

SOME CONDITIONS FOR REVOLUTIONIZING LATE CAPITALIST SOCIETIES [1968]*

Jürgen Habermas

Marx was convinced that a revolutionizing of the capitalist social system of his time was possible for two reasons. First, because at that time the antagonism between the owners of the means of production and wage labourers clearly manifested itself as class struggle, i.e., the subjects themselves were becoming conscious of this antagonism and therefore could be organized politically; and, secondly, because in the long run the institutional pressure for capital utilization in private form confronted the economic system with an insoluble problem. I know that for Marx these two conditions represented necessary but by no means sufficient conditions for a revolution. However, I shall limit my discussion to them, as I believe that these two conditions are no longer satisfied under state-regulated capitalism.

The *first* condition of a politically organizable class struggle is given if the relationship between the privileged and dominated groups is founded on exploitation, and if this exploitation becomes consciously subjective, i.e., is *incompatible* with the accepted legitimations of domination. Exploitation is thus defined as the dominating class living upon the labour of the dependent class which therefore, on the other hand, can pressure the dominant class by the withdrawal of its co-operation. The dominated wage labour of the nineteenth century was in this sense an exploited class. At the same time, this relationship of exploitation was incompatible with bourgeois ideology. According to this ideology, the transactions between private individuals were supposed to be regulated through relations of equivalence of exchange and consequently unfold in a sphere emancipated from domination and freed from violence.

Secondly, the analysis of the capitalist economic system which Marx accomplished on the foundation of the theory of value, as is known, serves to prove the inevitability of system-endangering disproportionalities. As long as economic growth is tied to the mechanism of the utilization of capital in private form, the

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accumulation process must repeatedly come to a standstill. This periodic destruction of non-utilizable reserves of capital is a condition of revolution, because it constitutes a vivid demonstration of the discrepancy between the developed productive forces on the one hand, and the institutional framework of the capitalist social system on the other. It thereby makes the masses conscious of the insoluble system problem.

In the following, I should like to name two developmental tendencies which are decisive for the state-organized capitalism of the present time.¹ This approximate reconstruction of its emergence should make clear on the one hand why the classical conditions of revolution are today no longer present; but, at the same time, it should indicate the structural weakness of the system which presents itself as a new point of attack.

I

Since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, two developmental tendencies have become observable in the most advanced capitalist countries: on the one hand, an increase of interventionist state activity which has to guarantee the stability of the system and, on the other hand, a growing interdependence of research and technology which has made the sciences the primary productive force. Both tendencies destroy that constellation which had been unique to liberal capitalism in its developed stage.

1. The permanent regulation of the economic process through state intervention has emerged as a defence against the system-endangering dysfunctions of unregulated capitalism. The basic ideology of equivalence of exchange, which Marx had theoretically unmasked, has practically collapsed. The form of private economic utilization of capital can only be maintained through the state correctives of social and economic policy which stabilize circulation and compensate for market consequences. Thereby the system of domination is itself transformed. After the disintegration of the ideology of equivalence of exchange—upon which the modern natural law constructions of the bourgeois-constitutional state were also based—political domination requires a new basis for its legitimacy. Now that the power indirectly exercised within the exchange process itself has to be controlled by pre-state organised and state institutionalised authority, legitimation can no longer be derived from a non-political order, the relations of production. In this sense, the compulsion to direct legitimation in pre-capitalist societies is once again renewed. On the other hand, the re-establishment of direct political domination (with a traditional form of legitimation grounded in cultural tradition) has become impossible. Formal democratic authority in state-regulated, capitalist systems is placed under a legitimation obligation which can no longer be redeemed through recourse to the pre-bourgeois form of legitimation. This is why a substitute programmatic replaces the equivalence-ideology of

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free exchange. This programmatic is oriented not to the social consequences of the market institution, but to the state compensation of the dysfunctions for free exchange relations. It links together the moment of the bourgeois ideology of performance (which of course shifts status assignment according to individual performance from the market to the school system) with the promise of welfare (with the prospect of job security as well as income stability). This substitute programmatic obliges the system of control to both maintain the conditions of stability of a total system which grants social security and chances of personal advancement and to overcome risks associated with growth. This necessitates considerable room for manoeuvring for state interventions which, in return for restrictions placed upon the institutions of private law, secure the private form of capital utilization and bind the loyalty of the masses to the capitalist form of society.

Insofar as state activity is directed to the stability and the growth of the economic system, politics now assumes a strangely negative character: it is concerned with the elimination of dysfunctionalities and the prevention of system-endangering risks, i.e., it is oriented not to the realization of practical goals but to the solution of technical problems. Through its orientation to preventive action, state activity becomes restricted to technical tasks. Its purpose is "just to keep the system going". Practical questions therefore are virtually pushed aside. I am here distinguishing between technical and practical questions. Technical problems arise with respect to the purposive-rational organization of means and the rational choice between alternative means for the attainment of given goals. Practical problems, on the other hand, arise with respect to the acceptance or rejection of norms, in our case of norms of collective life which we can—with good reasons—support or reject, translate into reality or struggle against. The distinction between technical and practical questions corresponds, I should like to add immediately, to the distinction between work and interaction. Work is a term which describes any form of instrumental or strategic action, while interaction refers to a reciprocal relationship of at least two subjects under common, that is, inter-subjectively comprehensible and binding norms.

I return to the question of eliminating essential practical substance from the politics of late capitalism. Old style politics was forced, if only because of the form of legitimation assumed by traditional authority, to define itself in relation to practical goals: interpretations of "the good life" were attached to contexts of interaction. The same was still true for the ideology of bourgeois society. Today, however, the substitute programmatic only refers to the functioning of a controlled system. It excludes practical questions and thereby the discussion of the acceptance of standards which were only accessible to democratic will-formation. For the solution of technical tasks is not dependent upon public discussion. But public discussions could problematize the boundary conditions of the system within which the tasks of state activity primarily appear as technical problems. The new politics of state intervention therefore requires a depoliticization of the mass of the population. In the same measure as practical questions are excluded, the political public sphere loses its function. The mass media assume the function

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of securing that depoliticization of the masses. On the other hand, the legitimation of domination by the substitute programmatic leaves open a decisive legitimation need: How can the depoliticization of the masses become plausible to them? Marcuse provided an answer to this question: technology and science *also* take on the role of an ideology.

2. Since the end of the nineteenth century, a second developmental tendency, characteristic of late capitalism, has become more and more powerful: the scientization of technology. Through large-scale industrial research, science, technology and commercialization have been integrated into one system. It is linked in the meantime with state-commissioned research, which primarily supports scientific and technical progress in the military field. From there information flows back into the domain of civilian-goods production. Thus technology and science become the primary productive force and with that the conditions of applicability of Marx's labour theory of value disappear. It no longer makes sense to calculate the amounts of capital for investments in research and development on the basis of the value of unskilled (simple) labour power, because institutionalized scientific-technical progress has become the basis of an indirect surplus value production, compared to which the only source of surplus value Marx considered—the labour power of the immediate producers—has less and less importance.

This development subsequently gives rise to a strangely technocratic consciousness. So long as the productive forces were clearly connected to the rational decisions and instrumental actions of a socially producing humanity they could be understood as a potential with a growing technical power of disposal; they could not, however, be confused with the institutional framework in which they are embedded. With the institutionalization of scientific-technical progress, the potential of the productive forces assumes a form which decreases the dualism of work and interaction in the consciousness of humanity. It is true that social interests still determine, as always, the direction, the functions and the pace of technical progress. Yet these interests define the social system so fully that they are identical with the interest of maintaining the system. The private form of capital utilization and a loyalty-securing code of distribution for social compensations are as such withdrawn from discussion. A quasi-autonomous progress of science and technology appears as an independent variable on which the single most important variable of the system, namely, economic growth, in fact depends. This results in a perspective in which the development of the social system seems to be determined by the logic of scientific-technical progress. The immanently law-like character of this progress seems to produce the compellingness of tasks to which a politics based on obeying functional needs must respond. If this technocratic consciousness, which of course is a false consciousness, manifests itself as everyday self-understanding, then the reference to the role of technology and science can explain and legitimize why in modern societies a democratic process of will-formation concerning practical questions must both lose its functions and be replaced by plebiscitary decisions about alternative sets of leaders of the administrative *personnel*. In this sense, technology and science

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today assume a double function: they are not only productive forces, but also ideologies. This also explains why the discrepancy between the forces and relations of production no longer continues to be meaningful, that is, is no longer evident in the consciousness of the mass of the population.

II

We can now return to the two structural conditions of revolution stated by Marx. The second condition, namely, that the mechanisms of capital utilization in private form as such confront the system with insoluble problems, is no longer satisfied if it is correct that the institutionalization of scientific-technical progress casts fundamental doubt upon the orthodox crisis theory, and if in actual fact, through the organisation of science as the leading productive force, space is created in which state activity can principally secure economic growth and mass loyalty through re-distribution. I do not want to go further into this possibility at this point.² What is of interest to me is that the first condition of the possibility of a politically organizable class struggle is also no longer necessarily fulfilled. For capitalist society has changed to such an extent—due to the two aforementioned developmental tendencies—that *two* key categories of Marx's theory of revolution, *viz.*, class struggle and ideology can no longer be so easily applied.

1. The late capitalist system is defined to such an extent by compensation, *i.e.*, by a politics of conflict avoidance which secures the loyalty of the wage-dependent masses, that the class conflict—built into the social structure by the private economic utilization of capital now as before—is the conflict which, with the relatively greatest probability, remains latent. This conflict retreats behind other conflicts which, although also conditioned by the mode of production, no longer can assume the form of class conflicts. Claus Offe has analyzed this paradoxical state of affairs: open conflicts are more likely to be sparked by social interests the less their violation has system-endangering consequences. At the periphery of this state sphere of action, needs are pregnant with conflict because they are remote from the latent central conflict and therefore do not enjoy any priority in the warding off of dangers. Conflicts arise due to these needs to the extent with which the disproportionately spread state interventions give rise to retarded spheres of development and to corresponding tensions of disparity. The interests linked to the maintenance of the mode of production can no longer be unambiguously located in the social system as class interests. For the system of political control, which is oriented to the prevention of threats to the system, excludes just that "domination" which is exercised when *one* class subject opposes the *other* as an identifiable group.

This signals not an abolition but a latency of class antagonisms. It is true that, as empirical sociologists, we can satisfactorily demonstrate that class-specific differences continue to exist in the form of subcultural traditions and correspond-

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ing differences of not only standards of living and ways of life but also of political attitudes. Furthermore, the socio-structurally conditioned probability arises that the class of wage-labourers will be hit harder by social disparities than other groups. And, finally, the generalized interest in the maintenance of the system on the level of immediate life chances is today still anchored in a structure of privilege: For the concept of an interest completely independent of living subjects would cancel itself out. But with the warding off of dangers to the system, political authority in state-regulated capitalism has absorbed an interest in the maintenance of the compensatory facade of distribution that reaches beyond the virtualized class boundaries.

On the other hand, the displacement of the conflict zone from the class boundary to the underprivileged spheres of life does not at all imply the elimination of grave conflict potential. As the racial conflict in the United States shows in the extreme, so many consequences of disparity can accumulate in certain areas and groups that civil war-like explosions result. When not linked with the protest potential of other origins, all conflicts based solely on such deprivation are characterized by the fact that, while they provoke the system to react sharply and in a way incompatible with formal democracy, they cannot really revolutionize this system. For deprived groups are not social classes; in addition, they never even potentially represent the mass of the population. Their loss of rights and their pauperization are no longer identical with exploitation, since the system does not feed upon their labour; at most, they represent a past phase of exploitation. Yet they cannot *enforce* the fulfillment of the claims they legitimately represent through the withdrawal of their cooperation; these claims consequently have an appellative character. In the extreme case, deprived groups can react to the long term non-recognition of their legitimate claims with desperate destruction and self-destruction: such civil strife, however, lacks the revolutionary chances of success of class struggle so long as coalitions with privileged groups are not realized.

In late capitalist society the deprived and privileged groups no longer oppose each other *as* socio-economic classes insofar as the limits of deprivation remain group specific at all and do not pass directly through the categories of the population.

2. The technocratic consciousness is in one respect "less ideological" than all previous ideologies, because it does not have the power of delusion which simulates the fulfillment of interests by only compensating suppressed desires. In another respect, the glassy background ideology which fetishizes science is more irresistible and far-reaching than ideologies of the old type. By concealing practical questions, this ideology not only justifies the particular interest in domination of a certain class and suppresses the particular need for emancipation of another class—it also strikes against the emancipatory species-interest as such.

The technocratic consciousness is no rationalizing, wishful phantasy, no "illusion" in the Freudian sense of positing a non-repressive, wish-fulfilling relationship of interactions. The basic figure of just and domination-free interaction

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satisfactory for both sides could still be attributed to bourgeois ideologies. Founded on communication restricted by repression, it was precisely these ideologies that satisfied the criteria of wish-fulfillment and substitute satisfaction in such a manner that the relationship of force that at one time had been institutionalized with the capital relationship could not be named as such. The technocratic consciousness, however, no longer expresses a projection of the "good life" that, though not identical with the bad reality, at least is brought into a potentially satisfactory relationship with it. Certainly both the new as well as the old ideology serve to preclude the thematization of the social base. In the past, the relationship between capitalists and wage labourers was the direct basis of social violence; today it is the structural conditions which define the functional tasks of system maintenance, namely, the private economic form of capital utilization and a political form of distribution of social compensations which secures the loyalty of the masses. Nevertheless, the old and the new ideology differ in two respects. On the one hand, the capital relationship—due to its being linked to a political mode of distribution guaranteeing loyalty—is no longer based on uncorrected exploitation and oppression: the virtualization of continuing class division presupposes that the repression on which it rests has become historically conscious and has *only then* been stabilized in modified form as a characteristic of the system. For this reason, the technocratic consciousness cannot be based on collective repression in the same way as was the authority of older ideologies. On the other hand, mass loyalty can only be produced with the help of compensations for privatized needs. The interpretation of the accomplishments which the system uses to justify itself must in principle not be political; this interpretation refers directly to the use-neutral allocation of money and leisure and, indirectly, to the technocratic justification of the exclusion of practical questions.

III

At this point, I have reached a decisive step in my argumentation. I maintain that the conditions of a politically organizable class struggle in late capitalism are not fulfilled so long as there is an effective separation of two motivational links—links that were always connected in the workers' movement and in Marxist theory—in such a way that one interest can be satisfied and the other repressed. What is being satisfied is the economic interest of consumers in socially produced goods and services and that of employees in reduced working hours; what has been repressed is the political interest of individuals, their achievement of autonomy by voluntarily participating in all decision-making processes upon which their lives depend. The stabilization of the state-regulated capitalist social system depends on the loyalty of the masses being linked to an unpolitical form of social compensations (of income and leisure time) and to ensuring that there is a screening out of their interest in the solution of practical

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questions concerning a better and good life. For this reason, however, the social system of state-regulated capitalism rests upon a *very weak legitimation basis*. By diverting the interests of broad strata to the private domain, the system of domination is almost exclusively negative and no longer affirmatively justified by practical goals. The depoliticization of the public sphere, which is necessary for the system and rules out a process of will-formation in radical-democratic form, discloses the strategic point of vulnerability of the system.

Before naming the forces which are directed at this point of weakness, I will at least mention the two *international* tendencies which have so far contributed instead to a stabilization of capitalism.

1. The connection between the economic stability of the developed capitalist countries and the catastrophic economic situation in the countries of the Third World can no longer apparently be apprehended today through the theory of imperialism. I do not doubt that the adverse socio-economic starting conditions in these latter countries have been generated by the imperialism of the contemporary industrial nations. There is every reason to believe, however, that relationships based on economic exploitation between First and Third World countries are tending to be replaced with relationships of strategic dependence and growing disparity. On an international level, deprivation also signifies an outrageous deprivation of rights which, however, is no longer automatically identifiable with exploitation and, in the future, will become even less so identifiable. This also clarifies why those countries which represent a past phase of exploitation today convincingly assert a certain moralization of claims against the former colonial powers.

2. The establishment of a bloc of socialist states following the Russian Revolution and the victory of the Allies over fascist Germany has created a new level of international class struggle. The military presence as well as the state socialist model of organized society exert a competitive pressure upon, and at least contribute to the self-disciplining of capitalism. The internal pressure created by the imperative to maintain mass-loyalty through economic growth and social compensations is reinforced by the external pressure of tangible alternatives. An endangerment of state-regulated capitalism will certainly not result so long as the alternative model is only represented by the form of domination of bureaucratic socialism. Nevertheless, the *immobilisme* of the 50's has fractured, and there are more frequent signs of new revolutionary developments. If the classical conditions of the revolution are no longer fulfilled, are there alternative conditions? In conclusion, I would like to respond to this question—at least in thesis form—with respect to developments within both late capitalist social systems and the international sector.

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IV

1. For the time being neither the old class opposition nor the new types of deprivation contain protest potential which tends to repoliticize the withered public sphere. The only protest potential which is currently directed at the new conflict zone by recognizable interests arises within certain groups of university and high school students. Here we can begin with three observations:

a) The protest group of university and high school students is a privileged group. They do not represent interests that immediately derive from their social position and that could be satisfied—in conformity with the system—through increased social compensations. The first American studies³ of student activists confirm that the great majority are not status-seekers but, rather, that they are recruited from social groups of a higher status and without economic burdens.

b) The legitimization propositions of the system of domination do not seem to be convincing to this group for understandable reasons. The welfare state substitute programmatic for the decayed bourgeois ideologies assumes a certain orientation to status and achievement. According to the afore-mentioned studies, however, the militant students are less oriented to private, occupational career and future family than the remainder of students. Both their academic performances—which are frequently above average—and their social origin lend little support to a horizon of expectations which is determined by anticipated labour market pressures.

c) In this group, conflict can be sparked not by the expected *extent* of discipline and sacrifice but only because of the kind of imposed renunciations. University and high school students do not struggle for a greater share of the disposable categories of social compensations: income and leisure time. Their protest is much more directed against these categories of 'compensation' as such. The little data we have confirms the assumption that the protest of youth from middle class families is no longer identical with the generational pattern of authority conflict. The active students more likely have parents who share their critical attitudes; relatively frequently they have been raised with more psychological understanding and in accordance with more liberal educational principles than comparable groups of non-activists. Their socialization seems more likely to have been effected within subcultures freed from immediate economic pressure, and within which there has been a loss of function of the traditions of bourgeois morality and their petit-bourgeois offspring. Thus, the training for the 'switching over' to the value orientation of purposive-rational action no longer includes the fetishism of this action. These educational techniques can foster experiences and orientations that collide with the conservative forms of life grounded in an economy of poverty. From this foundation could arise a complete lack of comprehension of the meaningless reproduction of superfluous virtues and sacrifices—a failure to understand why, despite the high level of technological development, the lives of individuals continue to be conditioned by the dictates of

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work, the ethics of competitive achievement, the pressure of status competition, the values of possessive reification and of proposed substitute-satisfactions, and why the discipline of alienated labour and the annulment of sensuality and aesthetic satisfaction are maintained. A structural exclusion of practical questions from the depoliticized public sphere has to become intolerable to this sensibility.⁴

I admit that this perspective upends the commonly accepted assumptions of Marxist theory. My hypothesis suggests that not material destitution but material abundance is the basis upon which the petit-bourgeois structure of needs—generated for centuries under the compulsion of individual competition, and which has not penetrated into the integrated labour force—can be broken. According to this hypothesis, only the psychology of satiety of the available affluence sensitizes the population to the ideologically concealed compulsion of bureaucratized forms of work and life, within which the wealth of past generations has been acquired. If this is correct, then the revolution would not lead to the abolition of poverty but assume it.⁵ On a global scale, however, the prospects for this assumption are not good. As matters stand, the protest of youth can only have revolutionary consequences if it is confronted in the near future with an insoluble system problem to which I have so far not referred. I am of the opinion that the problem which will increase in importance is that of a structurally conditioned erosion of the ideology of the achieving society. The degree of social affluence produced by an industrially developed capitalism, and the technical as well as organizational conditions under which this wealth is produced, continually increase the difficulty of even subjectively and convincingly binding the allocation of status to the mechanism of evaluating individual performance.

2. On an international level, two developments are emerging which permit conjectures about a qualitative transformation of the external pressure on the late capitalist system. Again, I should like to differentiate between relations with Third World countries and relations with socialist countries of the Soviet type.

a) There are strong reasons for believing that organized capitalism as well as bureaucratic socialism are incapable of generating from within sufficient motivation to provide effective, i.e., sufficiently large development aid that is exclusively oriented to the interests of the recipient countries. It is estimated that, for this purpose, the affluent countries would have to divert 15-20% of their social product in order to close the economic gap between the poor and the affluent countries. As this is unlikely to happen, a catastrophic famine during the 80's cannot be ruled out. The extent of this catastrophe could be so large that, with respect to this phenomenon, the discrepancy between the forces and relations of production can once again become directly evident to the population of the industrialized countries.⁶ Such a consciousness of the inability of the established system to solve problems of survival in other parts of the world could renew an international class struggle situation if one of these countries—I am here thinking of China—succeeded in developing an industrial potential sufficient for atomic blackmail without at the same time developing the forms of bureaucratic domination and that mentality which have hitherto always accompanied the

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industrialization of a society. If China, despite industrial growth, maintained its revolutionary point of departure and effectively renewed the consciousness of this beginning in each generation, the pauperized and weakened nations, which today do not necessarily have to be the exploited nations, would find an advocate. This advocate could compensate for the missing means of economic pressure through the withdrawal of cooperation by military pressure, without at the same time adhering to the sensitive rules of the game of the atomic superpowers.

b) An alternative development, which could also lead (with less risk) to an external pressure on the developed capitalist societies is in my opinion only probable if—despite the brutal repression of the Czechoslovakian reformers—an anti-authoritarian dissolution of bureaucratic socialism could soon be achieved. Only a radical democratization of the developed state socialist countries could produce a competitive model, one which makes the limits of state-regulated capitalism obvious, that is, visible to the consciousness of the currently well-integrated masses. Under the given military and strategic conditions, the superiority of the socialist mode of production cannot become effective and visible as long as both sides choose economic growth, the supply of goods and the reduction of working hours—private welfare—as the only criterion for comparison. The superiority of a mode of production should be judged according to the space it opens for a democratization of decision-making processes in all social domains.

Max-Planck-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften
München

Notes

1. Here I am repeating parts of the analysis of *Technik und Wissenschaft als 'Ideologie'* (Frankfurt, 1968); the essays from this volume were subsequently translated as *Toward A Rational Society. Student Protest, Science and Politics*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London, 1971), essays 4-6; *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston, 1973), essay 4; and *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London, 1972), appendix.
2. Compare my study, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, 1975).
3. S.M. Lipset, P.G. Altbach, 'Student Politics and Higher Education in the USA', in S.M. Lipset (ed.), *Student Politics* (New York, 1967), pp. 199 ff.; R. Flacks, 'The Liberated Generation, An Exploration of the Roots of Student Protest', *Journal of Social Issues*, July 1967, pp. 52 ff.; K. Keniston, 'The Sources of Student Dissent', *ibid.*, pp. 108 ff.
4. Compare the subsequent study of R. Döbert, G. Nünner-Winkler, 'Konflikt und Rückzugspotentiale in spätkapitalistischen Gesellschaften', *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 1973.
5. See Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston, 1972).
6. As a consequence of more recent prognoses, I see a need to weaken my previous formulations.