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“Challenging the ‘Public’ from a revolutionary Perspective”

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Abstract:

While public policy is usually associated with the creation of all those conditions promoting social welfare (the well-being of the great social majority), there are important reasons currently leading to a compromise of public policies and a cooptation of the content itself of a “public sector” and “public policy”. These include the capitalist control of the state, the conjunctural conditions of capitalist accumulation, the transnationalization of production and capital, and the shifting frontiers of commodity production determined by factors such as technological innovations, the class struggle balances, and the ideological hegemony of neo-liberalism. Instead of an abstractive reflection on the public/private conflict, we use some particular cases (education and knowledge, mass media, and tourism) to demonstrate the increasing tension between capitalist development and the really public interest. In spite of the currently drastic shrinkage and perversion of the public sector (policy), we suggest that an expansion of the public goods sector is urgently needed and examine its prerequisites. The need and prospects of a communist transformation are also briefly examined, as well as the currently unfolding attempts towards a configuration of alternative forms of organization beyond capitalism. To evaluate these alternatives, we more specifically examine the significance of property rights and a scaled-up commons-based production and appropriation. Finally, examining critically the current role of social sciences, we propose a drastic methodological shift in order to focus, in close association with unfolding social struggles, on real social problems and contribute to a critical search for alternatives beyond capitalism.

1. Introduction

“Public policy” is commonly conceived as a set of actions, regulatory measures, laws, and funding priorities undertaken by a governmental or state agency to promote some particular goals associated with a specific policy area (Wikipedia 2018). This policy may concern the general preconditions of social reproduction, the specific conditions of capitalist development and profitability, or a more specific social policy aiming at the promotion of social welfare, that is, the upgrading of well-being of the great social majority.

The currently unfolding and protracted economic crisis, the interrelated ecological crisis culminating with a dramatic climatic change, the increasing social inequality, and an expansive social corruption raise serious questions associated, not only with market failure and a broader systemic failure, but also concerning the efficacy, content, and orientations of “public policy”. The so-called “public policy” is inherently contradictory, but to understand its contradictory character we need to go beyond mainstream (bourgeois) state theory, which considers the state as socially autonomous and neutral, ensuring social cohesion and promoting the common good. Taking into account the class character of contemporary capitalist states, we can understand that state policies and what is misconceived as “public” policy are mainly serving the interests of the ruling capitalist class, and not the actual interests of the broad public (the working class majority). There is obviously a conflict between these latter (popular) interests and the overwhelming interests of the dominant capitalist class. As it should be expected, therefore, the capitalist control of the state and the ideological and political domination of the capitalist class, particularly with the neoliberal hegemony of recent decades, tend to an increasing corruption and cooptation of the concept itself of “public” policy. “Public” policies are commonly identified with state policies, but state policy does not coincide with an essentially public policy.

While it is broadly accepted that the way out of the current crisis requires an increased state intervention, an expanded public sector, and a salient role of public policy, to contribute in overcoming the exacerbated socio-ecological crisis and a broader and multifaceted civilizational crisis, we need, among else, to scrutinize public policy, not only conceptually, but also to examine its scope and evolution within a historically specific context. We need, moreover, to examine the evolving conflicts between private and public interests within this context, as well as the prospects of a dialectical resolution of this conflict in the course of a potential transformation and reorganization of society. Finally, we also need to consider the role of social science in illuminating this process of social reorganization and in the search for alternative paths of social development. Here, we will broadly argue that, while the development of a public goods sector has been largely based on market failure, neo-liberalism enabled capitalist (market) forces to take revenge by extending the domain of commodity (capitalist) production. The exacerbation of capitalist crisis, however, raises a trend towards an openly socialized (open source) and commons-based production.

2. The “Public” Sector and Policy within the contemporary Context

An assessment of the real essence and relevance of the “public sector” and its particular policies (concerning education, health care, employment, income distribution, environment, etc.) requires a critical examination of the scope, the content, and the socio-economic determinants of these policies within a contemporary context. We need, in the first place, a broad periodization of capitalism, in order to better understand the state of the economy and the conjunctural conditions of capitalist accumulation. We need to take into account that, while the “golden age” of capitalist accumulation during the early post-WWII period encompassed an extensive state intervention, a significant “welfare state”, and a prominent role of public policies (fiscal and other forms of public policy concerning full employment, income distribution, provision of public goods, etc.), the period after the accumulation crisis of the 1970s signals the emergence of a new stage of capitalist development that has been termed “totalitarian capitalism” (see Lioukakis 2010, 2016a), which roughly coincides with increasing globalization, a decrease of state intervention, a decline of the so-called “welfare state”, and a growing hegemony of neo-liberalism. The balance of class forces, which is against the working class throughout this period, becomes even more detrimental for it with the severe and protracted recession after 2007-08. Under these conditions, the so-called relative autonomy of the state tends to become a mere illusion, while the supreme reign of market forces and the overwhelming domination of the capitalist state imply a drastic shrinkage of the public sector, and a significant decrease of both the extent and scope of public policies.

Second, we need to consider that, while the Keynesian state-intervention of the early post-war period and the relevant significance of public policies pertained to a relatively autonomous and independent development of particular nation-states in this period, the transnational accumulation and rapid globalization of capital during the recently emergent stage of capitalism have implied a significant decline of the relative autonomy of particular nation-states, as well as a drastic decline in both the scope and the regulatory efficacy of public policies. And while it is broadly accepted that “the private sector needs investment guidance and support from governments in order to achieve long-term growth” (Ougaard 2018: 135), it is increasingly realized that, under conditions of rapid transnational development of capital, particular national states are incapable or unwilling to provide the necessary infrastructures needed by transnational capital. In this case, “the transnational state [TNS] tendentially intervenes to secure the provision of general material conditions for the expanded reproduction of capitalism on a global scale” (Ougaard 2018: 132), as is clearly confirmed by the “infrastructure push” promoted recently to serve the common interests of transnational capital (Ibid). There is, more generally, an increasing awareness of the need to formulate and implement public policies on a supranational level. This becomes evident with a recent binding pact signed by 24 Latin American and Caribbean countries “to protect land defenders”, as well as with the attempts of UN officials “to codify the right to a healthy environment” (Guardian 2018, March 5 and 9 respectively). We have here

clearly to do with a growing need of global governance. At the same time, the emerging transnational state (see Robinson 2001, 2004) and various supranational institutions tend to an undisguised promotion of the interests of transnational capital at the expense of the welfare conditions of the broad working classes. Under these conditions of increasing instability, unemployment, inequality, and social corruption, national states take an increasingly executive and repressive role, rather than a regulatory role to promote social welfare. And while the state may be a potential protector of social welfare, it is also one of the main violators of human rights. Moreover, there is an increasing uncertainty as to the relevance and responsibility of national states or transnational organizations for regulating and safeguarding human rights.

Third, it should be pointed out that state policies and public policy in particular are further affected by the shifting frontiers of commodity production, determined by factors such as technological innovations and the class struggle balances, as well as by the lasting (ideological and political) domination of neo-liberalism. As noted more generally, “it is historically contingent whether certain infrastructures are provided by the state or not” (Ougaard 2018: 130). The exacerbated economic and fiscal crisis in most national states, with a concomitant increase of indebtedness and the imposition of severe austerity during recent decades, is of course conducive to a decline or degradation of public policies. Within this context, and taking into account the ideological hegemony of neo-liberalism and several setbacks in class struggle, we can further understand how a number of technological innovations have also contributed to a drastic shift of the frontiers of commodity production. In the case some of goods formerly provided as public goods because of a lack of exclusiveness (education, health care, national parks, etc.), certain innovations, particularly in control systems, have rendered such exclusiveness possible, extending thus the frontiers of commodity production. In this way, the domain of public goods and of a public sector in general has decreased, and the scope and potential effectiveness of public policy have consequently declined.

The factors highlighted so far, including the capitalist control of the state, the conjunctural conditions of capitalism, the transnationalization of capital, the shifting frontiers of commodity production, and the ideological hegemony of neo-liberalism, have inadvertently led to a significant compromise of public policies and a capitalist cooptation of the concept itself of the “public”. Like so many other ideas (or concepts), such as socialism, sustainable development, buen vivir etc. (see Solón 2018), the concept of “public policy” has been co-opted and identified with state policy to often mean the opposite of what would actually imply a promotion of the well-being of the working social majority within a balanced ecological reproduction.

This compromise and degradation of public policy and the detrimental implications for actual social welfare have been further intensified with the recently rapid proliferation of public-private partnerships (PPPs), which came largely as a result of the exacerbated crisis and the domination of neo-liberalism. This trend has raised a long and heated debate (see Fourie and Burger 2000, Forrer et al. 2010, Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2011, Hildyard 2014), with the

advocates of PPPs to argue for a presumable complementarity between the public and private sectors, an increased competitiveness and efficiency, and an extended capacity of finance big infrastructural projects, promoting economic growth and social welfare. Analytical scrutiny, however, and a critical examination of a great number of such PPPs indicate that such partnerships usually create mechanisms for a private appropriation of social resources, introduce private profit-seeking criteria into public administration, promote private profitability rather than the common good, extend a secured domain of commodity production, increase social inequality and instability, and often lead to a violation of environmental constraints resulting in an increasing ecological degradation.

Under these conditions, the decline and hallowing out of “public” policy have to do, not only with the neo-liberal fiscal austerity, but also with an overwhelming interlocking of transnational capital and an expanding social corruption. This becomes most evident in the case of the pharmaceutical and health care sector. The penetration of private capital, in general, within what was commonly conceived as a public sector and the rapid corruption or degradation of public policy will most likely lead to a further exacerbation of socio-ecological crisis, an extensive social corruption, and a civilizational decline. The present condition of global political economy seems to be at cross-roads and, instead of abstractly juxtaposing the domains of public and private interests, it is perhaps more fruitful to examine this public/private conflict in some particular cases in order to better diagnose the current situation and the potential for social change.

3. Some Cases of public/private Conflict and the actual public Interest

An abstractive reflection on the public/private conflict that is quite common in the public discourse is usually rather vague and at variance with the actual interests of the public. These interests of the working social majority are associated with the satisfaction of basic social needs, a democratic participation in the process of production, distribution, and social governance, as well as the protection of the environment and the quality of life. Instead of focusing, therefore, on the public/private conflict in general, it is perhaps more illuminating to examine this conflict in some particular cases as it unfolds under present conditions.

A first important case concerns education and the production and utilization of knowledge. Although public education has several advantages as it may ensure, among else, a more or less equitable participation in the educational process and the development of social consciousness, under the neo-liberal domination of the last few decades, capital has made important strides in the domain that was previously public education and knowledge. The establishment of public education has been based on the non-rivalrous and not easily excludable character of education, as well as on the need of the state to provide public/free education as a public good insofar as the

market fails to provide a sufficiently high level of education. The public character of knowledge is also usually determined by its non-rivalrous and not easily excludable nature. Recent developments, however, have ensured the possibility of exclusion, and the increasing needs for highly educated and specialized labour have changed this condition. An extensive privatization and commodification of education as well as a rapid commodification, not only of applied, but also of basic scientific knowledge have worked against public education and knowledge, and have tended to restrict or undermine public policy in this area. The expansive protection of the so-called Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) is a most characteristic case indicating the monopolistic appropriation and exploitation of knowledge by capital (see Boyle 2008). All these changes essentially lead to an increasing exploitation of labour, increasing socioeconomic inequalities, and a huge appropriation by capital of social resources associated with social efforts and investments in the production of knowledge. As becomes evident, an increasing tension arises in this area and an intensifying conflict between private capitalist interests and the public interest concerning the great social majority.

A second case illustrating the increasing conflict between public and private (capitalist) interests concerns the mass media. These media include the press (newspapers, journals, etc) and the electronic media, especially the TV channels. While the former have been traditionally controlled by private interests, the non-rivalry and not so easy excludability of the relevant services in the latter case have in the past dictated a mostly public control of these media. However, new technological and social developments during recent decades, including the rising significance of advertising, the possibility of exclusion via subscription channels, and the potential of exerting a great influence on public opinion and ideological/political evolutions, have led to a rapid and extensive privatization of these media. It must be stressed that the mass media, in general, have a strategic importance as they greatly affect (or determine) the information and cultural development, as well as a potential ideological manipulation of the population, while contributing in shaping social consciousness. For this reason, the degradation or restriction of public media works against the interests of the broad public, but also the increasing control of mass media by big and often corrupt capitalists may exert a great and dangerous influence on socio-political developments, functioning thus again at the detriment of broad public interests. There is, therefore, an increasing conflict between public and private interests, but at the same time a great potential for a reorganization of these media.

A third case of conflict between public and private interests concerns the rapidly developing tourism sector, which in some particular countries has a strategic importance. As indicated by the available evidence and an extensive relevant literature, the currently prevailing pattern of massive tourism is largely based upon ecological and cultural conditions which are produced and historically developed collectively by the great social majority of the working population, as well as on infrastructures largely financed by the (state) public. At the same time, this pattern of development tends to lead to an increasing social inequality and instability, and has detrimental

implications for local cultures, the ecological conditions, and the quality of life of domestic population, while the great benefits (profits and rents) from this sector are captured and appropriated by a small minority of local or transnational monopolistic interests (big hotels, transnational tour operators, air companies, and financial or other mediators). There is obviously an increasing social conflict (between public and private interests) evolving in this sector (see Liodakis 2017), but there is also an ample potential for a radical reorganization of this sector, with a perhaps more limited development of tourism, ensuring ecological sustainability and cultural protection, a greater stability, and a more equitable distribution of the benefits from this development. Such reorganization, however, undoubtedly presupposes a broader transformation of society at large.

As becomes clear above, the deepening crisis of capitalism and the increasing restriction and cooptation of “public” policy are implying a rapid degradation of social welfare, namely of the well-being of the great social majority. At the same time, technological and social/ institutional changes during recent decades have led to an increasing blurring or interpenetration between different concepts and categories, such as the presumably polar public/private organizational forms. The erosion of this traditional polarity has given rise to new, and often hybrid, organizational forms, such as the common(s), or increased the salience and significance of such forms. There is a historically determined overlap and interpenetration between these organizational categories. To examine these structural changes more closely, we need to take into account that the so-called “civil society” is not anymore the private society, it is a fraction of the public sphere extending both within the state and also within private society” (Beladis 2018: 154). In this regard, we moreover need to consider that “hegemony” in this sphere, even when it concerns a terrain partly beyond the state, maintains a largely state/public character. More precisely, and as has been juridically accepted, the concession and transfer of certain public resources (or infrastructures) to private groups for a long-term profit-seeking exploitation does not suspend their public character, despite the fact that their long-term “possession” becomes private and remains only formally under state/public control (Ibid.: 156). On the other hand, we have to consider that a (national) state may have both public and private properties. In the latter case the state is not an agent of public interest, acting rather as a common private rentier or speculator. And as pointed out for the former case, “in the context of the capitalist mode of production, state property can only to a certain extent serve public and social needs, and indeed within the extreme neo-liberalism that we presently live the public property of the state is increasingly merged with private and tends to lose any specific functionality and conceptual clarity” (Ibid.).

It should be understood that the character of a public good is not so much determined by the intrinsic nature of the good itself, but rather by a historically contingent will of the public, often expressed by the state, to engage with a collective production, distribution and consumption of this particular good. The public character of a good essentially presupposes a collective (public)

ownership (or real possession) of the infrastructures (or resources) required for its production, the collective participation in the production of these resources and the public good itself, and the collective participation in the consumption or appropriation of this good. There is no objective criterion determining the dividing line between the domains of public, private, and common goods. This line is rather determined historically by technological developments and power balances (see Vercellone 2015, 2017, Fumagalli et al. 2018). It is clear, for example, that some rivalrous and excludable goods that are produced as commodities (private goods), such as books, music, and films, are changed by digitalization into non-rivalrous and non-excludable, which can be produced as common goods at a minimal cost. Similarly, the copyleft model has undermined and subverted the principles of copyright and private property, creating thus a protected domain for knowledge as a public good. As argued, it is not the intrinsic character of a good that decides whether it can be reproduced as a common good. “[I]t is the ability of work to cooperate and organize itself differently compared to the logic of private and public that ultimately determines the propensity of a series of goods or resources to be managed according to the principles of the Common” (Vercellone 2017). And as demonstrated in a significant recent literature, a collective management of common (or common pool) resources has historically shown a capacity to ensure an efficient and sustainable reproduction, implying a reduction of scarcity (see Runge 1986, Ostrom 1990, Agrawal 2001).

It becomes clear from above that market relations and private property cannot adequately serve the public or common interest, nor is it simply a matter of a clear-cut conflict between the public and private domain of production. Intense social struggles, deep structural changes, and a persistent theoretical search are certainly required to ensure social welfare in the long-run.

4. The Need and Prospects of an alternative/communist Transformation

The deepening socio-ecological crisis of capitalism, the cooptation and degradation of “public” policy, and the continuing decline in the welfare of the great social majority indicate that the problem cannot be adequately resolved with some kind of reform, balancing somehow the public and private domains of production. Reforms should not be denied, of course, if they have a revolutionary character harnessed with a broader revolutionary perspective and a radical socioeconomic transformation that is urgently needed. It is within this broad perspective of social change that a large number of struggles are currently evolving around the world and a great diversity of local or regional attempts are seeking to configure and establish new and equitable forms of social and productive organization, compatible with a sustainable ecosystem. Apart from traditional strategies focusing on taking state power to mobilize it for social change, a great number of attempts are presently focusing on more horizontal, self-managing, democratic, and commons-based organizational forms. As noted regarding the commons,

The Commons consists in peer-to-peer production of value on the basis of distributed or common property infrastructures (natural resources, technology, knowledge, capital, culture). The Commons disrupts capitalism inasmuch as it favors decentralization over central control, democratic over hierarchical management, access over property, transparency over privacy, and sustainability over growth. (Papadimitropoulos 2017: 210)

Despite the often tentative character of some of these efforts and the great diversity of organizational forms (including public, private, and common at various levels of aggregation), we can broadly conceive these efforts as a movement towards some kind of “communism.”

In this endeavour, seeking new, effective, equitable, and ecologically sustainable forms of social organization, we need to take seriously into account a number of principles and determinant factors arising from historical experience or outlined in the relevant literature. It should be clear in the first place that the principle of “subsidiarity” offers a valuable directive ensuring both ecological compatibility and decentralized democratic control. It needs to be stressed, however, that local changes and developments within the interstices of capitalism may not be adequate to ensure a safe transition beyond capitalism required today (see Sharzer 2012, Fuentes-Ramírez 2014). The larger frame is essentially required, implying both the need to challenge or undermine the capitalist state and extent this transformative movement on an international or global level.

As is also confirmed by historical experience and an extensive theoretical research (see Milonakis and Meramveliotakis 2013), property rights concerning the basic means of production are crucial insofar as they largely determine whether the forms of production based on these rights will have a competitive and exploitative character or will encourage cooperative relations of production, and whether these forms of production will impinge upon or allow the protection of ecological conditions. It should be stressed, however, that real possession is even more significant than the (absolute) juridical ownership of the means (or resources) of production. This has been clearly demonstrated in the former regimes of the so-called “existing socialism”, which in fact were no more than actual “state capitalism”. In this case, despite the juridical public ownership of the means of production, the real possession of these means by certain social (bureaucratic) strata was sufficient to create the conditions for a reproduction of capitalist forms of production (see Chattopadhyay 2016: 209, Beladis 2017, Vercellone 2017). What is also important here concerns the social conditions under which these resources or means of production are reproduced and developed. Examining these conditions may shed further light on the potential of a certain mode of production to appropriate and exploit resources produced under different forms of social relations. Contemporary capitalism offers a specific example insofar as it can extensively appropriate resources produced collectively as commons or in the context of a peer-to-peer (P2P) production.

The intrinsic character of resources is also important, not only because it affects the technology used and the organization of labour, but also because it may more specifically determine the appropriate regime concerning their possession and management. As noted,

Resources with a moveable, replicable, and protean nature, such as genetic material, information, knowledge and culture, suggest a regime of common human heritage (no man's property), while exhaustible resources (whether renewable or not), such as mineral deposits, irrigation systems, pastures, and fishing territories, dictate collective property at various levels (including the communal and the national) (Liodakis 2016b: 243-44; see also Ostrom 1990, Brush 2007).

In the present and future search for a configuration of appropriate forms of social and productive organization, we should clearly take into account all aspects highlighted above (forms of property, intrinsic character of goods or resources, scale of production, and social organization of labour), considering that we have essentially to do with different aspects of a (unified) dialectical process of metabolism between society and nature. Technology definitely plays a crucial role in this metabolic process as an intentional re-organization of nature (including humans themselves) to serve the historically determined consumption and productive needs of society. Taking for granted that technology is socially shaped to serve social needs, we should further realize that certain technologies, such as the new networking ICT, combined with appropriate organizational forms, may greatly reduce material scarcity, creating conditions of abundance which imply a restriction of commodity production while enabling a further expansion of commons-based (or public) forms of production (see Liodakis 2016b).

These material conditions for an expansive commons-based production may offer the basis for the expansion of a broadly conceived public sector, which is absolutely expedient for a transition beyond capitalism. This sector, however, should be distinguished from a state-centric conception and an assignment to the state the agency of social change. On the contrary, this process will most likely imply a growth of the self-managerial capacities of the working people, a democratic control and increasing substantiation of popular sovereignty, as well as a potential withering away of the state. These elements are essentially compatible with Marx's vision of socialism/communism as a movement leading to a new mode of production organized by freely associated producers (see Chattopadhyay 2016). But the potential expansion of a commons-based production should not obscure the possibility of social conflicts arising between various geographically located forms of collective production, or between collective forms of production at any particular level of aggregation and the interest of society as a whole. To avoid or minimize such conflicts and any potentially negative ecological implications, we may suggest a combination of the principle of subsidiarity with a social coordination and planning at the highest level possible.

We do not, of course, ignore the presently unfavourable ideological/subjective conditions for such a revolutionary transformation beyond capitalism. This, however, should not constitute a

draw-back from theoretical elaborations, ideological preparations, social struggles, and pre-figurative activities necessary to bring such a perspective closer to reality.

5. What Role for Social Science?

The current exacerbation of the socio-ecological crisis of capitalism and the failure of the presumably public policy to meet the greatest part of social needs indicate that public policy itself and society at large are presently at a crucial cross-road. The question arising in this context is whether social science as a particular scientific discipline could offer appropriate guidance and a way out from this impasse. The bulk of historical evidence suggests that, if social science continues in the mainstream course, following an idealist approach dictated by the dominant bourgeois ideology, an academic sterility and social conformism, departing from the real social problems, it will be unable at best to contribute much in the search for a way out. At worse, it will contribute to a conservation of the present status quo, an even further exacerbation of the current crisis, an increasing social despair, and a decline of the credibility of social science as a scientific discipline.

It is only by escaping from the “business as usual” rule of scientific practice that social science could adequately inform people and illuminate potential development options, while offering a real support in the struggle of the less privileged classes for a better life. It can be suggested that, a drastic methodological shift, following a socially grounded theoretical and empirical research and a dialectical materialist approach, may greatly contribute to an urgently needed social and political outlet. Such a theoretical and methodological reorientation could, in the first place, shed sufficient light on the deepest causes of the present social plight and the factors leading to an increasing social corruption and an exacerbation of the current socio-ecological crisis. At the same time, such a reorientation of social science could offer a great service by exploring new forms of possession and property relations, and new forms of social organization of production and distribution, contributing thus to an institutional configuration ensuring democratic control, maximum social welfare, and an ecologically compatible mode of production and social file. We have here only indicated some of the potential development ruts, but there is certainly a great need for further research concerning, among else, a critical utilization of the ICT revolution, the development of P2P production, and the rapid expansion of a sharing economy.

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