

## AUTHORITARIAN TENDENCIES OF THE SOCIETY OF THE COLLAPSE

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*It is unfortunate that in the world there is  
more foolishness than could ever be  
required for evil, and more evil than could  
ever be created by foolishness.*

KARL KRAUS, *Aphorisms*.

*Sad people are merciless.*

MARIANA ENRIQUEZ, "Verde rojo anaranjado".

In the last few years in Latin America, and in the westernised world in general, a wide-ranging debate has come about regarding the so-called rise of the right. The discussions highlight the institutional repositioning of conservative groups, who take up spaces in the parliaments, the courts, and, in the worse cases, the national governments. The attempts at explaining the different versions of this phenomenon often talk of fascisms, neofascism, totalitarianisms, etc., to try and map out and help us understand the epoch-defining changes that we are witnessing. Generally speaking, these terms are wrong - but that is of little concern to those who use them, even if they do mix up historical periods and lump together and simplify vastly different processes. Their key concern is indeed to denounce the "rise" of the right in the world, heralding a danger similar to that which took place in Europe in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Without denying that there has been a drastic institutional shift in which conservatives have taken up more and more spaces - a completely different process to that of the European fascist movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or the authoritarian governments of national security in Latin America, in the 1960s and 70s - it is somewhat pointless to analyse this from the perspective of left versus right at the state level. Essentially this is because the chains of liberal thinking are still being tightened, chains that rein in the possibility of radical critique, because there is a focus on institutional grievances and an assumption that what is being disputed is neutral and necessary: the idea that democracy and the state are eternal inevitabilities.

The staunch defence of liberal democracy hinders any acknowledgment of the authoritarian core within the modern forms of the state and institutional politics – which both the right and the left have participated and continue to participate in.

Secondly, to continue paying such close attention to the field of institutional politics and the “deformations” in democracy makes it easy to overlook those social dynamics that are somewhat closer to home, dynamics in which most people who deem themselves spectators of the left/right debate are indeed participants. One of these dynamics is the growing social authoritarianism, which cannot be analysed using the dichotomous simplification of left and right. Social authoritarianism comes up across the spectrum; there is also left-wing authoritarianism, which needs to be talked about in order to escape the trap of the topography of enlightened and institutional politics. This might be a way of regaining the power of social politics which cannot be captured by the technocratic forms of politics, those which are defined by the position of the “specialists” and which define the direction of everyday lives.

This article will try to present some key readings on social authoritarianism, highlighting its material culture and how it relates to the debate on the trajectory of a capitalism in decline. The starting point is the assumption that authoritarianism is not only a behaviour that belongs to the political sphere, but rather it is a way of understanding the world and positioning oneself in it. Authoritarianism is semantics, i.e. a structure of meaning in which collective and individual actions are brought into a discursive structure that shapes the material side of the world. This structure is not only symbolic; it has a material basis and a sensitive side which must be discussed in order to push forward the debate on the conditions of contemporary society and the possible ways of plotting the demise of the capitalist system. Furthermore, it is important to understand the role that the left plays in slowing down this process, since, amid all the pragmatic zeal of the new institution, left-wing post holders do not dare admit to their own active role in the conservation of the status quo.

### **Collapse and authoritarianism**

The unquestionable faith in the market forces, i.e. the oikodicy, is sustained by the society of money and work, which can only give rise to authoritarian subjectivities that must try and fight their way to the top, against the competition (Vogl, 2015). This struggle is exacerbated in a context in which both money and work lose their ideal equilibrium in the world of the market ruled by valuation. In today’s context, salaried work is radically decreasing amid the automatism of production, which casts out millions of people and

forces them to take up self-employed and informal work – those grey areas which have always underpinned the formal economy. Work decreases in the official sense, but it grows in all the possible alternative forms, affecting those “invisible” lives whose link with production is ever marginalised: women, migrants, the poor. In turn, money also undergoes certain mutations which, despite ensuring it stays at the core of everyday life, turn it into something increasingly abstract and therefore controlled by anonymous powers, far removed from the people who think they are producing it. From here stems the growing importance of financial valuation, and its corresponding disciplinary mechanism: that is, credit (Jappe, 2011; Lazzarato, 2010). Money is soon dematerialised; it becomes a matter of binary logic under the watchful gaze of the banking technocrats. The oikodicy collapses.

The destabilisation of the market, along with that of work and money, are mere symptoms of a great collapse. This collapse is not on its way: it’s already here, defining the meaning of collective lives. We are not witnessing an economic crisis, which might well be resolved via the fine-tuning of financial mechanisms and a new industrial revolution; nor is it a breakdown of the state and democracy, which, as with the prevailing forms of coexistence, can be repaired with reforms and citizen engagement; nor is it an age of the end of moral values, in which indifference and individualism reign true, and which can be improved via new communitarianism. This is a collapse in the general conditions for the reproduction of life, both in human life and in what is known as nature. This does not mean the end of the world, but rather a mutation in which a radical impoverishment of the qualitative forms of life is proclaimed. Life will go on, but impoverished to unthinkable extents; despite the irreversible extinction of thousands of animal and vegetable species, the reproduction of lives will continue, but within scenarios so precarious that they are simply unimaginable today.

For centuries, historical time was determined by catastrophe. Both biographical and collective time were marked by a tragic occurrence – cities were founded after earthquakes or wars; people were born after storms or droughts -, until the Enlightenment eliminated the scatological sense of social time and replaced it with the teleology of progress. This change was also metaphysical; the proclaimed end of time was thus instilled with the progress needed, as if it were a kind of rational objective. The paradox in today’s state of time is that, for the first time, there is fairly accurate knowledge about the end of the conditions that make possible the reproduction of life as we know it. The catastrophe is discernible and can be explained, apparently.

But as the many critiques of the Enlightenment and its mythographies have shown, information will not emancipate humankind, quite the opposite: it

has served as a mechanism that legitimises the controlling of territories and the management of populations. Today, knowledge about catastrophes is used to control catastrophes and turn them into fields of economic opportunities - a quick fix for the contraction of the formal economy – while allowing for governance by means of catastrophe itself (Semprun and Riesel, 2011). Administrating catastrophes and administrating by means of catastrophes define the governmentality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in its construction of the scenarios that lead to the surgical and legitimised control over territories, bodies and subjectivities. In the collapse scenario, collective responsibility emerges, in which everybody must act as a whole; the common sense of the time is that “everybody is responsible” and so “everybody must take action”.

Catastrophe can be used to promote new forms of individual reaction and collective manipulations (Mann and Wainwright, 2018). Today, everybody has to position themselves with relation to the collapse, leaving until later any critique on the industrial society that caused it. In this context, new social authoritarianism emerges, whose basis is simple: it doesn't matter if everything comes to an end as long as I keep hold of my privileges. It doesn't matter if thousands of people die, if millions are displaced, if ecosystems collapse, as long as the abstract world of apparent privileges goes on. This perverse relation is necessary for the ongoing reproduction of a capitalism in decline. In the contemporary context, the largest problem is collapse in the abstract sense, not a collapse in the actual society that produces it – and social authoritarianism is thus in charge of conserving that equation.

Max Horkheimer ([1942]2006) analysed the organic role of the authoritarian state in the reproduction of capital in crisis contexts, over the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He showed how political violence by the state was linked with the anonymous forces of capital in order to shape a society that would legitimise a war economy. In turn, this would accelerate industrial production and allow society to be modelled from below, up towards the not-so-dynamic ruling classes, and from above, reaching down to the working masses who would be willing to fight for transformation. The authoritarian state allowed for accelerated modernisations which brought on cycles of true subsumption in less industrialised regions. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are not witnessing state authoritarianism, but rather social authoritarianism, which carries out new functions in the reproduction of capital in a context of systemic dislocation. It is no longer just the state's political violence that mobilises the shaping of society; multiple “anonymous” acts of violence are linked to the “anonymous” forces of the growing corporate power, in order to define civilising trends and ensure that profits and the control of how power is exerted would be shared by as few hands as possible. The social authoritarianism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century correlates

with the governmentality of collapse: managing crises, and managing by means of crises. The state powers are no longer the great protagonists; they still occupy an important place, but they leave room for cooperative forces and reactionary collectives – it is no coincidence that new religious sects and cults, of all kinds, are emerging all around the world. The collapse of the reign of the economy gives rise to authoritarian reactions, and acknowledging the catastrophe serves to mobilise the seductive forces of capitalism: it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of the prevailing order of things (Jameson, 2009).

This correlation of forces brings about an unprecedented war economy, quite fitting for a permanent state of emergency, which itself acquires a new climate-focussed edge and thus becomes a state of ecological emergency. This emergency is not presented as an authoritarian one, but rather as something for which there is collective responsibility (Semprun and Riesel, 2011). The war project of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has therefore turned environmental collapse into a military problem, leaving to one side all the economic responsibilities.

Amid this scenario of decay, new forms of social authoritarianism emerge, forms which are far removed from the historical fascisms of the past century. New warriors appear - due to be studied in depth – who are not reduced to the classic form of people belonging to military and police groups, nor the faithful spectators of the battle. The warrior of this collapse is camouflaged; they take up positions that are barely recognisable at first sight, and they have distinct training methods at their disposal. Their topographies are no longer the trenches or the battlegrounds, but rather the everyday areas, the cities and towns in which battles must be waged to slow down the collapse, to avoid harming the “essential cores” of humanity, to protect life.

### **Social authoritarianism has the face of a man**

Faced with the idea of an abstract threat against humanity as a whole (as if such a thing existed), reactionary arguments come up on both the left and the right to defend the “ultimate meaning” of life (whatever that may mean). Today, the defence of life in the abstract sense is the objective of all the institutional political forces, to such an extent that they seem to defend the same thing, coinciding in projects of safeguarding and conservation that do not question the qualitative meaning of the existence of those species that occupy the spaces they are aiming to protect. This attitude exposes a patriarchal sense in the abstract conservation of life, which does not take into account specific contents, not the cultural forms which make life possible; and, in the case of ecosystems, these do not consider its active

role, nor its link with the reproduction of specific and distinct forms of life. Facing the collapse, it would seem that there can be no wavering, and that life must be protected by a paternal force.

Social authoritarianism makes it apparent that the patriarchy is a way of arranging the world, not just a top-down exertion of masculine force over the feminine and the feminised. It is a collective power which always appears renewed and reinforced in contexts of crisis. In the context of the collapse, the patriarchy re-emerges as a grammar that instils itself with the responsibility of saving the world. Social authoritarianism carries the mark of hypermasculinisation; redemption must follow the behaviour of white metropolitan men, their ecological conscience, their general defence of life, their coherence and their necessary sacrifices. Hypermasculinisation adapts well to the left and the right, both share responsible practices and moral behaviours that strengthen the meaning of an ultimate and unquestionable truth that must be adhered to in order to save the world.

The authoritarian personality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is masculinised, it operates via a defence of closed communitarianisms, whose ideal model is the distinctly masculine combination of complicities, silences and protections. This is a way of defending any values that might preserve the meaning of life, values that are turned into absolute and unquestionable truths that demand submission of the people who form part of the renewed communities. The defence of authority allows for an absolute subordination or, when the person who represents that condition does not exist, the possibility of becoming an authority – which sanctions, punishes, directs and resolves, via incontrovertible principles, the disputes that arise from social interaction. In this process, the exertion of force is the means of self-affirmation; physical force remains a priority, but the use of symbolic, epistemic and affective kinds of force is also very common.

The use of symbolic and epistemic forces allows for a growing social scenario of anti-intellectualism; the kinds of knowledge that will respond to the situation of collapse come from unquestionable explanations. This is where the prioritisation of the emotions comes from – especially virility, courage, faithfulness – as cognitive criteria instead of listening to and engaging with contingent arguments. Social authoritarianism creates a kind of communication which cancels out any real communication, inasmuch that it rejects all possible acts of listening as a prerequisite for dialogue. This sets the right conditions for an unprecedented scenario: the secularisation of the technocracy. The ancient, specialist forms of knowledge, exclusive to certain qualified people who ruled the world, are watered down into authorised certainties to give an opinion on anything, thanks to the “democratisation” of knowledge by means of social networks. The authoritarian personality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can “argue” its positions with

specialised information. This way, the exacerbated superstition and religiosity that are so characteristic of authoritarianism are dressed up as informed and legitimate opinion, because in the democratic context everybody produces knowledge, all truths are equally important, everything is equally valid. In the authoritarian order, the difference depends on the force with which such truth is defended, rather than on its actual content.

This allows other scenarios to be constructed, one where a hatred of fragility is fostered, which is a true hindrance in the context of the collapse. The forms of xenophobia are dressed up as scientific facts or educated judgements. An enlightened hatred of vulnerability is constructed in the authoritarian discourse. This impedes the acknowledgment of one's own fears and insecurities. In a world of absolute empowerment and headstrongness, doubt and fragility are not possible. The politics of the affects as promoted by social authoritarianism impedes the creation of mirroring dynamics – both dialectical and dialogical – in which any and all positions can see themselves reflected, and can therefore modify their position within the world. This is how a static image of the political position is constructed, which becomes self-referential and self-satisfying – the same on both the left and the right, racing as they do to construct dogmatisms of all types.

The dissolution of the dynamics of contact and divergence, of reflection and modification, aggravate the war on history that is so characteristic of 21<sup>st</sup> century authoritarianism. It is not a war on knowledge of the past – history reduced to an enlightened judgement on past occurrences – but rather on the ability to be politically linked with time in order to build links and legacies that can acknowledge the fact that before us there were others to whom we are indebted. The war on history – with an undeniable masculinising face, which prioritises the moment over connection, evanescence over cultivation – generates orphan existences, keen to advance authoritarianism, as if this were the only way of understanding one's place in the world. This is where the possibility of being politically connected with time in order to dispute the meaning of existence can be found, and is also where the ideal conditions appear for the rise of authoritarianism and patriarchal force, which so defines and defends the meaning of life as something generic which must be protected.

This brings about new social sensibilities, which are defined by the sense of anaesthesia and amnesia. The growing advances in pharmacology in society are not merely coincidental. In contexts where atrocities are so devastating, and where the ability to class them as part of a broader social time is so rare, is where the solution of painkillers emerges – just look at the social conflict represented by opiates in the United States, the epicentre of the collapse of the oikodicy. Recent social authoritarianism also promotes social

anaesthesia in combined ways. Paradoxically, in a society of painkillers, the absolute exposure of lives is encouraged; this society of transparency gradually bores a hole into that human condition of having an inaccessible core, which nobody, not even the subjects themselves, can reach (Han, 2013). Today, social networks demand that we expose everything and are exposed to everything, ever protected by the screen, and with medication on hand.

This way, it is possible to be up-to-date on the progress of the catastrophe, as well as the personal lives of those people with whom we can no longer have relationships. This is the cause of the obsession with having to say something, with regards to both the catastrophe and the personal lives of those people we think we know. 21<sup>st</sup> century social authoritarianism, unlike 20<sup>th</sup> century fascism, promotes an overproduction of pronouncements, it fosters the end of silence. Speaking out becomes compulsory; nobody who is committed to solving the collapse – be they from the left or the right – can remain silent. Thus, silence stopped being a common good (Illich, 2005).

The images that are produced from this compulsory speaking-out about the collapse, generate an environment that is similar to that of anaesthetising medication: short-lived relief, a morbid satisfaction of having fulfilled the obligation to take a position and defend one absolute truth. But given that medication creates addiction, you can never quite say enough, so you have to say more, you have to expose everything, expose the very person as proof of having taken a political stance, because the private is also political and because everything has to be political at all times. This prevents any acknowledgement of the fact that there is nothing more authoritarian than turning an order into the exposition of the intimate. But in the contemporary world this seems inevitable. Where there is silence, doubt, vulnerability, this is a threat, and alarm bells ring.

This is how social authoritarianism reproduces the usual senses of domination, but it does not have the mechanisms nor the accumulated material conditions which allow it to build externalities to dominate, and so they are internalised. The external which acts as a threat, which deserves to be exterminated or secluded, lies within people themselves or those they are close to – the enemy is the very person who does not follow the orders. This is directly linked with the transformations in the exertion of power. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, power has mutated, it is no longer an external relationship, the subjects subject themselves; the most radical expression of this is the idea of being one's own boss, there is no external employer anymore, and so people duly exploit themselves. The possibility of re-establishing social antagonism is more and more complicated, because the person who works in flexible conditions – taking pride in their freedom and



being able to organise their work, as they see fit, according to how much they want to earn – cannot recognise their class enemy, mostly because the class struggle that so defines the classes has stopped.

The social resentment typical of productive competition cannot lean towards one political exteriority. As such, the grammars of the social hierarchy are reinforced, those which permit an unleashing of the rage built up in those people who, historically, have functioned as recipients for such resentment: women, children, elderly people and migrants. This catharsis reproduces, in a deformed way, the ideal world of capital, turning men into mini managers at home, into cruel entrepreneurs who aggravate already-precarious situations. Desires are those desires imposed by the logics of excess. These authoritarian realisations radicalise the conditions of vulnerability, feeding into a vicious circle of failure, violence and cruelty. They become precarious and sad existences, which have no limits, not even in death, which is presented as an external matter.

### **What's left. Memory and the sense of collapse**

We are facing a scenario of authoritarian archipelagos, which is far from being a political regime like the 20<sup>th</sup> century fascisms. This makes their battle more difficult, because it cannot be reduced to a classical political topology, that is, it is not an issue of the left or the right. Social authoritarianism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a reaction to the oncoming collapse, and it demonstrates the limits of the imagination to think and act in another way. It is the most rounded expression of the inability to claim back verbs, instead of institutions (Illich, 2005): 'to educate' becomes 'school', 'to get well' becomes 'hospital', 'to politicise' become 'party' and 'state', etc. The institution is always an authoritarian mechanism that captures the founding and contingent force of events. Yet it appears that, in the face of the collapse, the imagination cannot conceive that another end is possible: not the end of the world, but rather the end of capitalism.

But while privileges are not being questioned, and the critique of the industrial society is not taken up again, along with the world of ruins it produces, the transformation will still be considered as a process for reordering chaos. This is why it is necessary to know that the force of social authoritarianism produces unarmed bodies for the struggle for social transformation, submerged in sadness and nostalgia for a world that never existed and never will.

This does not mean resigning oneself to the collapse, but neither does it mean restoring the epic or tragic figure of the struggle for transformation. Perhaps the road is simpler and more humble, being able to regain the

meaning of life, hold it, in one's own hands and in those of the others with whom life is weaved, to make life something concrete again. This is not possible without the restoring of the political link with time, because otherwise only empty shells will be produced, life with zero qualities, mere physiological reproductions.

On the other hand, this brings about a challenge in terms of memory and its mechanisms to be able to produce testimonies on this era of collapse in which millions of people die industrially – albeit no longer in the production-line model of the fascist extermination camps – in a flexible and partly delocalised production mode. Future generations will not have the ruins of the concentration camps or the clandestine detention centres, nor spying offices, nor physical documents on which 20<sup>th</sup> century authoritarianism carried out social classification; even the remains of bodies are a mystery for the memory of the present.

We are facing the challenge of constructing archives that fight against the original sense of the contemporary archive. The archive of social authoritarianism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be an anarchive, a *αν-ἀρχή*, which fights against the fundamental meaning of information, as if this were a transparent exteriority which can be accessed without conflict. The anarchive of authoritarianism and the collapse should entail, as a basic principle, respect for silence as a common good. When we are lost for words, to help cultivate them, it is better not to speak: could there possibly be an archive of silences? Could there be a forensic history without words?

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