

“More courage to Utopian Thinking”

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In his recent interview with the journal ‘Theorie und Praxis der Sozialen Arbeit’ (led by Marius Mühlhausen), Stephan Lessenich talks about his new book, what it feels like to be treated like a “lefty romanticist” and of his persistent conviction that we need a new sociological analysis of the global economy.

Prof. Lessenich, a while ago Barack Obama said that if we could choose to be born in any period in human history without knowing which nationality, gender or ethnicity we would have, we would choose the present. Do you agree with him? Are we living in the best of all times?

Sure, we would pick the present. Or at least, we would if we were making these considerations *in this part* of the world. Probably most people would say something like “I’d rather be living today than 100, or 70, or even 30 years ago.” And it does make sense! Average Germans in today’s German society are doing much better than they were in the past.

You emphasize that these considerations are being made *here*. But you must admit that the global infant mortality rate is decreasing, as is the number of people living in absolute poverty. At the same time, more and more people are learning to read and write and the economy in the global south is growing. Wouldn’t you say that, from a global perspective, capitalism has improved the lives of many people?

I wouldn’t contradict the mere description. If we agree with Obama, in most parts of the world those born today are better off than those born 20 years ago. Still, I don’t completely support the progressive perspective, but would rather differentiate a bit more. In fact, we cannot fully ascribe all this progress to capitalist modernization. After all, capitalism alone doesn’t reduce child mortality. Medical institutions, such as public health care systems which are ultimately to be seen as parts of the welfare state, also play a role.

But don’t you agree that the value necessary to run such institutions is gained through the capitalist economy?

Oh, I don’t doubt the success of the capitalism system at creating value. However, I find your story a bit one-sided, to say the least. Let me offer a counter-story: While *productive* on the one hand, capitalism simultaneously works as an incredibly *destructive* system. Undoubtedly, over the last two decades there has been an upward trend for certain groups among the world population. At the same time, we are living under conditions which allow rich societies to transfer the costs of their consumption to distant locations instead of carrying those costs themselves. And that’s a problem!

With regard to the topic of your new book ‘Neben uns die Sintflut. Die Externalisierungsgesellschaft und ihr Preis’: Here you also refer to our world as a society of ‘externalization.’ What exactly do you mean by this?

By ‘externalization,’ I mean the dynamic through which rich societies, such as our highly industrialized countries of the global north, transfer the economic, ecological and social costs of their production and consumption to other regions of the world. Some economic sectors create major environmental devastation, not here, but elsewhere. Likewise, production carried out under inhuman, unbearable conditions is outsourced. The past two decades have once again proven in the most radical manner how the growth strategy of rich societies is based on this very logic of externalization. Their particular power resource lies in their capacity to find means and ways to impose the costs of their expensive way of life onto others.

Additionally, you’re making a case for a more sociological perspective on global relations. Can you explain your reasons for this?

There are two reasons. If we want to understand unequal living conditions on a global scale, we cannot limit ourselves to statistical income indicators. One cannot only ask if — and possibly to what extent — gross domestic products are converging, for example. We need to look at all social and cultural conditions! In China, for example, an increase in income goes along with a massive exploitation of the labor force. People who can be assumed to have acquired a new socioeconomic status far above the statistical poverty line are still working under conditions far beyond everything we can imagine by our standards.

And the second reason?

Well, the second reason is that when seeking to identify those responsible for these global discrepancies, the everyday practices of average citizens living in richer industrial societies also need to be considered. If we do this, we arrive at the following conclusion: Those average citizens also support this dynamic of constant externalization with their particular way of life. And that’s not a moralistic statement, just an attempt to complete the analysis. Not only wealthy capitalists profit from these conditions. However indirectly, and without being in a dominant position, so do millions or even billions of people living in the developed world.

But doesn’t the bottom line remain the same?

Yes, but this is the only way to understand why there is so little fundamental change, and why capitalism is still such a stable and robust system. People think along the lines of “Look, after all we’re moving forward, are we not?” They live under the impression that maintaining global capitalism will eventually even out living conditions on a global scale. They’re saying “We’re not the ones responsible for this—the elite few in power and the super-rich they are protecting are! They’re the ones causing all the exploitation and eco-

logical devastation! It's them we need to tax more heavily!" and the like. And I agree! But this alone will not solve our problem.

But isn't this an internalization of global patterns of consumptions? How could individuals change that?

Well, one could get the idea that each and every one of us is responsible for the current conditions. This would be an extreme contradiction of my own previous work, since I have always placed a strong critical emphasis on the question of subjectivation, e.g. on the restructuring of the welfare state through of the enforcement of 'self-responsibility.' You could say that I'm doing the exact same thing now, except that I'm trying to draw attention to world society and global inequality mechanisms.

Yes, your critics could say that you finally learnt your lesson.

Well, and in part that's true. For example, I believe that a radical critique of 'the system' or 'institutions' alone can only take you to a certain point. It's not enough to focus on 'those few at the top' or 'capital' or even 'capitalism' as abstract figurations. Instead, we need to ask how this complex is maintained and secured. When we do this, individual practices come into focus. At the same time, however, we should not neglect how individuals are bound into structures and social relationships. For an individual who wants to live a successful life, there is no way out of this system of production and consumption. In order to develop successful counterstrategies, we need to focus on the individual's entanglement in these relationships.

But shouldn't we differentiate a bit more? For example, in German society we can identify particular groups that are causing high externalization costs.

We know that practices of externalization are more widespread in the upper social strata, as defined by income and fortune, than in the lower ones. We can basically say that the working class was bribed by the upper class through a rise in their living standards. And because workers – consciously or unconsciously – knew that they were profiting from this colonial and/or post-colonial dynamic, there was little room left for international solidarity in their everyday consumer practice. I would really like to highlight the double-edged character of this issue. If we don't, we limit our analysis to the logic of being dominated, while neglecting that those being dominated are also, at the same time, supporting and participating in this domination.

When talking about protests against capitalism from the left, as for example last year in the case of the G-20 summit in Hamburg, time and again the objection arises that only those who can 'afford' criticizing do so. However, others who are hoping to improve their situation would require globalization, open markets, and capitalism *in toto*.

This is indeed an interesting phenomenon and only these contradictions can explain the relative stability of global capitalism. And ultimately it is due to these perfidious coalitions, such as between capital and labor here in Germany. So why has neoliberalism worked so well over the last three decades? Because of the promise that with new forms

of economic coordination – less state and more market – we can keep on creating wealth and maintain the growth rates necessary for underprivileged groups to improve their situation.

And that's why there is little hope for change beyond the regime of externalization in democracies? After all, the alternatives don't seem so attractive...

The core of the problem is that all our ideas about what is desirable depend on economic growth. And I think that is what drives those perfidious coalitions between those who have a lot right now, and those who hope to get a lot in the future. What's more, the politicians in power depend on productive industries creating wealth. Every politician who says "We have to tax corporations so you're going to be much worse off now" will get into trouble.

So does a just economic system require an authoritarian government?

Well, only if an enlightened caste of intellectuals, politicians or even sociologists would say "Hey, folks, you're living your lives all wrong! Growth is destructive! That's why we're taking charge—to delight you with our new post-growth regime!" That would be authoritarianism from the left, which would neglect the public interest. There is one thing which we should remind ourselves of. Historically speaking, the urge for growth has not always just been there — it was established after World War II. Only today does it appear as though it were some kind of quasi-natural state. We tend to forget that civilization has for the longest time developed without massive exploitation of fossil resources and without development indicators, which we know today. Not every proposed alternative to our current configuration of economy and society is authoritarian in its aim.

But still the question remains: how can social and economic structures be transformed?

We need a public debate on the costs of the growth model that western industrial societies have established over the last sixty or seventy years. Perhaps such a debate would help us find the compromise that will allow us to stop living at the expense of third parties. I can't see much authoritarianism there, but Utopia. We need more courage to Utopian thinking instead of fear!

So far, we seem to be doing quite well at hiding our own externalization activities.

I think that, in recent decades, rich societies like the German one have developed a broad range of instruments to make global conditions in support of externalization invisible. So fundamental change can only happen when we immediately confront the problems caused by externalization in different locations. And by problems I am not referring to the Marxist topos of '*Verelendung*' (impoverishment). People do not necessarily have to live under bad conditions in order for a change to occur. But they have to be confronted with the realities beyond the scope of their everyday lives.

In a way this is already happening, as people attempt to cross the Mediterranean.

Well, we can always try to ignore the problem by changing the TV channel or turning to a different page in the newspaper. But this becomes more complicated once those people

are crowding our front doors. The more we realize that the increasing number of refugees in the last two years is not an exceptional 'boom' but rather a permanent phenomenon, the greater the opportunity for public debate. I think that the increase in numbers has not only caused people to say "Oh my God, we need to lock ourselves in!" but has also helped them to realize that we must no longer close our eyes to this.

In his current book "Über Grenzen denken" (Thinking across borders), philosopher Julian Nida-Rümelin makes a case for the right of national collectives to self-determination. Given that immigration policies are legitimized through democratic elections within the national framework, could one not argue that we can legitimately choose to ignore the fate of people from far-off countries?

What drives Nida-Rümelin is the question of where to draw the demarcation line for any given community, that unit within which people can exchange ideas and opinions and legitimately decide how they want to live as a society. Now, if we say that the nation state is a historically-developed institution, and also the only imaginable and only legitimate framework within which citizens can decide how they want to live, this does make sense. If so, then the borders as we know them today are not only functionally but also morally appropriate. And then we also arrive at the idea that there have to be many segmented spaces within which people decide how they want to live.

And do you agree with this idea?

I think if we take into account the existing structural dependencies at the global level, we cannot support such an argument. If we consider the current world society, we cannot help but recognize that the ability to decide how we want to live our lives—meaning the right to collective self-determination within national borders—does structurally depend on supplies made outside of those borders.

And this makes us responsible for others?

If you'd like to make a moral argument, yes. But you could also argue for a functional dependence *between* those self-determined communities, and this takes us to the work of classical sociologist Emile Durkheim who, in his discussions of solidarity, also argued from a technical and functional perspective rather than a moral one. Essentially, he said that whoever depends on another person must practice solidarity. And when you look at the world society as one society based on division of labor, in the sense that raw materials and industrial goods must be made and immaterial labor must be carried out somewhere, we realize that there is a mutual dependency. And this has to be taken into account when talking about self-determination. In my opinion, and despite the fact that national borders will persist at least for a while, it is theoretically and morally inappropriate to ignore these connections. The right to collective self-determination cannot be evaluated independently from these relationships within world society.

But, realistically speaking, it must be clear that our welfare state cannot take care of everybody who suffers from externalization.

The goal would be to acknowledge that human beings are entitled to certain minimum social rights – or, to put it differently, to a maximum of guaranteed social rights. Although we are very far away from this goal, actually it's not so unrealistic—as long as we don't translate it into 'we need the German welfare state on a global scale now' but rather 'let's secure basic social rights for everybody'.

In the beginning, you demanded a collective strategy against the structure of global inequalities. But how likely do you think such collective action actually is in a time when everyone speaks of individualization?

I think often we call for individualization or a lack of solidarization in a kind of performative way, justifying it by saying "As we all know, we live in a time where everyone is fending for themselves." If we really take a look around, we won't see a radically individualized society, but rather all kinds of solidarity exercised in everyday life. Of course, these patterns have changed over the last decades. But do not think that the moral foundation for a different form of collectivity has disappeared. On the other hand, I find it striking how strongly neoliberal ideology has to be impressed upon the public in order to remain in place. For three or four decades now we have been reading the same *Leitartikel*. It seems that in order for them to stay in line, people need to hear again and again "Yes, we must abstain today in order to prosper tomorrow!" It doesn't even matter what is actually happening; you'll always find an economist saying "Today we're still doing well, but we must remain competitive. Otherwise, we're lost."

So, you would reject the idea that neoliberalism has been internalized?

Well, it's obvious that there are mutual dependencies that keep the system going. There is a foundation of collectivity and solidarity which has not disappeared in recent decades, and which can be revitalized or made accessible in numerous innovative ways. In particular, the way civil society has taken care of refugees over the last years—in all possible social milieus and independently of political affiliations—has shown how deeply values of solidarity are rooted within society.

So, what is missing is a political translation of this everyday life collectivity?

There is a widespread self-fulfilling prophecy which states that wherever you look, you will find neoliberalism. Parties are neoliberal, institutions are neoliberal, everywhere is neoliberalism. In the end, the entire society is neoliberal. And in part, this diagnosis is correct. We are living in an age of economization. But we cannot say that everything has changed now, can we? Indeed, I am surprised, especially if we look at contemporary social democracy, at how strongly its representatives identify with neoliberal ways of thinking. At the same time, there has been surprisingly little willingness to counter the increased power of capital through a new—or even stronger—sense of solidarity. I don't know why those responsible have let themselves be dissuaded from this path. Because we certainly have the sociocultural resources we need to create solutions.

Is this also because the situation is so complex that political parties don't really know where to start?

Well, this diagnosis is frequently made. However, I think that we can actually point easily to some essential patterns. For example, we can easily connect the statement ‘We are living at the expense of others’ to the statement ‘Profits in this country are unequally distributed and we can change that.’ I do not think that this would mean asking too much from people. Instead, we should just take them more seriously. There is a great deal of widespread everyday knowledge about how these things work all across society, and also about how these things are connected to globalization and world society.

Is it also a problem that, if you address these issues, you become marginalized as a left-leaning romantic dreamer, or even a fundamentalist?

Oh, yes! People are quick to react with the attitude “well, that may sound nice, but it’s totally unrealistic.” And if you’re not careful, they will call you an authoritarian. So, yes, there is a kind of ideological hegemony that isn’t exactly critical towards capitalism. And the space for a leftist imagination has surely been shrinking over the last years. But we should not let this discourage us. Instead, we should think about how we can re-conquer these spaces!

Interview: Marius Mühlhausen