Rage against the Rule of Money

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Rage. These are days of rage. Not just Fridays, but every day. Rage in North Africa and the Arab world, of course, but also on the streets of Athens, of Dublin, of Rome, Paris, Madrid, Lisbon, a deep, smouldering rage in Mexico.

An age of crisis, such as the present, is an age of rage. It is an age of frustrated expectations, frustrated hopes, frustrated life. We want to study at the university, but it is too expensive and there are no grants. We need good health care, but we do not have the money to pay for it. We need homes, we can see homes standing empty, but they are not for us. Or quite simply, for the millions and millions of people in the world who are starving: we want to eat: we can see that the food is there, that there is plenty of food for everyone in the world, but something stands between us and the food – money, or rather the fact that we don’t have enough of it.

And so we rage. And we rage all the more because we do not know what to do with our rage, we do not know how to use our rage to make the world a different place.

We rage against the obvious, against the government – against Erdogan, against Berlusconi, Papandreou, Gadaffi, Mubarak. But we know that that there is no answer to be found there. Our anger is not just against the politicians, but against the poverty and the frustration that those politicians represent. We know, or at least those of us who have lived in democracies know, that a change in leader changes very little, that representative democracy holds our rage entrapped: like a rat in a maze with no exit we run from one party to another, from one leader to another, but there is no way out, things do not get better, cannot get better because behind all the political power stands another, greater power, the power of capital, the power of money.

Our rage keeps running down dead-end streets. But that is dangerous, for we know that it can easily turn bitter. It becomes stifled rage, suffocated rage, a rage without hope, a rage that easily leads to domestic violence, to racism, to fascism even. What is the rise of the right-wing throughout the world if it is not the expression of this rage without hope, without perspective.

In this rage of burnt hopes, the rage often does not appear, all that we see is the burnt hopes, the depression, the anti-depressants, the drugs. Where is the rage, people ask, when it seems that the world is characterised by acceptance, by submission to the dictates of the rich and powerful. It is a structural rage, a rage built in to the frustration upon which the world is constructed. It is a rage that may not show itself, but that is always latent, always threatening, waiting to be touched. A rage which perhaps those of us who have the good fortune to live far from the centres of power and money can discern more easily. A rage which we respect because it is our rage. A rage which is the only possible source of radical social change and which we who think about social change must seek to ride, as if it were a tiger.

Rage, then, as the starting point. But what, then? Where, then? Where do we go
with our rage? Our rage against the world around us is justified rage, because the world
is an unjust, destructive and suicidal world. Our rage is more than justified, it is
righteous, righteous rage, dignified rage. A rage that pushes towards a different world, a
rage that will be satisfied only when we create a world that is not based on the
management of anger.

We rage, then, not just against the politicians, not just against the bankers, not
just against the rich and the capitalists: certainly we rage against them, but they are
powerful only to the extent that they serve a greater ruler, Money. We rage against the
rule of money.

That does not mean that we do not want money, necessarily. Money is the form
that wealth takes in this society, and as the producers of that wealth, we all want to
participate in it. In the present society, no matter how austerely we may (or may not)
like to live, we need money to live and to realise our projects. So yes, we want more
money, for ourselves, for the universities, for schools and hospitals, for gardens and
parks, for projects that point towards a different world, and so on. But we do not want a
world that is ruled by money, we do not want a world in which the richness that we
produce takes the form of money, we do not want a world in which money is the
dominant form of social cohesion, the medium through which our social relations are
established.

Money is seductive. It has a face of fairness and equality. And yet we
know it is not so. The existence of money as the dominant force of social cohesion has
disastrous, possibly fatal consequences for humanity. Money deprives us of the
possibility of self-determination: the existence of money as social cohesion means that
the force which shapes social development is a force that nobody controls. Governments
pretend to control the development of society, but again and again it is made clear that
they are subject to the movement of money. They can try to control that movement, but
they cannot control it. Money has its own dynamic, the dynamic of self-expansion, the
dynamic of capital. Money is constantly seeking to expand itself and will flow to
wherever the possibilities of expansion are greatest. Ultimately of course the expansion
of money depends upon the production of surplus value, the constant intensification of
exploitation and the uncontrollable drive of faster-faster-faster. The rule of money is the
rule of capital. The rule of money is the subjection of the world to a dynamic that
nobody controls, a dynamic that creates enormous contrasts between rich and poor, that
generates violence and war, a dynamic that destroys the other forms of life on earth, that
destroys the preconditions of human existence: a dynamic that is not only destructive
but suicidal. Money is a great bulldozer tearing up the world around us. Money is an
insidious force penetrating ever more aspects of our lives and of our relations with other
people. The movement of money is the movement of social disintegration. Money holds
society together but it does so in a way that tears it apart and leads it towards its own
destruction. Money destroys community.

Rage, then, rage against the rule of money! Yet it seems so hopeless, so
ridiculous. Rage against the police and you throw a stone. Rage against the banks and
you break a window. But how do you rage against money? It seems like going out in the
street and beating the air. Or going to the sea and kicking the water. Money seems so
natural, simply part of the atmosphere that we breathe.
And yet it is not so. In fact our lives are a constant struggle against the rule of money, a constant struggle to create spaces or moments that we protect from the assault of money, a constant struggle to push back the rule of money. We create no-go areas against money, we put up signs that say “money, stay out, capital, stay out! Here the people rule! Here, in our relation with our children and our friends, here in our schools, here in our hospitals there is a different dynamic at work. Money stay out! Here the law of value has no place, here we are creating and defending different values!” And we have many different names for these moments or spaces, we call them love or friendship or class solidarity or comradeship or trust or anti-power or community or communism. Communism, understood in this way, is simply part of the movement of everyday struggle: that is what makes the creation of a communist society a real possibility.

History is class struggle, of course, but for the past few hundred years class struggle has been focussed on money: on the one hand the struggle to impose money as the all pervasive social nexus, seeping into every corner of our lives, and on the other hand the struggle at every level to break the deadly dynamic of the rule of money (the rule of capital) and create-and-defend different forms of relating to the people around us.

We used to think that we had pushed the rule of money back decisively. That was perhaps the great hope, achievement and finally myth of the twentieth century. We thought that in a big part of the world, as a result of the Russian, Chinese and other revolutions, money no longer determined social development. And not only that: with the welfare state in many other countries, the rule of money seemed to have been pushed out of areas like health, education and, to a lesser extent, housing. There was a reality in that: the great struggles of the twentieth century really did push back the rule of money in ways that significantly altered the quality of life. To be able to go to the doctor without worrying about money, to be able to send our children to school without worrying about the cost – they are achievements that should not be dismissed, achievements that must be defended where they still exist.

Yet the pushing back of the rule of money was not the breaking of its power that we hoped for. Under the massive assaults of those who fought for a different world, money retreated and regrouped, gathering its forces for a new assault. The form of this retreat was the Keynesian welfare state and the socialist states. In both cases the state was the key. The state seemed to provide the alternative to the rule of money: the rule of the state replaced the rule of money, it seemed, and of course the state was democratic, subject to the rule of the people. But the state cannot replace the rule of money because it depends on money for its existence: it depends on money raised through taxation or the sale of the products produced by the state enterprises. And the rule of the state is certainly not the rule of the people because the state, as a form of organisation based on the administration of society by full-time officials, systematically excludes people from running their own lives. In other words, the great struggles against the rule of money had at their core a weakness: they were focussed on a form of organisation, the state, that appeared to stand against the rule of money but in fact prolonged and extended that rule. The great dynamic of death was not broken.

To put it in other words. Money is a form of social cohesion, of social nexus, that rebounds upon what we do, how we do it and every detail of our lives. Money shapes our doing but at the same time it is produced and reproduced by the way that we
do the things we do. Money transforms our activity, our doing, into labour or, more precisely, into abstract or alienated labour, and it is this abstract labour that produces and reproduces the rule of money. The rule of money is the rule of abstract labour: each reinforces the other. The only way of breaking the rule of money (the dynamic of death) is by transforming the activity on which it is based, by breaking abstract labour and replacing it by a different doing, a concrete self-determining activity. But neither the socialist revolutions nor the welfare state did anything at all to break the hold of labour. On the contrary, they strengthened enormously the dominance of labour over alternative forms of activity and so strengthened the rule of money which they apparently sought to undermine.

And so in last part of the twentieth century, money reappears in all the arrogance of its unbroken power. The great revolutions are swept aside, the welfare state is openly attacked. Money returns in all its violence, driving millions and millions of peasants from the land, transforming the cities of the world into gigantic slums, subjecting all life to the rule of profit, measuring everything. Money, it is proclaimed, is the only legitimate form of social cohesion, the only rational way in which people can come together. Bow down to the rule of money! Abstract labour is the only way of doing, and abstract labour is the rule of faster-faster-faster. Bow down to the rule of money, bow down to the rule of labour!

But people do not bow down, or at least not sufficiently. We still want to live even if we do not have a job. We still want to love, not just to have relations measured in money. We may work faster, but we cannot keep up with the faster-faster-faster demanded by money, by capital. And so, already from the 1920s, but more and more as the century goes on, popular resistance enters into money as a maggot enters into an apple, and grows within it. The only way in which money/capital can reproduce itself and maintain its rule over the world is on the basis of an ever-increasing expansion of debt. But this makes it increasingly unstable and subject to periodic crisis. The period of capital’s arrogance (neo-liberalism) has been characterised by financial instability leading to the great crash of 2008.

Financial crisis is the explosive manifestation of money’s incapacity to provide the social cohesion that it claims to provide. Money, although it holds the world together, never does so as successfully as it claims. A very big part of the world’s population is simply left on the margins by money: they receive very little money and find ways to survive (or not) without passing through the money form. In financial crisis, the failure of cohesion explodes: More and more people are excluded from the circuit of money, or only marginally or precariously included. The fragility of the rule of money is revealed. More and more people are forced, often against their will, to find other forms of social cohesion, other forms of reproducing themselves. In times of high unemployment, for example, and especially in those countries where there is little or no form of unemployment benefit, the solidarity of the extended family becomes crucial.

In times of crisis, the antagonism between money and other forms of social cohesion intensifies. Precisely in the moment of its failure, money (with the support of its loyal servants, the politicians) does everything possible to maintain and strengthen its rule: that is the significance of the crises and European Union and IMF interventions in Greece, Ireland and Portugal.
And on our side? Rage and confusion. But also more than that. The drive against the rule of money is still there, still the key to our humanity and our hope. And now it is no longer focussed on the state: the illusion of the state as the alternative to money has been greatly weakened, though it is still present. Now the drive against the rule of money increasingly takes the form of the creation of interstitial spaces, spaces or moments in which experimental forms of social cohesion are created on a different basis, consciously following a different logic. These are the “no-go areas” that we saw earlier, the spaces of love, trust or communism that are rooted in everyday life but now push further in an open attack on the rule of money. These can be seen as cracks in the texture of capitalist domination, cracks in the rule of money, moments or spaces that push against-and-beyond existing society.

These cracks come from different directions and often join up, and often do not. They include those forms of solidarity that people develop out of necessity, simply as a way of survival: these have been crucial in the uprising in the cities of Latin American cities over the last twenty years, for example. They include too (in a contradictory but very important manner) the struggles to protect what remains of the last great push against the rule of money, the free education, health care and other services provided (albeit inadequately and oppressively) through the state – see for example the current struggles against the cuts in state expenditure in Britain. And thirdly, there are the million initiatives and experiments consciously created outside the structures of the state: the thousands and thousands and thousands of revolts and experiments throughout the world where people are saying “No, we shall not accept the rule of money, we shall not accept the rule of capital, we shall do things in a different way”. So many refusals-and-creations, so many dignities: sometimes big, sometimes small, sometimes pathetic, always contradictory. House occupations, social centres, community gardens, alternative radio stations, free software movements, peasant rebellions in which the people say “Enough! Now the people will rule”, factory occupations, university events such as this in which students and teachers agree that they will concentrate on the only scientific question that remains to us, namely how can we stop the headlong rush of humanity towards self-destruction? A world of different refusals-and-creations, a world of dignities. A political economy of resistance, an anti-economy of rebellion, the embryos perhaps of a new world, a world of many worlds.

These cracks are our defence-and-attack against the murderous and suicidal dynamic of the rule of money. These cracks are the only hope that humanity can still have a future. The only hope of creating a radically different world is through the creation, expansion, multiplication and confluence of these cracks, these dignities, these spaces or moments of refusal and creation.

Rage, then, rage against the rule of money. Break the windows of the banks, shoot the politicians, kill the rich, hang the bankers from the lampposts. Certainly all that is very understandable. But it is money we must kill, not its servants. And the only way to kill money is to create different social cohesions, different ways of coming together, different ways of doing things. Kill money, kill labour. Here, now.