital we are experiencing—at least since the very beginning of the 1970s—is

an all-embracing structural crisis.¹⁸

Let us see, summed up as briefly as possible, the defining characteristics of the structural crisis we are concerned with.

The historical novelty of today's crisis is manifest under four main aspects:

(1) its character is universal, rather than restricted to one particular sphere (e.g., financial, or commercial, or affecting this or that particular branch of production, or applying to this rather than that type of labour, with its specific range of skills and degrees of productivity, etc.);

(2) its scope is truly global (in the most threateningly literal sense of the term), rather than confined to a particular set of countries (as all major crises have been in the past);

(3) its time scale is extended, continuous—if you like: permanent—rather than limited and cyclic, as all former crises of capital happened to be.

(4) its mode of unfolding might be called creeping—in contrast to the more spectacular and dramatic eruptions and collapses of the past—while adding the proviso that even the most vehement or violent convulsions cannot be excluded as far as the future is concerned: i.e, when the complex machinery now actively engaged in “crisis-management” and in the more or less temporary “displacement” of the growing contradictions runs out of steam....

[Here] it is necessary to make some general points about the criteria of a structural crisis, as well as about the forms in which its solution may be envisaged.

To put it in the simplest and most general terms, a structural crisis affects the totality of a social complex, in all its relations with its constituent parts or sub-complexes, as well as with other complexes to which it is linked. By contrast, a non-structural crisis affects only some parts of the complex in question, and thus no matter how severe it might be with regard to the affected parts, it cannot endanger the continued survival of the overall structure.

Accordingly, the displacement of contradictions is feasible only while the crisis is partial, relative and internally manageable by the system, requiring no more than shifts—even if major ones—within the relatively autonomous system itself. By the same token, a structural crisis calls into question the very existence of the overall complex concerned, postulating its transcendence and replacement by some alternative complex.

The same contrast may be expressed in terms of the limits any particular social complex happens to have in its immediacy, at any given time, as compared to those beyond which it cannot conceivably go. Thus, a structural crisis is not concerned with the immediate limits but with the ultimate limits of a global structure....¹⁹

Thus, in a fairly obvious sense nothing could be more serious than the structural crisis of capital's mode of social metabolic reproduction which defines the ultimate limits of the established order. But even though profoundly serious in its all-important general parameters, on the face of it the structural crisis may not appear to be of such a deciding importance when compared to the dramatic vicissitudes of a major conjunctural crisis. For the “thunderstorms” through which the conjunctural crises discharge themselves are rather paradoxical in the sense that in their mode of unfolding they not only discharge (and

impose) but also resolve themselves, to the degree to which that is feasible under the circumstances. This they can do precisely because of their partial character which does not call into question the ultimate limits of the established global structure. At the same time, however, and for the same reason, they can only “resolve” the underlying deep-seated structural problems—which necessarily assert themselves again and again in the form of the specific conjunctural crises—in a strictly partial and temporally also most limited way. Until, that is, the next conjunctural crisis appears on society’s horizon.

By contrast, in view of the inescapably complex and prolonged nature of the structural crisis, unfolding in historical time in an epochal and not episodic/instantaneous sense, it is the cumulative interrelationship of the whole that decides the issue, even under the false appearance of “normality.” This is because in the structural crisis everything is at stake, involving the all-embracing ultimate limits of the given order of which there cannot possibly be a “symbolic/paradigmatic” particular instance. Without understanding the overall systemic connections and implications of the particular events and developments we lose sight of the really significant changes and of the corresponding levers of potential strategic intervention positively to affect them, in the interest of the necessary systemic transformation. Our social responsibility therefore calls for an uncompromising critical awareness of the emerging cumulative interrelationship, instead of looking for comforting reassurances in the world of illusory normality until the house collapses over our head.

Given the structural crisis of capital in our time, it would be an absolute miracle if that crisis did not manifest itself—and indeed in a profound and far-reaching sense—in the domain of politics. For politics, together with its corresponding framework of the law, occupies a vitally important position in the capital system. This is due to the fact that the modern state is the totalizing political command structure of capital, required (for as long as the now established reproductive order survives) in order to introduce some kind of cohesion (or effectively functioning unity)—even if a most problematical and periodically broken one—into the multiplicity of the centrifugal constituents (the productive and distributive “microcosms”) of the capital system.

This kind of cohesion can only be unstable because it depends on the always prevailing, but by its very nature changing, relation of forces. Once that cohesion is broken, due to a significantly changed relation of forces, it must be somehow reconstituted, so as to match the new relation of forces. Until, that is, it gets broken again. And so it goes on and on, as a matter of course taken for granted. This kind of problematically self-renewing dynamics applies both internally, among the dominant forces of the particular countries, and internationally, requiring periodic readjustments according to the changing power relations of the multiplicity of states in capital’s global order. This is how U.S. capital could acquire its global dominance in the twentieth century, in part through the internal dynamics of its own development, and in part through progressively asserting its imperialist superiority over the greatly weakened former imperialist powers—above all Britain and France—during and after the Second World War.

The big question in this regard is: how long can this kind of breaking and reconstituting the given system’s effectively functioning cohesion be carried on without activating capital’s structural crisis? The forced readjustment of the inter-state relation of forces does not seem to constitute an ultimate limit in this respect. After all, we must remember that humanity had to, and did, endure the horrors of two World Wars without calling into question the suitability of capital to remain the systemic controller of our social metabolic reproduction. This could be considered not only understandable but, worse than that, also acceptable,

because it always belonged to the normality of capital to stipulate that “there must be war if the adversary cannot be subdued in any other way.” The trouble is, though, that such “reasoning”—which was never more “reasoned” than the categorical assertion that “might is right, whatever the consequences”—is now totally absurd. For a Third World War could not stop at the point of subduing the denounced adversary only. It would destroy the whole of humanity. When Albert Einstein was asked, what kind of weapons the Third World War would be fought with, his answer was that he could not tell that, but he would absolutely guarantee that all subsequent wars would be fought with stone axes.

The role of politics in reconstituting the required cohesion was always great in the capital system. Quite simply, such a system could not be maintained without it. For it would tend to fall to pieces under the centrifugal force of its constituent parts. What appears in general under the normality of capital as a major political crisis, is in a deeper sense due to the need to produce a new cohesion at the overall societal level, in accord with the materially changed—or changing—relation of forces. Thus, for instance, monopolistic trends of development cannot be left simply to themselves without causing massive problems all around. They must be somehow brought into a relatively cohesive framework by politics—the totalizing command structure of capital. This must be done even if the demonstratively adopted regulatory steps often amount to no more than a blatant ideological rationalization and justification of the new relation of forces, to be further relaxed in favor of monopolistic (or quasi-monopolistic) corporations as the underlying trend dictates it. Naturally, international monopolistic developments take place on the basis of the same kind of determinations. But all of these processes are in principle compatible with capital’s normality, without necessarily resulting in the system’s structural crisis. Nor indeed in the structural crisis of politics. For, as far as the question of crisis is concerned, we are still talking about crises in politics—that is, particular crises unfolding and resolving themselves within the manageable parameters of the established political system—and not about the crisis of politics.

Established political institutions have the important function to manage, in a sense even to routinize, the most convenient and durable way of reconstituting the required societal cohesion, in tune with the ongoing material developments and correspondingly changing relation of forces, activating at the same time also the available cultural and ideological arsenal in the service of that end. In capitalist democratic societies this process in the political domain is usually managed in the form of more or less genuinely contested periodic parliamentary elections. Even when the necessary reconstituting readjustments cannot be contained within such orderly parameters, due to some major changes in the underlying relation of forces, bringing with them dictatorial types of political/military intervention, we may still talk about crises in politics containable by capital, provided that sooner or later we see a return to the “democratic constitutionality” characteristic of capital’s normality. Moreover, such developments are frequently controlled to a major extent from abroad, as the numerous instances of U.S. inspired and managed authoritarian rule in Latin America testify.

It is, of course, a very different matter when deeply authoritarian processes and trends of development begin to prevail not in subordinate regions but in the inner core—the structurally dominant parts—of the global capital system. In that case the former pattern of “double bookkeeping,” which consists in ruthlessly (even militarily imperialistically) dominating other countries while conforming at home to the “democratic rules of the game,” including the full observance of constitutionality, such double bookkeeping becomes

unmanageable. The displacement of contradictions is a systemic aspiration of capital, for as long as it is practicable. Given the structural hierarchies that prevail and must prevail at any given time also in inter-state relations, it is part of the system's normality that the dominant countries attempt to export—in the form of violent interventions, including wars—their internal contradictions into other, less powerful, parts of the system. This they do in the hope of internally securing, and in the midst of major collisions intensifying even across class boundaries, the required social cohesion.

However, this becomes increasingly difficult—notwithstanding all self-serving mythology about “universally beneficial globalization”—the more globally intertwined the capital system becomes. As a result, significant changes must unfold, with serious consequences everywhere. For the primary concern of the overwhelmingly dominant country, at the present time the United States, is to secure and retain control over the global capital system, as the supreme power of global hegemonic imperialism. But in view of the prohibitive material and human costs involved, which must be paid for one way or another, this design for global domination inevitably carries with it immense dangers as well as implied resistance, not only internationally but also internally. For that reason, in order to maintain authoritarian control over the capital system as a whole, under the conditions of a deepening structural crisis inseparable from capitalist globalization in our time, the unmistakable authoritarian trends must intensify not only on the international plane but also inside the dominant imperialist countries, in order to subdue all likely resistance. The grave violations of constitutionality we have already seen in the United States and in the legal/political framework of its close allies, and what we are even more likely to see in the future, as presaged in the measures and legal clauses codified to date, or still under rather one-sided “consideration” in the cynically manipulated legislative pipeline, are clear indications of this dangerous trend, under the impact of capital's structural crisis.

A revealing example of the tendentious legislative manipulation is the way in which important laws are drafted by the executive branch of government. Not surprisingly, therefore, a High Court judge in Britain had to complain about a vital issue of human rights by saying that “the laws passed had been drafted in a way that prevented the courts overturning control orders....The judge said, Charles Clarke [the British Home Secretary at the time] had made his decision to issue the order on one-sided information, but he was unable to envisage the circumstances allowing the court to quash the Home Secretary's decision. As a result, the judge said, he would have to leave the order in place, even though he ruled that it contravened human rights law.”²⁰

In the post-Second World War period, “the end of imperialism” was celebrated, somewhat hastily and naively. For in reality we saw only a long overdue readjustment in the international relation of forces, in line with the way in which the socioeconomic and political power relations have been objectively reshaped before and during the Second World War, as projected already in a key passage of President Roosevelt's First Inaugural Address advocating the “open door policy” everywhere, including the then colonial territories. The postwar readjustment carried with it, of course, the relegation of the former colonial powers to the second and third division, as subordinate forces of American imperialism. However, for a considerable number of years—in the postwar period of reconstruction and relatively undisturbed economic expansion which helped the successful establishment and financing of the welfare state—the major change heralded by the forcefully instituted “open door policy” (open to the United States, that is) was coupled with the illusion that imperialism itself had been forever relegated to the past. Moreover, it was also coupled with the broadly

diffused ideology, heavily infecting not only intellectuals but also some important organized movements of the traditional left, according to which the crises of the established socioeconomic and political order (admitted to only shortly before the war), belonged irretrievably to the past. This ideology was promoted—together with its ideological twin brother preaching “the end of ideology”—on the gratuitous assumption that we now lived in the world of “organized capitalism” which succeeded in mastering its contradictions on a permanent basis.

There had to be a rude awakening, also in politics and ideology, as the all-embracing and deepening structural crisis of the capital system asserted itself. In 1987, when there was a big crisis on the international stock exchanges, European merchant bankers were arguing in a televised public discussion that the reason for that crisis was the U.S. refusal to do something about its astronomical debt. The American banker aggressively retorted in the discussion that they should just wait until the United States begins to do something about its debt, and then they will see how enormous a crisis will explode in their face. And in a sense he was right. For it was extremely naïve to imagine that Europe could conveniently isolate itself from the brutal all-round impact of the chronically unresolved global structural crisis of which the U.S. debt is only one aspect, fully involving the self-interested complicity of the creditor countries.

In the last two decades we have seen the return of palpably blatant imperialism with a vengeance, after being successfully camouflaged as the postcolonial world of “democracy and liberty” for a very long time. And under the now prevailing circumstances it assumed a particularly destructive form. It now dominates the historical stage wedded to the open assertion of the necessity to engage, in the present and in the future, in “unlimited wars.” Moreover, as mentioned earlier, it did not shy away even from decreeing the “moral legitimacy” of using nuclear weapons—in a “preemptive” and “preventive” way—even against countries which did not possess such weapons.

Since the onset of capital’s structural crisis at the very beginning of the 1970s, the grave problems of the system have been accumulating and worsening in every field, not least in the domain of politics. Although, contrary to all evidence, the wishful thinking of “universally beneficial globalization” continues to be propagandized everywhere, we do not possess viable international political organs capable of redressing the clearly visible negative consequences of the ongoing trends of development. Even the limited potential of the United Nations is nullified by American determination to impose Washington’s aggressive policies on the world, as it happened at the time of embarking on the Iraq war under false pretenses.

Acting in that way the U.S. government arbitrarily presumed to itself the unchallengeable role of being the global government of the capital system as a whole, untroubled by the thought of the necessary ultimate failure of such a design. For it is not enough to unleash “overwhelming force,” as the dominant military doctrine prescribes, destroying the other side’s army and inflicting in the course of the undertaken military adventures immense “collateral damage,” as it is obscenely called, on the entire population. The sustainable permanent occupation and domination—including the untroubled and profitable economic exploitation—of the countries attacked in that way is a totally different matter. To imagine that even the greatest military superpower could do that, as a matter of “forced normality” imposed upon the whole world, and stipulated in that sense as the unalterable predicament of the “new world order,” is a totally absurd proposition.

Unfortunately, events and developments have been pointing in that direction for a very long time. For it was not President George W. Bush but President Bill Clinton who arrogantly declared that “there is only one necessary nation, the United States of America.” The neocons only wanted to live up to, and to enforce, that belief. But even the so-called liberals could preach nothing more positive than the same pernicious creed, on the whole in the same spirit. They were complaining that we have in the world today “too many states,” and they were advocating a so-called jurisdictional integration as the viable solution of such problem.²¹ That is to say, a grotesquely named “jurisdictional integration” which would actually mean the pseudo-legitimation of an authoritarian direct control of the deplored “too many states” by less than a mere handful of imperialist powers, above all the United States. This conception, despite its obfuscating terminology, is not very different from Thomas P. M. Barnett’s theorization of how to deal with the deplored “condition of disconnectedness” quoted above.

If there are “too many states” today, they cannot be wished out of existence. Nor can they be destroyed through military devastation, so as to establish on that basis the globalized happiness of the “new normality.” Legitimate national interests cannot be repressed indefinitely. Of all places in the world, the people of Latin America can eloquently testify to this truth.

The structural crisis of politics is an integral part of the capital system’s long festering structural crisis. It is ubiquitous, and consequently, it cannot be resolved by tampering in a self-perpetuating/apologetic way with any one of its isolated political aspects. Least of all could it be resolved by tampering with constitutionality itself, of which we can see many alarming instances. Not even by subverting and abolishing constitutionality altogether. If British High Court judges and Italian magistrates can protest against such attempts, no matter how aggressively the Berlusconi of this world denounce them even three days before a general election, so can we all do the same, with critical awareness of what is at stake.²² Our established mode of social metabolic control is in profound crisis, and it can be remedied only by instituting a radically different one, based on substantive equality that becomes actually feasible in our time, the first time ever in history. Many people rightly criticize the painfully obvious failures of parliamentary politics. But also in that respect, the necessary rethinking of the past and present of parliamentarism cannot lead to sustainable results without being inserted in its broad setting, as an integral part of the envisaged new social metabolic order, inseparable from the requirements of substantive equality.

Many people agree today that—because of its escalating destructiveness even on the environmental plane, as well as in the sphere of production and wasteful capital accumulation, not to mention the growing direct manifestations of the most irresponsible military destruction—our social metabolic order is not viable in the long run. However, what must be brought into the forefront of our critical awareness of the ongoing trends of developments and of their cumulative impact is the fact that the long run is becoming ever shorter in our time. Our responsibility is to do something about it before we run out of time.

István Mészáros is author of Socialism or Barbarism: From the “American Century” to the Crossroads (2001) and Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition (1995), both published by Monthly Review Press.

Notes

1. István Mészáros, *Socialism or Barbarism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 40.

2. "Seymour Hersh reports that one option involves the use of a bunker-buster tactical nuclear weapon, such as the B61-11, to ensure the destruction of Iran's main centrifuge plant at Natanz."
3. Sarah Baxter, "Gunning for Iran," The Sunday Times, April 9, 2006.
4. This April 17, 2006, initiative was preceded in the autumn of 2005 by a petition signed by more than 1800 physicists that repudiated new U.S. nuclear weapons policies that include preemptive use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear adversaries, <http://www.globalresearch.ca>.
5. John Pilger rightly castigated Prime Minister Tony Blair on this score. He wrote that: "Blair has demonstrated his taste for absolute power with his abuse of the Royal Prerogative, which he has used to bypass parliament in going to war." Pilger's article from which this passage is quoted was published in the New Statesman, April 17, 2006. We could also add that such devices as the "Royal Prerogative," as well as their equally problematical equivalents in other constitutions, have been invented on the whole precisely for the purpose of being abused, as self-legitimizing authoritarian escape clauses which can arbitrarily overrule democratic demands under difficult circumstances, instead of extending the powers of democratic decision making, as should be the case in situations of major crisis.
6. Baxter, "Gunning for Iran."
7. Richard Peet, "Perpetual War for a Lasting Peace," Monthly Review (January 2005), 55-56.
8. Peet, "Perpetual War for a Lasting Peace."
8. Max Boot, Savage Wars of Peace, quoted in "The Failure of Empire," the Editors, Monthly Review (January 2005), 7.
9. István Mészáros, O século XXI, socialismo ou barbárie (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2003) 10.
10. "Transcripts show No 10's hand in war legal advice." The Guardian, February 24, 2005. It should be mentioned here as a way of clarification that Lord Goldsmith's first opinion was highly sceptical of the legality of the envisaged war.
11. Philippe Sands, Lawless World (London: Penguin Books, 2005).
12. John Mortimer, "I cannot believe that a Labour Government would be so ready to destroy our law, our freedom of speech and our civil liberties," The Mail on Sunday, October 2, 2005.
13. "Terror Law an affront to justice," The Guardian, April 13, 2006.
14. "John Pilger sees freedom die quietly," New Statesman, April 17, 2006.
15. Japan Press Weekly (March 2006), 26.
16. Manuel Marulanda Vélez, "Carta enviada pelo líder histórico das FARC da Colômbia a Álvaro Leyva, candidato às Eleições Presidenciais marcadas para 24 de Maio de 2006," resistir.info, April 2006.
17. Vélez, "Carta enviada pelo líder histórico das FARC da Colômbia."

18. I wrote in November 1971, in the preface to the third edition of Marx's Theory of Alienation, that the unfolding events and developments "dramatically underlined the intensification of the global structural crisis of capital."

19. István Mészáros, Beyond Capital, 680–82. In chapter 18 the issue is discussed in much greater detail.

20. "Terror Law an affront to justice," The Guardian, April 13, 2006. Another article in the same issue of The Guardian, by Tania Branigan, the paper's political correspondent, reported that "Critics claimed that the Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill would allow the government to change almost any law it wished—even introducing new criminal offences or altering the constitution—without scrutiny.... Tories and Lib Dems had dubbed it the 'parliamentary scrutiny abolition bill.'"

21. Martin Wolf, Why Globalization Works? (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

22. Giorgio Ruffolo, "Un paese danneggiato," La Repubblica, April 7, 2006.

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