

Politics Today: Interview with Wolfgang Streeck

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1) We cannot not begin with the ongoing war in Ukraine. It appears on some level to be very difficult to assess or analyze such a situation which is not only heated but also still intensely developing. In addition, none of us is a military analyst. But we nevertheless want to start with a rather huge question: What should we expect from this war?

However the war ends, or more likely: drags on, it will result in a resurrection under American leadership of what is called “the West”, with Western Europe closely tied to the United States, and NATO rather than the European Union as the dominant international organization for Western Europe. For a long time, there will be no rapprochement between Western Europe and Russia, therefore no French-led third-party role for Europe in the evolving post-neoliberal global system. Russia will be allied with China, Europe with the United States, both blocs getting ready to battle over global dominance or, alternatively, the structure of a bipolar world order. NATO will be the European arm of the United States, the EU the bridgehead of the United States on the other side of the Atlantic.

2) You have very insistently and incisively analyzed the internal deadlocks and problems within the current representational politics in the EU for example. Is there any and if so what kind of political action, political options, political agents do you identify on an international stage?

The EU will play much less of a role in the next one or two decades, and its internal problems will be overlaid by its service for the resurrected West. The United States will want the EU to be less picky about “rule of law” in its Eastern frontier states; they will also want the EU to admit into membership Ukraine, Moldavia, the West Balkans, even Georgia. This will make enormous fiscal demands on the EU and its member states, adding to their obligation under NATO to increase their defense spending to two percent of GDP. The EU will become a receptacle for collective-European public debt, on the model of the NGEU Corona Recovery Fund. Old tensions between German Atlanticism and French Gaullism will be resolved in favor of the former. As unprecedented financial resources will be needed for supporting the Eastern European front states and upgrading the European military, financial support for Mediterranean countries, in particular Italy, will come under pressure.

3) One of your diagnoses led you to argue that -- in difference from the famous saying that this is more difficult to do than to imagine the end of the world -- one can in fact imagine the end of capitalism. But, as you then added, this imaginable end is not a happy end, not an end that ends well, but rather one that ends worse and in a disintegration that is

more disintegrating than the already existing one. What are the political implications of this? Does a new vision of politics only emerge when one thinks through the absolute disaster of the existing political-economic conditions?

It is interesting to see how the diversities of capitalism are now being overlaid by, or associated with, the diversities of states and state blocs. There is Western market capitalism, Chinese communist party capitalism, Russian crony capitalism, all with their own class of oligarchs, and all armed to their teeth and willing to go to war if they feel they must. Internally each model of capitalism is full of conflicts and contradictions, which is why they have become so reliant and dependent on strong states or state blocs, and on external enemies for their internal integration. How stable will all this be? I cannot make any prediction here. Certainly, inequality is continuing to rise everywhere, collective goods are declining, life risks for ordinary people are growing. But up to now we still are in a Gramscian interregnum: the old order is dying but no new order is as yet being born, the latter because there are no relevant political forces with a vision beyond capitalism.

4) To follow up. You have written about the crisis of capitalism and the forms or possibilities of ending it. What we would like to discuss a bit with you is perhaps grimmer than your positions. We want to read the famous sentence from *The Communist Manifesto*: "capitalism produces its own gravediggers." We think that the far more frightening realization we have come to grasp is that capitalism does reproduce its own logic, indefinitely, and it does meet an immanent limit. But this limit is not socialism nor communism, but barbarism: the utter destruction of natural and social substance in a "downward spiral" that does not recognize any "reality testing" in this destruction. In this sense, the "gravediggers" that capitalism produces are gravediggers of both capitalism and communism. Is it the time that all emancipatory projects should not use the immanent logic of capitalism on pointing a way out nor wait for the collapse of capitalism in the hope that we will not be dragged down along with it. In this sense, what can be done?

A self-destructive evolutionary logic without a happy ending, ever more destructive as it proceeds, annihilating not just itself but also any chance of a future redemption? Could be. There is no lack of dystopian scenarios one can come up with. Perhaps the only hope is that people will at some point discover their creativity, their agency, their sense of honor, their solidarity and stand up to do, or fight for, a different, less aggressive, more peaceful social order. It may take a long time, given modern means of individual and mass control and

the disorganization of human society at the global level, compared to the organization of contemporary capitalism and the modern means of violence.

5) During and after every crisis, say the financial crisis of 2008, the on-going crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, etc., the real victim of the financial crisis was not capital, but the Left itself. Yet again, the Left proved incapable of providing even a minimal idea of an alternative to global capitalism. What do you think is the reason for the Left's inability to offer an alternative?

The task is gigantic: inventing a new society and a new way of life. I think we must take leave of the modernist illusion that a new world can be created by intelligent design and implemented by revolutionary state power – the Marxist-Leninist way of changing the world. We should admit that we do not know what the better life will be like that we hope for. Nor can we expect capitalism to be canceled the way communism was canceled by Boris Yeltsin: From tomorrow on capitalism! The rise of a new order will most likely take place gradually, unnoticed first, through the accumulated expediences invented by people trying to cope with the deficiencies of the old regime. Socialists may have to be like sociologists rather than urban planners: watch what is going on and try to draw out the lines that they see, to get a sense of where they may lead. What the new order is may be possible to understand only when it has already come into existence. But of course, there is no guarantee that it will.

6) There are some contemporary economists and social theorists who are arguing that we no longer live in capitalism, but we have 'regressed' to techno-feudalism, or corporate feudalism, neo-feudalism etc. What is your take on this? Did the current crisis of capitalism change its mode of appearance but not at all its mode of operation or are we witnessing something profoundly novel?

Capitalism has always changed its appearance, from early to high to late capitalism, from trade to industrial to financial capitalism, from liberal to democratic to neoliberal capitalism, from Italian to Dutch to English to American to Chinese capitalism etc. etc. All the time its imminent demise was predicted by the best and the brightest, Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, and on the other side of the spectrum Weber, Sombart, Schumpeter – they all expected capitalism to end in their lifetime. It did not of course end. What all these capitalisms had in common is that as economic modes of production they depended for their stability on the progress of an endless accumulation of capital in private hands, for the purpose of

breeding with it more capital – and capitalist societies were ones whose order and prosperity depended on successful private capital accumulation. There are all sorts of reasons why this process cannot go on forever – and all sorts of interventions, and circumstances, why it nevertheless did go on until now, with occasional interruptions, called crises. We will see how long this will last. Capitalism is a historical phenomenon, it had a beginning, so it must have an end. But we don't know when that will be, what it will be like, and what will come next.

7) How do you see or understand the relation between theory and politics? Should we decouple them, or should politics operate only under the condition of being informed by theoretical reflections? Would you agree with the statement that politics which does not think is administration?

Yes, but I have a less elevated idea of politics. It is not just politicians or technocrats that do politics, not just the elites. We all, intentionally or not, act on, generate, destroy the collective foundations of our human existence. Theory you need to become aware of the political nature of your life, to not mistake it for a merely private life.

8) What do you think of the role of the state today? Can the state be an object of emancipatory politics, or should we focus our attention to the forms of non-statal forms of organisations? Can emancipatory politics exist within the coordinates and confines of the state?

“The state” is too general a concept for me, too indeterminate. There are small states and big states, imperial and peripheral states, states that can manage capitalism by coercing compliance of workers and states that can manage capitalism only by making concessions to workers. In any case, states cannot be considered without the societies that they face and organize – the political parties, the unions of workers, the social movements etc. Trade unions, cooperatives, self-help groups of all sorts – they must conquer space for themselves outside of state and market and protect it against their intrusion. All politics today takes place, as you put it, within the confines of states. But within those confines emancipatory politics must have, must build spaces of its own, of social autonomy, optimally protected by the state's constitution, just as it needs spaces that are not governed by the law of the market but, instead, by voluntary solidarity.

9) What are the conditions for politics in times of ecological crisis and ecological catastrophes? Is there a political grounding of such politics or

does politics need to start somewhere else, say in economy or does it even have to have a more material and natural basis?

I only have a very general answer here, which is that anti-capitalist politics must develop non-capitalist relations and practices inside and against capitalism, if possible with the assistance of a reformist state, in a struggle for collective goods, non-capitalist forms of enterprise and banking, less mobile capital, social rather than private property etc. etc. This includes solidary behavior in private everyday life, the acceptance of responsibility for one's actions, what one says and does, as a basis for more, if you will, militant kinds of political action. Politics from below, everyday politics. The labor movements of the nineteenth century were organized, not just in parties and trade unions, but also in consumer cooperatives, reading circles etc. Are there, could there be equivalents for this today? If not, forget about anti-capitalist, socialist, communist politics.

11) Do you think that Marxism is redeemable as a conceptual, intellectual and political apparatus or framework - and can there be any contemporary sense of what thinkers previously referred to as communism?

There are too many Marxisms around to answer this question sensibly. To me the Marxist tradition is an indispensable building bloc of any useful theory of society, in particular modern society: because of its premise that societies, certainly capitalist societies, are subject to objective forces, to a proper dynamic of their own, an evolutionary logic vested in their structure, not in anyone's action, a logic that has to do with the means of production and reproduction, that shapes social life and in this challenges human agency, the capacity of humans, individually and collectively, to ride or suppress that logic in their collective interest.

As to communism, to me it is something that exists, a real condition of social life: it is the common ground on which any society, including capitalist society, is based. Without that common ground there can be no human life. Capitalist individualism denies that communism exists, or in any case denies that it serves a useful function. Capitalism's project is to absorb the communism of society into the market, to commercialize it, replace it with monetized trade relations. A post-capitalist "communist" society is one that recognizes the need for collective goods, goods that do not create envy because they are the property of all, that are equally available to all of a society's members – and a society free from the need to be subservient to unending capital accumulation in private hands, at the penalty of its impoverishment.