

Chornical crisis and historical limits of capitalism¹

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Abstract

The globalization of the policies of fondomonetarist adjustment, since the early eighties, constitutes the response of financial capital, mainly of USA, to the crisis of the seventies (crisis that is not another thing but the return to the “convulsive normality” of imperialism). This globalization has contributed to leading the world economy into a new and even more serious crisis, the current one. So the last almost fifty years can be synthesized in the follow sequence: crisis→adjustment→crisis. The confirmation of the economic destruction and social regression that this sequence implies demands a rigorous and solvent theoretical characterization of the current world capitalist economy. With the aim of contribute to achieve it, in this paper, which is based on the Marxist method (identified as the historical culmination of the best tradition of economic thought), the theoretical category of productive forces is proposed as the central reference.

In order to do it we start with the presentation of the social and historical content of this category, from a dialectic point of view linked to the social and therefore historical category of relations of production. On this basis the pretension of a trajectory of capitalism structured around long cycles is shown us as a formulation incompatible with the Marxist method and with the own historical facts, i.e., is refuted. Faced with it, the conclusion of Marx's theoretical approach leads to raise the question of the historical limits of capitalism. On the basis of all the above, are approached the particularities of the empirical analysis of the productive forces. Which confirms us the process of destruction they are suffering as a direct result of the demands of capitalist accumulation today, embodied in a scenario of forging ahead incompatible with any pretension of new progressive capitalist redeployments, foundation of supposed “good capitalisms”.

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Productive forces, imperialism, world economy, capitalism

¹ This paper comes from two sections of the book Arrizabalo, X. (2014); *Capitalismo y economía mundial*, IME-ARCIS-UdeC, Madrid. All of its empirical foundations come from this text and in particular from its statistical appendix (675-708).

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The globalization of the policies of fundomonetarist adjustment, since the early eighties, constitutes the response of financial capital, mainly of the USA, to the crisis of the seventies (which is not another thing but the return to the “convulsive normality” of imperialism). This globalization has contributed to leading the world economy into a new and even more serious crisis, the current one. So the last forty years can be synthesized in the sequence crisis→adjustment→crisis. The confirmation of the economic destruction and social regression that this sequence implies demands a rigorous and solvent theoretical characterization of the current world capitalist economy.

The analysis of the current crisis, from a point of view that goes beyond its merely circumstantial aspects, leads directly to this question: what are the future prospects for humanity? Can expectations be founded on the fact that a new redeployment of capitalist accumulation will make it possible to overcome the current tendency, towards the impoverishment of the majority of the population (which is not only a relative impoverishment, but in many cases, as in Europe, it even becomes an absolute impoverishment)?

As can be seen, this is not just any question, since it deals with whether the level of scientific and technical progress that humanity has achieved thanks to the greater productivity of labour could be, within the framework of the capitalist mode of production, the basis for an effective improvement of its living conditions. Or if it's inevitable that this progress, within this framework, does not materialize in an improvement of them but, on the contrary, tends to provoke their ever greater deterioration. In other words, a situation of barbarism that is more than a threat to the future, the reality of which there are signs as serious as, to cite just one example, the explosion of the phenomenon of malnutrition in Europe³.

With the aim of providing elements for the characterisation of the current situation, this paper is based on the Marxist method, the historical culmination of the best tradition of economic thought. It proposes as a central reference the theoretical category of productive forces, in order to approach the final discussion about the perspectives of capitalism. The social understanding of this category is conformed as well as the necessary lever for the rigorous discussion about the limitats of capitalism.

Because, in effect, to sustain the possibility of a new capitalist redeployment, that allows to solve the serious problems existing today, also demands to sustain the theoretical possibility of new systematic developments of the productive forces under capitalism. For example, under the formula that capitalism behaves in a cyclical way in the long term, so that the possibility of these supposed new developments would remain open. On the contrary, our interpretation, resulting from the application of the Marxist method to the analysis of the facts, concludes that it is not only that the productive forces are increasingly blocked, but that, de facto, destructive processes of them are taking place in an increasingly broad and systematic way.

³ “Last year, an estimated 10% of Greek primary and middle school students were suffering from what public health professionals call ‘food insecurity’, i.e. they were hungry or at risk of going hungry, says Dr. (...) Greece has fallen to the level of some African countries (El País, 13 April 2013, quoting Athena Linos, professor at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Athens and director of a food aid programme at Prolepsis, a public health NGO).

“A 2012 UNICEF report showed that, among the poorest families with children in Greece, more than 26 per cent had a ‘poor diet for economic reasons’. (El País, 18 April 2013). In the case of Spain, the at-risk-of-poverty rate rises in 2011 to 33.8% in the Canary Islands, 31.9% in Extremadura and 31.7% in Andalusia and Castilla-La Mancha. For Spain as a whole, the risk of poverty or social exclusion rate affects 29.9% of the population under 16 years of age (INE, Living Conditions Survey; available at www.ine.es/jaxi/tabla.do?path=/t25/p453/provi/l0/&file=01002.px&type=pcaxis&L=0).

In order to argue all this, in the paper we start from the presentation of the social and historical content of this category of productive forces, from a dialectic point of view linked to the social and therefore historical category of relations of production.

Then, on this basis, the claim of a trajectory of capitalism structured around long cycles is shown us as a formulation incompatible with the Marxist method and with the historical facts themselves; i.e., is refuted. Faced with it, the conclusion of Marx's theoretical approach leads to raise the question of the historical limits of capitalism. At the same time, on the basis of all the above, are approached the particularities of the empirical analysis of the productive forces, which in any case lead to verify the process of destruction to which they are suffering, as a direct result of the demands of the capitalist accumulation today, captured in a scenario of forging ahead, incompatible with any pretension of new capitalist redeployments of progressive character, foundation of supposed "good capitalisms".

1. Productive forces and relations of production: two theoretical social and indisociable categories

Each society presents a certain degree of development of the productive forces. This development is the result of the effective deployment of the possibilities provided to each society by the availability of the elements participating in the production process. Therefore, the development of the productive forces depends on the available labour and means of production. Or to talk in a more precise way: it depends on the combinations that can be established between the available labour (according to its quantity and its qualification) and the means of production (according to its quantity and the technical progress that contain). These combinations are therefore based on the productivity of labour, the variable on which the productive forces ultimately depend. But productive forces are not productivity.

We have said that the availability of the elements that participate in the production process "provide possibilities" and that the productive forces "depend" on this availability, on their possible combinations, on the productivity of the labour in which they are materialized. That's to say, this availability is not a sufficient condition, it's only necessary condition. Certain availability of living labor and means of production is an indispensable requirement for the development of the productive forces, but it's not enough, it does not assure it because the productive forces are not the productivity of labor.

Some authors, such as Marta Harnecker⁴, have mechanically identified the increase in labour productivity with the development of productive forces. But this identification is contrary to the Marxist method, precisely because of its mechanicism, which denies de facto the social, dialectical and historical character of precise social categories such as productive forces.

Productive forces of humanity are the material and intellectual expression of the degree of domination over nature reached by it, of its acquired capacity to force nature to satisfy its needs. They are not, again, mere technical sets; they are at once the product and the instrument of man's practical-theoretical activity in his relations with nature, an activity which is the substance, the foundation of all progress in human civilization. For historical materialism, the socio-economic-historical category of productive forces occupies a central place in the history of humanity (Boisgontier, 1971b: 254)⁵.

⁴ "We will measure the degree of development of the productive forces by the degree of *PRODUCTIVITY* of the work"; Harnecker, Marta (1969); *Los conceptos elementales del materialismo histórico*, Siglo XXI, México, p. 42 (capital letters in the original).

⁵ See, in general, Boisgontier (1971b), Gluckstein (1999: 83-96) and Gill (1979: 384-391).

Indeed, in the first place the social character of the productive forces imposes the need to contextualize the discussion about their development beyond the influence of technical development, given that the hypothetical translation of this to the social level must be compatible with the exigences of the “rules of the game” (in the capitalist economy, the profitability). Secondly, the dialectical character of the economic processes supposes that the technical questions cannot reach a dimension superior to that of being necessary condition, because no automatism can be established between them and their social reflection. No technical development per se equals or guarantees social development. And thirdly, historical character implies that not only is there nothing pre-established as to the inexorable development of productive forces, but that the basis of their potential development for the establishment of new relations of production that verify this potential can, since a certain moment -and in fact it does- becomes an obstacle to further development. It is precisely to this issue, which is central at present, that this document is specifically oriented.

In short, around the notion of productive forces there is a significant risk of confusion, interested or not. Because one thing is the formulation of the productive labor force, strictly associated with its technical capacity of production, in an asocial way and, therefore, exclusively related to productivity. And something quite different is the economic and therefore social category of productive forces, a category that goes far beyond a purely technical consideration. Of course, productive forces are based on productive capacity, which in turn depends on the combinations that can be established between living labor and the available means of production.

But in no case are these combinations alien to the social “rules of the game” (the relations of production that we discuss below), which ultimately determine which of these possible combinations are actually carried out. To such an extent that the logic of certain production relations can lead to the uselessness of that capacity (suffice it to mention as an example the phenomenon of unemployment at present, incomprehensible from the “common sense” of the use values, but easy to understand from the logic of the dominant production relations, the capitalist ones, since it exists simply because of the absence of sufficient profitability to contract that offered work). That is to say, the productive forces, in their interrelation with the relations of production (thanks to which they acquire their social, historical character), do not consist in productivity, but in the social exploitation of the potentialities that, hypothetically, this productivity can contribute. In fact,

not all human labour is equivalent to putting productive forces into action. Thus, a work that does not respond to the purpose of satisfying human needs and that, far from favoring the development of the productive forces, unleashes the destructive forces, can be considered as useless, or even as a waste of time and forces (Gluckstein, 1999: 88).

It is, of course, the case of the gigantic development of the armament industry in the imperialist stage of capitalism:

On the one hand, because the nature of wars has changed completely: the wars of the 20th century have been wars of destruction with which the different imperialisms decided their relations by means of the destruction of entire populations and the economic bases of entire continents; destructive are also the 'humanitarian wars', which serve as cover for the operations of tearing apart and plundering of entire countries by the 'civilizing' troops of the great imperialist powers. On the other hand, because the armament industry itself, used as a driving wheel of the economy, diverts for its own benefit a great part of the nations' budgets, feeding indebtedness, which in turn leads to the massive destruction of public services and national economies (Gluckstein, 1999: 89).

Part of the confusion comes from drawing a parallel with the notion of productive work. In the capitalist economy, this is strictly defined by its capacity to produce surplus value and, therefore, it is totally devoid of any consideration towards its social utility or, in short, towards its contribution in the field of use values. When we thus approach the notion of productive work, we do so by investigating its function from the point of view of the capitalist accumulation process (that is, the one led by the capitalists with the objective of valuing their capital), in order to know the laws of its historical development. On the contrary, when we approach the question of the productive forces we do it from a perspective that goes beyond the specifically capitalist accumulation, putting it in relation with the general perspectives of humanity:

It could be objected that the production of weapons, regardless of their destructive function, offers the capitalists a privileged way out of production. It even represents important markets. But that the only thing that indicates is that the development of capitalist production cannot be identified with the development of the productive forces of humanity (Gluckstein, 1999: 89).

A first definition of the production process, seen in a technical way, approaches it simply as the combination of living labor and means of production to give rise to new products, products that are the result of a transformation process. But that definition does not give us anything for the economic analysis if we do not incorporate in it the social guidelines that allow us to understand how and in what magnitude this combination is produced. In fact, the object of economics refers to nothing but the social form through which society organizes itself to produce the material base of its existence, of its reproduction in time. Transitorily and intuitively we have referred to it, in colloquial terms, as “rules of the game”; that is, the social key that governs the accumulation process within the framework of whose development effectively produces an impulse to the productive forces; or, on the contrary, this is limited.

In effect, any society organizes production by establishing certain relations among its members; relations that are not only or in the first place technical, a technical division of labor, but derive from the particular conformation of the class structure of each type of society; that is, a social division. So, obviously, that organization of production will not be the same in every kind of society. In societies that are structured in classes, these relations do not occur between their members considered individually, but between the classes that integrate them (configured as such precisely around the role they occupy in the process of social production, linked in turn to the appropriation of the means of production). In short, the relations of production are the relations that are established between the different social classes in the social process of production.

Formulated in these terms it might seem that these relationships “fall from the sky”, which is certainly not the case. The relations of production derive from the particular links that each of these classes has with the means of production. That's why the relations of production can be of different types. For example, capitalist relations of production are based on the private appropriation of the means of production by only one social class, the bourgeoisie, so that the working class is dispossessed of them. Consequently, the social relationship on which the capitalist production process is based is established between the two classes: the commodification of the work force, whereby the working class sells its capacity to work as a means to obtain the income that allows it to buy the goods necessary for its reproduction, for its life. And by which the capitalist class buys this labor force to combine it with its means of production in a productive process of its property, whose result, thanks to exploitation or unpaid labor, is a surplus that takes the form of an increased mass of values (surplus value) that is also appropriated by it (profit). Indeed, it is the profit that allows the consumption of the members of this class (unproductive consumption), as well as that they face the needs

of accumulation that competition imposes. Precisely because the capitalist surplus or surplus value comes from unpaid labour is why we characterize these relations of production as relations of exploitation. In addition, the process of accumulation guided by the criterion of profitability and not by that of social needs, is carried out through the mechanism of indirect distribution of resources and products which is the exchange (goods adopt the social form of merchandise, so that for their consumption their purchase is demanded).

It goes without saying that, on the basis of a certain degree of technical development, there are alternative possibilities of social organization; that is, alternative possibilities of production relations and all their corollaries. At present, for example, thanks to the enormous qualification of the labour force and the scientific and technical development that makes it possible, there are material conditions for production relations based on non-hierarchical collaboration among the members of society as a whole, starting from the collective ownership of the means of production, which would allow a planned accumulation in which the criterion of production and distribution would be that of social needs expressed directly in a democratic way, not through the market.

The existence of these two main classes in the capitalist economy is the result of a historical process, through which classes are shaped as such by their place in the relations of production. It is because a part of the mercantile society constitutes its labor force (due to its condition of dispossessed means of production), that it is constituted as a class, around precisely that fact. And in parallel, it is because a part of society buys that labor force for its productive consumption (in combination with its means of production and with a view to the valorization of its capital, through the production of a surplus that is appropriated as profit), that it is constituted in class. Establishing between them the mentioned relation of exploitation that, therefore, constitutes the very essence of capitalism (thus showing, by the way, the fallacious inconsistency, and increasingly, of pretended modalities of “civilized capitalism” or “capitalism with a human face”)⁶.

Therefore, the theoretical categories of productive forces and relations of production cannot be considered in isolation, because they are not independent from each other: the development of productive forces conditions the relations of production and these, which therefore depend on them, in turn also influence them. Therefore, the link between the two is dialectical, dynamic, in permanent evolution, with tensions and contradictions.

From the first part of its connection, the necessity of a certain degree of development of the productive forces as a base for the setting in motion of new relations of production, can give account, as an example, of the impossibility that capitalism (that arises historically in a long period that extends, grosso modo, between 1500 and 1750) could have been consolidated in another previous period, due to the absence of the material conditions for it; that is to say, by the insufficient development of the productive forces.

And of the second part of the link between them, the conditioning exerted by the relations of production on the productive forces, a clear sample is the corset that the feudal relations of production suppose, in Western Europe of the mentioned period, for the materialization of certain potential changes (demographic, technological, availability of raw materials and natural resources, etc.) in an effective development of the productive forces. Corset of which society is liberated only by the own overcoming of the feudal relations of production, result of

⁶ A summary of the fundamentals and growing contradictions of capitalist accumulation, in the light of Marxist analysis, can be read in Arrizabalo (2014a: 95-146).

the successful class struggle of the ascending bourgeoisie and which will allow effectively the development of the productive forces⁷.

In fact, the enormous development of these is what characterizes in particular the first stage of capitalism that we call ascending capitalism. The development of the productive forces is not only the spectacular expansion of factory production, but also that of the proletariat as a class and the large urban agglomerations, which give rise to the development of construction, transport and communications. As well as the international economic relations that are acquiring a growing importance as a result of the very extension of capitalism, with the predominance of the export of goods, since the export of capital still has a very limited weight, but which already point towards the subsequent configuration of a world economy as such, which will integrate, albeit in a subordinate way in many cases, the immense majority of the world territory already at the beginning of the twentieth century. In any case, the development of the productive forces within the framework of these relations of production has nothing idyllic, but is based on the exploitation inherent to any capitalist process of accumulation.

The mechanical vision of the productive forces is directly related to the domination of the Stalinist conception within the workers' movement and its need to "decree" socialism (this conception is self-proclaimed Marxist, despite its incompatibility, both theoretical and political, with the most elementary approaches of Marxism):

For Stalin, socialism, which he identifies with the existing reality in the USSR, is a 'quantitative' concept, the culmination of a process of stateization of the means of production, and not a 'dialectical' ('qualitative') concept linked to the development of the productive forces (De Blas, 1994: 285).

In reality, it is not only that between the productive forces and the production relations there is an inextricable link, but it is precisely the set integrated by the productive forces and the production relations what constitutes the economic structure of a society, its economic base. And, therefore, the object of study of the economy as a discipline⁸.

The notion of economic structure allows Marx to refer to the economy from a historical and dialectical perspective. Thus it emphasizes its condition of totality integrated by different components, that maintain between themselves dialectic relations of interdependence. And that, historically approached, make possible the comprehension of their condition of permanence as for the elements that go beyond the circumstantial and, simultaneously, of movement, of change that opens the possibility that the own elements of bottom can be substituted by others that give place to a new structure. Therefore, this use of the notion of structure has nothing to do with "structuralism" which, in figures such as Althusser's, is incompatible with a materialistic conception of the world (Arrizabalo, 2014: 29).

Marx's next quotation, about the dialectical link between productive forces and production relations, perfectly illustrates the conclusion of what has just been explained. Especially in relation to the theme that constitutes the central content of this paper, the historical limits of capitalism:

The capitalist mode of production finds in the development of the productive forces a barrier that has nothing to do with the production of wealth as such; and this peculiar barrier testifies to the limitation and only historical and transitory character of the capitalist mode of production; it testifies that this is not

⁷ Another example is the one that constitutes the object of this paper: the obstacle that, at present, the capitalist relations of production suppose for the materialization of the hypothetical development of the productive forces that could allow the scientific and technical developments but that, in the capitalist framework, provoke their frustration, their destruction.

⁸ See Arrizabalo (2014a: 24-31).

an absolute mode of production for the production of wealth, but that, on the contrary, reached a certain stage, it enters into conflict with the further development of that wealth (Marx, 1894, 6: 310).

In fact, this is shown by the strong tensions to which the productive forces have been subjected in the last hundred years, to the point that the destruction of values typical of crises is already insufficient to end up, in a relatively cyclical way, restoring the conditions for accumulation to resume (which provokes the need for its destruction on an ever-increasing scale).

2. Imperialism and the historical limits of capitalism in the face of “long cycle” theories

On the plane of both economic and political debate, certain theorists as well as their organizations and leaders answer affirmatively to the question of whether the long-term trajectory of capitalism obeys a pattern of cyclical behavior, that is, according to upward and downward waves. These are the theories of “long cycles” (also called “long waves”). This approach has reached a certain echo, undoubtedly influenced by the “optimistic” vision provided by the notion of “long term cycle”, to defend that effectively capitalist accumulation has the possibility of redeploying itself again in an expansive way.

However, in the light of the events of the last more than forty years, any attempt to continue defending this supposed cyclical trajectory is settled empirically, given its incompatibility with the effective evolution in this long recent period. In fact, the period that begins around 1970, which is therefore already half a century old, has by no means contained any phase worthy of being qualified as expansion, even if the requirement is simply demanded that there be generalized growth, at least in the most advanced economies, and sustained in time beyond the short term.

The longing of these theories of “long cycles” occurs with the formulation of Nikolai Kondratiev, who in 1926 published in German his work *Die langen Wellen der Konjunktur* (“The long waves of the conjuncture”)⁹:

The dynamics of economic life in the capitalist social order are not simple and linear, but complex and cyclical (...) [Together with the average cycles of seven to eleven years and shorter cycles of three to five years], there is, moreover, enough ground to assume that, in the capitalist economy, There are also long cycles, whose average duration is fifty years (...) When affirming the existence of long cycles and denying that these are of accidental origin, we believe, at the same time, that they are born of causes rooted in the essence of the capitalist economy (Kondratiev, 1926 in VVAA, 1979: 33 y 66).

⁹ Kondratieff, Nicolái D. (1926); “Die langen Wellen der Konjunktur”, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 573-609. It was subsequently published in English in November 1935 under the title “The Long Waves in Economic Life” in *The Review of Economic Statistics*, vol. XVII, no. 6. And nine years later in Spanish as “Los grandes ciclos de la vida económica”, in Urquidí, Víctor L., dir. (1944); *Essays on the economic cycle*, FCE, Mexico. In 1979 it was published under the title “Los ciclos económicos largos” in a very clarifying work of the debate because it also compiles other texts that nourish the controversy on the matter. They are as follows: “La curva del desarrollo capitalista” by Trotsky (1923); “La teoría de los ciclos largos de Kondratieff”, by George Garvy (1943); “Las ‘ondas largas’ en la historia del capitalismo” by Ernest Mandel (1972, in “El capitalismo tardío”, which in 1964 this same author had called “Neocapitalismo”) and “La teoría de los grandes ciclos: Kondratieff, Trotsky y Mandel” by Richard B. Day (1977). Day explains that Kondratiev had already noted the subject four years earlier in: Kondratieff, Nicolái D. (1922); *Mirovoe khozyaistvo i evo konyunktury vo vremya i posle voyni, Vologda* (“The world economy and its junctures during and after the war”). Schumpeter is another relevant author on this subject. See Schumpeter, J.A. (1939); *Business Cycles, A Theoretical, Historical and Statistical Analysis of the Capitalist Process*, McGraw-Hill, New York. Returning to Kondratiev, in his 1926 text he points out that he reached the conclusion of the existence of long cycles in the years 1919-1921; a conclusion he did formulate in some previous texts, in 1922 and 1925, in particular in publications of the Moscow Institute for the Investigation of the Conjuncture, founded by himself in 1920. Kondratiev had been an Eserist (of the revolutionary socialist peasant party) and as such had participated as a minister in Kerensky's provisional government. During the 1920s and under Bolshevik rule, political leaders and theorists opposed to Bolshevism, such as Kondratiev, continued to work in state bodies in very relevant places, until Stalin and his clique took omnimodal control of the party and the state. In the context of the arrests and purges of the supporters of Bukharin's theses, including Kondratiev himself, he was arrested in 1930 and later executed in 1938, in the great wave of repression that followed Kirov's assassination.

The significance of this question of “long cycles” is due to the fact that it is directly connected with the permanent possibility of new developments of the productive forces within the framework of the capitalist mode of production. It is therefore connected with the historical limits of capitalism and has very profound political implications. Now, entering into its content, it must be emphasized that the very notion of long-term cycles inevitably clashes with the very foundation of economic reproduction, which has a social and therefore historical character. In fact, for a process to be defined as cyclical, two elements must come together: regularity in its oscillations (at least relatively) and a certain automatism in its materialization. In the light of both the theoretical and empirical analysis of capitalism, the incompatibility between such a formulation of “long term cycles” and the Marxist approach is obvious. It clashes in particular with the law with which Capital culminates, of the tendential decrease of the rate of profit. And it also clashes with the characterization of imperialism as the supreme phase of capitalism formulated by Lenin in 1916¹⁰.

It is not a question of economic determinism, but just the opposite, of the necessary joint consideration, but not chaotic or casual, of the factors that determine social development, in which the “economic factor” does play a decisive role, but only in the last instance. This is how Trotsky explained it in 1926, in relation to this same question:

The periodic recurrence of minor cycles is conditioned by the internal dynamics of capitalist forces, and manifests itself always and everywhere once the market has arisen to existence. As regards the long phases (of fifty years) of the tendency of capitalist evolution, for which Professor Kondratiev suggests, unfoundedly, the use of the term “cycles”, we must emphasize that the character and duration are determined, not by the internal dynamics of the capitalist economy, but by the external conditions that constitute the structure of capitalist evolution. The acquisition for capitalism of new countries and continents, the discovery of new natural resources and, in the awakening of these, major facts of “superstructural” order such as wars and revolutions, determine the character and the replacement of the ascending, stagnant or declining epochs of capitalist development (Trotsky, 1926 in VVAA, 1979: 91).

On the other hand, from the empirical point of view, Georges Garvy's criticism in 1943 is sufficiently clear and, from the current perspective, is even more fully endorsed:

Our analysis shows that the existence of long oscillations in the production series studied by Kondratieff is not proven; that the data of the four largest capitalist countries and the two world-wide series cover only one cycle; that, consequently, neither the international character of the phenomenon nor its repetition at regular intervals of rhythm can be affirmed on the basis of the material presented. The theory offered by Kondratieff to explain the cyclical repetition of long oscillations has no empirical basis (...) (Garvy, 1943, in VVAA, 1979: 138-139).

This does not mean at all, obviously, that the analysis of capitalism from a long-term perspective is of no interest, quite the opposite:

Although the hypothesis of long-lasting cyclical oscillations, on which shorter cyclical movements are superimposed, must be discarded, the idea that the capitalist economy has gone through several successive stages of development, characterized by different rhythms of growth and geographical expansion, deserves attention. The current analysis would probably gain in precision and meaning if it were based on a better articulated distinction between the different phases of the capitalist economy. The “curve of capitalist evolution” would be a more complicated picture than a simple curve and certainly more irregular than Kondratieff's long cycles. We would replace the hypothesis of long periodic oscillations with the study of the successive stages of our present economic system, of its growing geographical scope and of its changing relations with non-capitalist spheres. This would take us away from the construction of abstract models of temporal sequences, leading us to study the effective dynamics of our economic system (Garvy, 1943, in VVAA, 1979: 140-141).

¹⁰ See Arrizabalo (2014a: 167-183).

Although the debate has been formulated in terms of “cycles”, its essential content is not modified by naming it with another expression and, in particular, with that of “waves”, which is the term used for example by Ernest Mandel (and the one originally used by Kondratiev himself):

The international history of capitalism thus appears not only as a succession of industrial cycles distributed every seven or ten years, but also as a succession of longer periods, of around fifty years. We have known four, up to the present (...) It is evident that these “long waves” are not produced mechanically, but function through the articulation of the “classical” industrial cycle (...) Such a succession of at least five “long waves” cannot be attributed either to chance or to the play of exogenous factors alone (Mandel 1972, in VVAA, 1979: 158, 161 and 183).

Mandel adopts an “eclectic” perspective, as defined by Gill (1996: 558) with respect to his explanation of crises, but which extends to other planes such as the development of productive forces, the American decline or the bloc conflict. As such an eclectic approach and “with the pretext of delimiting reality in its concrete dimensions” (ibid.: 558), it tries to reconcile Marxist analysis with ad hoc explanations in each case. In this question of the cycles or waves of long term, this conciliation, impossible, can be summarized thus:

Kondratieff's theses pose two different types of problems. On the one hand it is a question of knowing whether the historical movement of capitalist accumulation knows more or less long periods of time that can be differentiated from each other by the increase or decrease of the rhythm of that movement. On the other hand, the question is whether this movement is cyclical or not. While Kondratieff answers both questions in the affirmative, Trotsky answers yes to the first and no to the second. Mandel pretends to agree with both, and Day underlines the impossibility of Mandel's position (Left in VVAA, 1979: 28-29).

This underlining of Day is totally clarifying...

Mandel's description of the “internal dynamics” of technological revolutions suggests the presence of some kind of rhythm [of the great cycles]; however, he also agrees with Trotsky that social and political factors prevent the great cycles from exhibiting a “natural need. To overcome this last difficulty, he avoids the reference to the great cycles -which imply rhythmic movement- and instead speaks of “long waves with a tonic of expansion” and “long waves with a tonic of stagnation”. But the problem with this terminology is that it leads directly to the essence of the Trotsky-Kondratieff debate. In Kondratieff's use of the term “wave”, two of them constitute a cycle. In addition, the term “wave” continues to imply a theoretical norm in relation to oscillations that can be differentiated (Day, 1977 in VVAA, 1979: 222).

...highlighting the incompatibility of Mandel's formulation with the Marxist method:

Thus, in the final analysis, Mandel faces the question of the equilibrium of capitalism, without realizing that he has done so (...) In short, he agrees with Kondratieff and Trotsky, something that is logically impossible. Either capitalism develops according to a continuous evolutionary pattern, in which case we can speak of cycles, or that theory hides the irregular development of capitalism, as Trotsky maintained. All the subtlety of the world will be incapable of overcoming the basic fact that, in Trotsky's opinion, long waves -or great cycles- are incompatible with a Marxist periodization of the history of capitalism (ibid.: 222).

In short:

Mandel's misunderstanding of Trotsky can also be illustrated by his reference to George Gavy, who very aptly concluded that Trotsky denied the cyclical character of long-term fluctuations. In Late Capitalism, Mandel suggests that Gavy's conclusions were “not very precise”; that is, Gavy discovered a simple semantic difficulty that, if followed, would reduce the question to a “purposeless dispute, as would the semantic differences between cycles, 'long waves', 'long periods' and 'large

segments of the capitalist development curve'. What seems to Mandel to be a simple semantic difference is actually the real crux of the Trotsky-Kondratieff debate (Day, 1977 in VVAA, 1979: 219).

The incompatibility between the Marxist method and the theory of long cycles or waves, which Kondratiev and Mandel, among others, propose, is well illustrated by the debate that had taken place in the first decades of the twentieth century by some of the main theoreticians of the workers' movement. Already in 1899 Eduard Bernstein had presented his revisionist position of the Marxist approach, rejecting the inevitability of a succession of deep and increasingly serious crises:

As no signs of a world economic crash of unprecedented violence have been seen, neither can we say that the periods of recovery that occurred (...) have been particularly ephemeral (...) if the geographically intense expansion of world trade, together with the extraordinary reduction in the time required for information and transport, have not increased to such an extent the possibilities of compensating for the imbalances, and if the enormous increase in the wealth of the European industrial states, together with the elasticity of the modern credit system and the birth of industrial cartels, have not so restricted the ability of local or particular imbalances to react to the general business situation as to make it necessary to consider highly unlikely, at least for a fairly long period, the possibility of economic crises of the kind precedent¹¹.

For Bernstein, contrary to Marxist analysis, general crises can be avoided:

The scheme of crises, in or for Marx, was not an image of the future, but a picture of the present, which was only expected in the future to present itself in ever more acute and macroscopic forms (...) Except for external and unforeseen events that provoke a general crisis - and, as we saw, this is always possible, there is not sufficient reason to deduce, on the basis of purely economic motives, that such a crisis is imminent. Local and partial depressive phenomena are inevitable, but not a general paralysis, given the current organization and extension of the international market and especially the expansion of livelihood production. This last phenomenon is of particular importance for our problem. Perhaps nothing has contributed so much to mitigating economic crises or preventing them from worsening as the collapse of revenues and livelihood prices¹².

In 1902, Kautsky had opposed Bernstein's position, arguing that crises tended to become increasingly severe and capitalism was heading for a state of chronic depression. However, twenty-five years later, in 1927, it totally changes its position in *The Materialistic Conception of History*, defending that there is no basis whatsoever to propose that capitalism tends to become a barrier for the development of productive forces (Gill, 1976: 367-368). Paradoxically, it sustains it starting from Marx's phrase of the Preface to the *Contribution to the critique of the political economy of 1859*, in which it affirms:

a social formation never perishes until all the productive forces for which it is amply sufficient have been developed, and new and superior relations of production never take their place before the conditions of existence of the same have not been incubated in the bosom of the own old society (Marx, 1859: 5).

But Kautsky defends that this affirmation does not apply to capitalism, which is capable of always continuing expanding the productive forces, unlike previous societies, which:

at the time of its decline they were no longer capable of supporting any development of the productive forces, hindering any new development... industrial capitalism leads to an ever more tempestuous expansion of the productive forces (taken from Boisgontier, 1971: 287).

¹¹ Bernstein, Eduard (1899); *Las premisas del socialismo y las tareas de la socialdemocracia*, Siglo XXI, México, 1982, p. 172.

¹² *Ibidem*: 176 and 182.

This means that Kautsky had derived an idealist position: for him, the overcoming of capitalism would no longer be a necessity, result of its historical exhaustion, but the product of a political decision. Thus, in reference to the First World War he argues:

But capitalism has not collapsed. It turned out that its elasticity, its capacity to adapt to a new situation were much stronger than its sensitive points. It has suffered the litmus test of war and today it is, from the purely economic point of view, more solid than ever... Thirty years ago I considered chronic crises. Afterwards, capitalism has suffered so many crises... and has come out of them so well that it seems economically more viable than half a century ago (ibid.: 287).

Kautsky's text is not premonitory: it dates from 1927, just two years before the outbreak of the so-called crisis of 1929. In the same period, the Communist International led by Lenin maintained the position of rejection of the hypothesis of an unlimited development of the productive forces under the bourgeois order:

The capitalist economy is at an impasse. The productive forces cannot develop any more within the framework of the capitalist regime (...) The new rising class, the class of the true producers, must, according to the laws of economic development, take into its hands the apparatus of production and create the new economic forms. Only in this way will it be possible to give maximum development to the productive forces to which the anarchy of capitalist production prevents them from giving all the yield of which they are capable.

For his part, Trotsky, in the Transition Programme approved in the constitution of the Fourth International in September 1938, expressly states that “the productive forces of humanity have ceased to grow”. To affirm that they have stopped growing is not equivalent to sustaining that there is going to be a gradual drift of decline of capitalist accumulation, which would clash with the dialectical analysis and the very theoretical culmination of Capital, the law of the tendential descent of the rate of profit. The supposed economic determinism of which Marxism is often accused does not correspond with the real content of this method of analysis, which does not indisputably establish what is going to happen (a regular and sustained fall in profitability that makes capitalism implode), but what can in no way happen (that capitalism can unlimitedly promote new processes of development of the productive forces)¹³.

In fact, Trotsky himself speaks of ebbs and flows to describe the behaviour of capitalist accumulation historically framed in its imperialist period. As Gill explains (1979: 372-373),

the general tendency of capitalism in the epoch of its decline, that of the blockade of the productive forces, which characterizes the regime “at the scale of an entire epoch”, does not eliminate with all the specific features of such a situation, the circumstantial variations, the particular conditions of such or such sector or of such a country, in sum the real conditions within which the class combat is developed. On the contrary, these particular features, local, temporal, these flows and ebbs, do not change the sense of the general tendency, nor therefore the strategic perspectives that are derived from it.

It is the same phenomenon that Lenin also described:

It would be a mistake to believe that this tendency to decomposition rules out the rapid growth of capitalism. No; certain industrial branches, certain sectors of the bourgeoisie, certain countries manifest in the epoch of imperialism, with greater or lesser intensity, already one or the other of these tendencies (...). As for the United States, economic development in recent decades has been even faster than in Germany, and, precisely thanks to this circumstance, the parasitic features of contemporary American capitalism stand out with particular relief (...) From everything we have said

¹³ IC (1921); “Tesis para la propaganda entre las mujeres”, Cuatro primeros congresos mundiales de l’Internationale Comunista, pág. 143.

about the economic essence of imperialism, it follows that it must be qualified as transitional capitalism or, more properly, as agonizing capitalism (Lenin, 1916: 496-498).

Indeed, it is perfectly compatible to formulate the existence of strict limits for the development of the productive forces of the capitalist mode of production and, at the same time, to defend the possibility of the mentioned ebbs and flows that, therefore, include phases of production growth in the real trajectory of capitalist accumulation. The key lies in the law of the trend decrease of the rate of profit (which is de facto the conclusion of Capital), which provides the basis for understanding two decisive keys: on the one hand, that the growing pressure against profitability finally supposes insurmountable limits for the development of productive forces; and on the other hand, that, simultaneously, its trend character is the framework in which there are ups and downs and irregularities. That is to say, the blockade on the development of the productive forces and the existence of phases of growth and phases of crisis are not only two compatible “phenomena”, but they are complementary, because the mentioned blockade, which establishes the general framework of capitalist accumulation in the imperialist stage, provokes a forward flight that is expressed in swings in the rhythm of accumulation. Swings which, of course, together with crises (ebbs) are also expressed in episodes of growth (flows). But not necessarily in a cyclical way.

If from the theoretical point of view Marx's approach in Capital denies any possibility that the process of capitalist accumulation is reproduced in an unlimited way, being constrained by the tendential decrease of the rate of profit (rate that constitutes its only stimulus), in empirical terms the current perspective unequivocally endorses such impossibility. In fact, after more than forty years since 1971, to mark a particularly symbolic date (derogation of the dollar-gold pattern), not even a real glimpse of the deployment of capitalist accumulation has materialized, which really had real signs of maintenance in time and extension in space.

It's not just that. The current crisis, the economic devastation it directly provokes and the very response of capital to it, exponentially spurring the destruction of productive forces in all planes, show in a palpable way the absence of foundation to endorse the thesis of a possible capitalist redeployment that relaunches the development of productive forces. The recent experience in the countries of Western Europe, the world region where the development of the productive forces had historically gone furthest, is categorical¹⁴: prior to the outbreak of the crisis, a destructive process was already underway, involving the dismantling of entire productive sectors and, above all, a growing devaluation of the labour force.

Just as capital has a tendency to disproportionately increase productive forces, it limits, unilaterally, etc., the main productive force, man himself; in short, it has a tendency to limit productive forces (Marx, 1857-58, I: 376).

This destruction of the main component of the productive forces, the labor force, is a demand of the capitalist accumulation reached the current point of its historical trajectory. The confirmation of this fact is what justifies this paper: the devaluation of the labor force has presided over the economic policy during the last three and a half decades (the policies of permanent adjustment *fondomonetarista*), whose essential content is precisely this: the cheapening of the merchandise labor force. The immense majority of the world population lives from the sale of this merchandise (and more and more because the rate of proletarianization or asalarization does not stop increasing¹⁵) and, therefore, from its price

¹⁴ See Arrizabalo (2014a: 625-650).

¹⁵ Guerrero, Diego (1999); *La explotación: Trabajo y capital en España (1954-2001)*, El Viejo Topo, Barcelona, 2006, p. 62-65.

(directly linked to its value), its living conditions depend. Their relative impoverishment is a requirement of the process of accumulation, which is expressed through the increase in the rate of surplus value, of exploitation. But what is posed right now is no longer this relative impoverishment, but an absolute impoverishment, the final expression of the destruction of productive forces to which the policies and actions of capital and its institutions increasingly flow.

Indeed, at the level of economic policy, the adjustment that has been systematically imposed since the early eighties, trying to respond to the crisis of the seventies, is the framework in which a capitalist accumulation unfolds that ends up leading to a new crisis with a much greater depth: the current one. And to which the only response on the part of capital is to intensify that same orientation, which is to be extended especially in those countries in which the working class has historically deployed its most powerful strongholds, particularly in Europe. And the institutions of capital deployed in this region, which is a reference on a world scale, are not only no longer able to deny it, but are making it more and more explicit:

In Greece], wages in the enterprise sector have fallen in recent quarters, but at an insufficient pace to help regain competitiveness, also due to continued wage moderation in Greece's main trading partners (...) However, recent labour market measures are expected to contribute to further reductions in labour costs over the next two years (...) [In Spain], the recent labour market reform allows firms greater flexibility to adjust wages and employment to their specific economic situation (...) Wage increases are expected to be moderate and, in combination with the continuation of the expected strong labour productivity growth, to further reduce CLU [unit labour costs]. The inflation differential with the euro area is expected to be negative, leading to some improvement in price competitiveness¹⁶.

They are new evidence of the increased need for a devaluation of the labour force that challenges the living conditions of the working class and is also the ultimate expression of the destruction of productive forces. Its extension in time, far beyond the short and medium term, abounds in invalidating the claims that the path of capitalist accumulation in the long term is due to cyclical behaviour.

3. Theoretical Possibility and Historical Need for the Destruction of Productive Forces

The theoretical category productive forces occupies the central place in the analysis of the historical future of societies. When one speaks of “development” (or of “economic development” or “economic and social development”), associated with a global structural change that translates into a sustained improvement in the living conditions of the population as a whole, then one is speaking of the development of productive forces. That is why the content of the productive forces does not simply consist of the productive potential of a society, expressed in the productivity that can be obtained from the labor force, according to its qualification and the availability of means of production with a certain degree of technical progress. It goes much further, because it includes its effective use in terms precisely of the living conditions of the population.

For this reason, as has been previously explained, productive forces cannot be reduced to one more concept or one more indicator, definable with “precise objective criteria”, which simply refers to the material dimension of the means of production and the labor force. This purely “technological” conception of the productive forces, as if they were simply the sum of mere objects or things quantifiable in a direct way, is contrary to the Marxist approach¹⁷:

¹⁶ European Commission (2012); “European Economic Forecast. Spring 2012”, Commission Staff Working Document, Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, Bruselas, p. 71 and 74.

¹⁷ Boisgontier (1971: 245-248).

Marxist analysis cannot ignore that no economic or social category can be reduced to its quantitative aspects; that its qualitative aspects are on the contrary determinant, because it is only in them where its contradictory character appears, the contradiction that founds this particular category and sets it in motion. Marxist analysis does not therefore start from the results of any statistical analysis as what constitutes the empirical reality of society, the “factual data” (Boisgontier, 1971: 247).

Social reality is only comprehensible in the light of a dialectical analysis, because its content is contradictory and changing, because there are no linear and univocal relations between the facts that compose it:

He [Marxist analysis] proceeds from the social relations of production to analyze the particular social category in question, from the fundamental contradiction of capitalism to lead to one of its specific determinations by abstraction; only by reconstructing the concrete totality he wants to study, now understood, clarified by dialectical analysis, will he use the quantitative data of the statisticians to illustrate the results to which he has already arrived. Because, again, the statistical method is not neutral - it comes from the transformation of social relations into things, into measurable magnitudes emptied of their contradictory character (Boisgontier, 1971: 247)¹⁸.

And this, which is so with general character, for the different social phenomena, it is it even more clearly for the productive forces, by the mentioned central place that they occupy for the explanation of the reproduction of the societies in the time:

These general considerations are particularly imposed when it is a question of the category at the same time social, economic and historical of the productive forces, in which are involved in an essential way the deepest relations between man and nature, and of the men between them, in their productive activity (Boisgontier, 1971: 247).

This characterization of the productive forces explains why they cannot be limited to a merely technical indicator:

The productive forces are not reduced, they cannot be reduced, they cannot be flattened in measurable magnitudes, set of machines, of raw or auxiliary materials and of simple or qualified work forces. They do not constitute a technological whole (although they present, as the values of use, on the one hand, an aspect measurable by the methods of science of nature or technology) (...) the productive forces include (...) elements measurable by technology or applied sciences (the performance of an engine, the amount of energy available to each worker, etc.), but they are not flattened at all, they are not reduced to these quantitative elements, which provide indications as to their growth, but cannot be sufficient in any case to appreciate it (Boisgontier, 1971: 253-254 and 256).

Precisely for this reason it has been raised that the question of productive forces, as a social question that it is, cannot be approached in isolation from the relations of production, since both are indissolubly related:

The Marxist method (...) considers the productive forces in bourgeois society not as simple material objects measurable with the aid of statistical techniques, but as an economic and social category, expression of a social relation involving opposite classes, in which the contradiction is manifested between the increasingly social character of production and the private character of the property of the means of production (Gill, 1979: 375).

This is not the case with the “technological conceptions” of the productive forces. With them it happens as with any other theoretical formulation: it cannot be decontextualized from the general political framework in which it is framed. To a greater extent when dealing with the productive forces, when referring these to a question that is in the center of all

¹⁸ Both Marx and Engels disassociated themselves from any pretense of closed concepts or definitions. For example Marx in the book II of Capital (1885: 274): “It is not a question here of definitions under which things are subsumed. It is about certain functions that are expressed in certain categories”. And Engels in the prologue to book III of Capital (Engels in Marx, 1894: 16): “(...) observations [which] (...) are based on the misunderstanding that Marx intends to define when he develops, and that, in general, finished definitions, valid once and for all, should be sought in Marx. It is understood that when things and their reciprocal relations are not conceived as fixed, but as variables, their reflections in the mind - the concepts - are also subjected to modification and renewal, that they are not enclosed in rigid definitions, but are developed within their process of historical or logical formation, respectively”.

debate about the perspectives of capitalism. And therefore, at the centre of all debate about the viability and scope of other possible ways of conducting economic policy beyond the short term, given that the productive forces ultimately refer not to material possibilities per se, but to their effective materialisation in a sustained improvement of the living conditions of the population.

These “technological conceptions” are not compatible with the theoretical and political framework of Marxism, in which the idealistic expectation that there are always possibilities of new developments of the productive forces in capitalism cannot be embedded. In effect, the Marxist approach is unequivocal with respect to the historical limits of capitalist accumulation because of its inevitably contradictory character...

From a certain moment the development of the productive forces becomes an obstacle for capital; therefore the relation of capital becomes a barrier for the development of the productive forces of work. Capital, i.e. wage labour, at this point enters into the same relationship with the development of social wealth and productive forces as the corporate system, the servitude of the gleba and slavery, and, as an obstacle, is necessarily eliminated (...) In acute contradictions, crises, convulsions, the growing inadequacy of the productive development of society is expressed in relation to its relations of production that are still in force today. The violent annihilation of capital, not due to circumstances alien to it, but as a condition of its self-preservation, is the most con-undent form in which it is given the advice to leave and leave room for a higher stage of social production (Marx, 1857-58, II: 282).

The limited nature of capitalist accumulation is most clearly shown in crises:

In crises the contradiction between social production and capitalist appropriation explodes violently. The circulation of goods is momentarily stopped; money becomes an obstacle to it; all the laws of production and the circulation of goods are turned upside down. The economic collision has reached its culminating point: the mode of production rebels against the mode of change, the productive forces rise against the mode of production from which they were born (Engels, 1877-1878: 243-244).

It is therefore the consubstantial contradiction to the capitalist mode of production which, causing its own problems, proves incapable of channelling the possibilities incubated by its activity:

The whole mechanism of the capitalist mode of production fails under the pressure of the productive forces that he himself has engendered. He can no longer convert all this mass of means of production into capital; they remain idle, which is why the reserve industrial army also remains idle. There are plenty of means of production, livelihoods, available workers, all the elements of production and wealth in general. But “the plethora becomes a source of misery and wealth” (Fourier), for it is precisely the plethora that prevents the means of production and life from becoming capital (ibid.: 244).

The conflict therefore arises at the very heart of capitalism, as its relations of production become the obstacle to the development of the productive forces, which will only be possible by overcoming these relations of production:

Indeed, the means of production, in capitalist society, cannot enter into action unless they have previously become capital, a means of exploiting the human labor force. The need for the means of production and of life to acquire the quality of capital stands as a spectre between them and the workers. It is she and she alone that prevents the assembly of the material lever and the personal lever of production, it is she alone that forbids the means of production to function and the workers to work and live (...) these same productive forces are increasingly pressing for the suppression of the contradiction, for their liberation from their condition of capital, for the effective recognition of their character as social productive forces (ibid.: 244).

In short, the productive forces escape the control of the ruling class, causing society as a whole to move towards a kind of forward flight:

A class that possesses the monopoly of all instruments of production and means of livelihood, but demonstrates in every period of crisis and in every ensuing disaster that it is incapable of continuing to dominate the forces of production that have already escaped its power; a class under whose leadership society is marching towards ruin like a locomotive whose blocked safety valve is the machinist too weak to open it. In other words, it comes from the fact that both the productive forces engendered by the modern capitalist system of production and the distribution system created by it are in flagrant contradiction with the same system of production to such an extent that it is indispensable to transform the mode of production and distribution so that all class differences are eliminated, if we do not want the whole of modern society to crash (ibid.: 138).

A great confusion has been sown over the theoretical category of productive forces. Interestingly, because it is the cornerstone on which the perspectives of capitalism can be seriously analyzed and, therefore, the political implications are direct and it can be said that implacable. It should therefore be stressed that economic growth, as conventionally defined, i.e. in terms of increased production, is not synonymous with the development of productive forces. Nor, as has already been explained, is productivity growth:

The Marxist method, contrary to the quantitative or positivist method (...) considers the productive forces in bourgeois society not as simple material objects measurable with the help of statistical techniques, but as an economic and social category, expression of a social relation that implies opposite classes, in which the contradiction between the increasingly social character of production and the private character of the property of the means of production is manifested (Gill, 1979: 375).

Precisely because this social and contradictory character of the question of productive forces cannot be ignored, it is necessary a “qualitative” analysis that allows effectively to evaluate the content of any process of economic growth, beyond the verification of its merely quantitative dimension in terms of increase of the value of production. If not,

abstracting the relations between man and nature and the relations of men between them, the quantitative method that measures in an apparently scientific way the productive forces according to “precise objective criteria”, leads to putting on an equal footing expenses of a completely different nature, such as armament expenses and social expenses, that is to say expenses whose orientation, direction, are opposed from the point of view of the contribution they provide to the progress of humanity or on the contrary to its regression (Gill, 1979: 377-378).

In reality, it is not only that there is no guarantee that the increase in the material possibilities of society (thanks to scientific and technical advances, based in turn on the better qualification of the workforce), will result in an improvement in the living conditions of the population as a whole (in particular of its very largely majority fraction that lives off its work, the working class), but that it is rather the other way around: the demands of the process of accumulation prevent it more and more, provoking that the generic possibilities of development of productive forces are transmuted, de facto and in an increasingly acute way, into destructive forces. Already in the mid-19th century, in 1845-46, Marx and Engels spoke of “forces of destruction” as opposed to “productive forces”:

In the development of the productive forces, a phase is reached in which productive forces and means of exchange arise which, under the existing relations, can only be a source of evils, which are no longer such productive forces, but rather forces of destruction (...) and, what is intimately related to it, a class emerges condemned to bear all the inconveniences of society without enjoying its advantages, which is expelled from society and forced to place itself in the most resolute opposition to all other classes; a class that forms the majority of all members of society (...)¹⁹.

The distortion of the theoretical category of productive forces is rooted in the lack of consideration of the relationship between exchange values and use values, which is a

¹⁹ Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich (1845-46); *German Ideology*, Ediciones Pueblos Unidos y Cartago, Buenos Aires, 1985, p. 81.

dialectical relationship. There is no doubt that, from the point of view of the accumulation of capital, what matters are the exchange values. Therefore, the field of analysis of the critique of the political economy, of society governed by the laws of capitalist accumulation, is that of exchange values. But the question of productive forces cannot be confined to the terrain of the historically limited society that is the capitalist, but refers to a broader level: that of the history of societies, that of the trajectory of human society and, therefore, must be considered the plane of the values of use. Because the values of use are always “below” the values of change (“wheat does not feed because it is capital, but because it is wheat”)²⁰.

An example of this imperative to consider the background of use values can be found in the reproduction schemes of book II of Capital. The foundation of these schemes lies in the need that the final production of a period, of a certain magnitude in value, contains in a certain proportion the values of use that allow effectively to carry out the reproduction of the elements consumed and its eventual extension. Or said more graphically, in order to reproduce the labor force, we need the goods behind which underlie the use values that are consumer goods (food, clothing, housing). In order to renew the means of production, we need the goods whose use values are “behind” the production goods (machinery, tools).

Therefore, accumulation is not only a question of substitution and increase in value. It is also a question of substitution and increase of the material base of this value, i.e. of the value of use (...) The refusal to take into account the value of use and social relations when evaluating productive forces, breaking the dialectical unity of the commodity (value of use - exchange value) and of the mode of production (productive forces - social relations), leads to a reduction of the economy to the range of econometrics and statistics (Gill, 1979: 381-382).

Another example of the always necessary underlying presence of use values behind values is the way Marx (1867, III: 760) explains the organic composition of capital:

(...) all capital is divided into means of production and living labor force, composition which is determined by the ratio between the mass of the means of production employed, on the one hand, and the amount of labor required for their employment, on the other. I call the first a composition of value; the second a technical composition of capital. There is a close correlation between the two. To express it, I call the composition of the value of the capital, insofar as it is determined by the technical composition of the same and reflects the variations of this, organic composition of the capital.

Leaving aside the background of use values means renouncing the meaning of the value-of-change/value-of-use duality as the basis of all the theoretical formulation that allows the understanding of capitalist accumulation:

Marx's method, for whom the “decisive point” of political economy is the splitting of human labor into abstract labor, producer of exchange values, and concrete labor, producer of use values (...) The use value -like the productive forces- presents such measurable effects. The objectivist error, or even positivist, “technologist”, of Weber and Mandel is to see only in the productive forces (and also, therefore, in the use value, in this respect comparable) this side, to forget completely that they are social relations, between men, because they are the artificial organs of which humanity is endowed in and by their fundamental relation with nature, the work, the productive activity destined to satisfy its needs and that this collective activity implies a social relation, a relation between men in a given society, in which it is inserted necessarily, as a specific social relation, in the form of society in which it manifests itself (Boisgontier, 1971: 250).

²⁰ Marx (1905-1910: 235).

In such a way that isolating both dimensions, disconnecting them, inevitably leads to make of the economic analysis a caricature:

to break this unit suppressing one of its terms, is, if only the exchange value is conserved, to degrade the economy to econometrics, that believes to translate in statistics all the social reality, and consequently to degrade the exchange value, social relation, to a simple technical measure of productivity; it is, if only the use value is conserved, to reduce the economy to the technology, to the applied sciences, and the use value itself, social relation, to a set of empirically verifiable and measurable properties (ibidem: 250).

Because in both planes the social relation and the contradictions that it supposes in capitalism are expressed. Both at the level of the values of use...

Opposing the satisfaction of the needs of human society to the indifference of capital to the particular nature of the merchandise produced by it and to its useful or harmful effects, provided that it is sold, from which comes its indifference to the production of means of destruction, to the deterioration of the natural environment, to the anarchic depletion of the resources of raw materials, etc. (...) (ibid.: 250).

...as at the level of the values of change:

as we see, the tendency of capital to incorporate always more value, therefore to appropriate an always greater mass of free surplus work, tends to deny itself (ibid.: 250).

Marx criticizes Ricardo in the Theories on surplus value, emphasizing the economic importance of use values:

when considering surplus value as such, the natural form of the product, and therefore of the surplus product, is indifferent. On the other hand, it is important to consider the real process of reproduction, partly in order to be able to understand the forms it takes and, partly, the influence that the production of luxury goods, etc. exerts on reproduction. One more example of how the value of use as such becomes economically important (Marx, 1905-1910: 224).

In short, it is convenient to emphasize what has already been explained in the first section regarding the fact that the question of the productive forces is not separable from the question of the relations of production, against all artificial schematism as Stalin's formulation of a supposed "necessary correspondence of the social relations and the productive forces" since:

Thus transformed into opposite things, into a frozen relation of "necessary correspondence", the productive forces will be studied by the applied sciences, the social relations by the human "sciences". Social relations and productive forces thus become irreducible "structures" one to the other in the structuralist Godelier, disciple of Althusser (Boisgontier, 1971: 252).

The reference to the capitalist relations of production constitutes a "call to the order" of reality, since the productive forces cannot be considered disconnected from them, that is to say, historically. The historical plasmation of the demands of these relations of production, the capitalist ones, is that they are configured de facto as a sort of corset that prevents the hypothetical possibilities of development of the productive forces. Indeed, these hypothetical possibilities collide more and more head-on with the reality of "profitability at any price" demanded by capitalist accumulation. To the point that precisely this price begins to be, to an ever greater extent, the destruction of productive forces, thus consecrating an accelerated increase in the distance between possibilities and reality:

The productive forces are clutched in the antagonism between their nature as an instrument of concrete labor at the service of the needs of humanity and their form of productive capital thirsting for

surplus value. They tend to amputate their own surplus, unusable for valorization as productive capital. They are contaminated by parasitism and the putrefaction of the mode of production in which they operate: they tend to deny themselves, to transform themselves into destructive forces; “organs of execution of the will of man in nature”, “organs of the human brain created by the hand of man”, they turn against their creator and threaten him with extinction. From the particular angle under which they are included in technology and are measurable, they are no longer measured only in megawatts, but in megatons, and finally in megamortals (Boisgontier, 1971: 257).

In other words, within the framework of the tensions between the productive forces and the capitalist relations of production, the historical exhaustion of the progressive character of the regime based on these, implies direct negative consequences on those, as Marx and Engels had already raised...

The great industry whose] development engendered a mass of productive forces that found in private property a hindering obstacle, as the guilds had been for manufacturing and the small agricultural exploitation for the advances of craftsmanship. These productive forces, under the regime of private property, only undergo a unilateral development, they become for the majority destructive forces and a great number of them cannot even be applied, with private property (Marx and Engels, 1845-46: 69).

...and as today it is seen in an increasingly acute form. In fact, the expression of this historical exhaustion is shown throughout the twentieth century, with crises, wars, etc. and also with the enthronement of sectors such as the armament whose production cannot be considered as use values that express useful work and, therefore, cannot be considered as an “indicator” of the development of productive forces:

For Marx, in any case, it is clear that the production of formidable means of destruction could not have been considered as a manifestation among others of useful work, “indispensable condition of the existence of man” (Boisgontier, 1971: 255).

4. The destructive sequence crisis→ajuste→crisis, confirmation of the inevitable flight forward of capitalism

Linking directly with the closing of the previous section, in the recent period that we have synthesized in the sequence crisis→ajuste→crisis, not only is there no development of the productive forces but more and more the value of its main component, the work force, is destroyed, as well as the environment on which it acts, the natural resources:

Capitalism, pushed by the motive of profit, deteriorates instead of improving the living and working conditions of the masses, attacks social conquests and democratic rights, drives more and more the congestion of cities, the destruction of the environment and the natural environment by pollution, threat of permanent destruction of certain ecological cycles (Gill, 1979: 386-387).

The key lies precisely in the fact that around the labor force, which is the main foundation of the productive forces, there is no doubt: it is systematically devalued through the reduction of direct but also indirect (education, health, etc.) and deferred (pensions) wages, as well as its unemployment (not only through unemployment, but also through part-time, precarious jobs, etc.). In this regard, the situation in the United States is very significant, clearly showing that appeals to the possibilities of technology and all the corresponding rhetoric have no basis in reality. In fact, the direct destruction of employment skyrocketed, even before the great crisis that broke out in 2007-2008:

From January 2001 to January 2006 (...) American industry lost 2.9 million jobs, almost 17% of the industrial workforce (...) Communications equipment lost 43% of the workforce. Semiconductors and electronic components lost 37% (...) in computers and electronic products, declined 30%. Electrical equipment and appliances lost 25% of its employees (...) in motor vehicles and parts declined 12%.

Furniture and related products lost 17% of their jobs. Clothing factories lost almost half (...) Textile employment declined by 43%. Paper and stationery products lost a fifth (...) plastics and rubber products declined by 15%. Even beverage and tobacco factories experienced a 7% contraction in employment²¹.

Therefore, it is not the crisis but something much deeper: the impossibility of even maintaining the degree of development reached by the productive forces within the framework of the demands of capital accumulation, which inexorably lead to a real “flight forward”. So even the episodes of relative recovery show the underlying trend towards the destruction of productive forces. This is the case, for example, of the “job creation” in the USA since 2010 that hides the very decrease of the active population:

The United States has been creating jobs for 34 months (...) But some data have a trick (...) unemployment is still at 7.4% and a large part of the drop in the unemployment rate is attributed to the contraction of the market. There are 2.2 million fewer employees than in 2007 and 13 million more people of working age²².

But it is not only that, but also other aspects such as unwanted part-time work:

There are more misleading figures. If the activity rate, currently at 63.4%, were at the pre-crisis level, unemployment would be around 10%. If what is taken into account when calculating unemployment are the 8.2 million employees forced to work part-time - where the hour is paid at an average of 15.75 dollars (11.8 euros) - and the 2.4 million excluded from the market, underemployment reaches 14%. Not to mention the 4.2 million long-term unemployed. There are 5.2 million fewer full-time jobs than in 2007, when the financial crisis began. Essentially, half of the employment created since mid-2009 is part-time. The worst thing, according to analysts, is that there are 22 million workers who want a full-time job and can't find it (ibid.).

And presiding over everything, the devaluation of the work force. Literally: a reduction in its value.

Added to this is the fact that new occupations are generally worse paid than before the crisis (...) it is the lowest-paid occupations that are behind the recent increase in employment (...) These categories in July represented 52% of new contracts. Protests over low wages coincide with the debate to raise the minimum wage per hour worked in the US and to link it to the evolution of the cost of living. President Barack Obama proposed earlier this year, in his State of the Union address, that it should rise to at least \$9 (6.75 euros) as a solution to try to curb growing inequality and help create a broader middle class. That minimum wage now stands at \$7.25 (5.40). With this salary, the annual income is around 14,500 dollars, well below the average income. “That could make the difference between going to the supermarket or to a food bank,” according to Obama (ibid.).

All of which is expressed socially in a growing polarization, the result of the dismantling of the protection elements:

The labor market has been creating much more inequality in the last thirty years, capturing those who earn most of the increase in macroeconomic productivity. Several factors may help explain this increase in inequality, not only the underlying technological changes but also the withdrawal of institutions developed during the New Deal and World War II - such as progressive fiscal policies, powerful trade unions, social provision of health and retirement benefits, and changing social norms related to pay inequality²³.

²¹ Roberts, Paul Craig (2006); “Nuking the Economy”, Baltimore Chronicle, 13 February. Roberts was Under Secretary of the Treasury during Reagan's presidency and an editorialist for the Wall Street Journal. In fact, in this article he uses this data to criticize in a tricky way immigration. But both these data per se, and the fact that someone like him presents them, show the impossibility of concealing the serious American economic deterioration, concretized among other areas, in the destruction of industrial employment long before the outbreak of the crisis.

²² Pozzi, Sandro (2013); “EE.UU. se recupera a tiempo parcial”, *El País*, 17 August.

²³ Saez, Emmanuel (2013); “Striking it Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States (Updated with 2012 preliminary estimates)”, UC Berkeley, 3 September (<http://elsa.berkeley.edu/~saez/saez-UStopincomes-2012.pdf>).

However, in the field of propaganda it is intended to present this destruction as one side of the coin, compensated by the other side, that of the “new economy” based on knowledge, new technologies, etc. But, as in the case of the misnamed “industrial reconversions” in the Spanish case, in which there was no other side to industrial dismantling, there is no compensatory mechanism here either:

Knowledge-based jobs that were supposed to take the place of lost jobs in the manufacturing sector in the “new globalized economy” never appeared. The information sector lost 17% of its jobs, with the telecommunications workforce declining 25%. Even jobs lost in wholesale and retail trade. Despite new accounting obligations imposed by [the Sarbanes-Oxley Act], accounting employment fell by 4%. Computer systems design and related activities lost 9% of their jobs. Today there are 209,000 fewer management and supervisory jobs than 5 years ago (ibid.).

In spite of these observations, which come from very far away, in the second half of the 20th century new formulations were deployed which, despite formally claiming Marxism, revised central approaches to the historical materialism on which it is based, in accordance with what has just been explained about the social character of the productive forces. This is the case of the “State monopoly capitalism” of Paul Boccara and the French Communist Party, as well as the “neocapitalism” or the “late capitalism” of Ernest Mandel. In both cases, the premise is a supposed new development of the productive forces, essentially associated with a “scientific-technical revolution” in Boccara and a “third industrial revolution” in Mandel. These “revolutions” would be the basis of the new phase of capitalism that gives its name to its theorizations. In Mandel's approach, this new phase is framed in his theory of long waves, whose incompatibility with Marxism has already been argued²⁴.

The conclusions of all this are categorical: the clearest expression of the contradictions of capitalism at present is the fact that, despite the increase in the rate of surplus value during the lustrums prior to 2007, the mass of surplus value obtained is insufficient to nourish a rate of profit that stimulates accumulation. The theoretical explanation is the law of capitalism consisting of the trend decrease of this rate (that is, of profitability, which is the only possible driving force for accumulation in this social regime):

This, in all respects, is the most important law of modern political economy and essential for understanding the most difficult relations. It is, from the historical point of view, the most important law (Marx, 1857-58, II: 281).

In historical terms, for one hundred years capitalist development has provoked a new configuration of capital (oligopolistic financial capital) that unfolds in a new playing field (the world economy), the result of which is an increasing tension on the productive forces. It is imperialism, in the framework of which the crises have a different, more serious status, which we identify with the expression “flight forward” in order to point out the growing needs of destruction for the continuation of capitalist accumulation (destruction which, of course, includes wars or the overexploitation of natural resources, but which concentrates especially on the devaluation of the labour force).

The path of the world economy since 1970 is synthesized in the sequence crisis→ajuste→crisis. This sequence links the crisis of the seventies (expression of the exhaustion of the exceptional post-war period begun in 1945), with the globalization of the policy of fondomonetarist adjustment (as capital's response to that crisis, centered on the cheapening of the labor force). This policy of adjustment is in turn connected to the current crisis, because when applied with the intention of achieving sufficient profitability at any

²⁴ See “Contemporary revisionist theses” in Gill (1979: 391-405).

price, in fact it ends up contributing to restricting it and, therefore, to the outbreak of a new crisis as profound as the current one. This crisis, which, like all crises, is presented in the first instance as a market phenomenon (in this case in the form of real estate, financial bubbles, etc.), has deep roots that reveal its historical character linked to the growing difficulties of capital appreciation.

Faced with it, in the face of the current serious crisis, the policies that the institutions of capital are trying to impose can easily be summed up under the colloquial formula of “more of the same”. Indeed, their essential content is a greater questioning of the livelihood of the immense majority of the world's population, that is, the working class: they are the attacks on the value of its work force. Their results are presented with truly brutal forms of destruction of productive forces, as indicated by the aforementioned episodes of child malnutrition even in economies among the most advanced in the world, such as those of Europe. And at the same time they are policies that, because of the above, will not be able to solve the problems, so that they can also be described as “scorched earth policies”.

One particular area in which this destruction is taking place is the frontal challenge to national sovereignty, the only framework in which democratic rights and guarantees take shape. Attacks on sovereignty are carried out through different channels, especially war, but also the institutionalisation of intergovernmental bodies lacking any democratic legitimacy.

With regard to the wars that imperialism, particularly the United States, undertakes, to such an extent they seek the destruction of nations, as well as the business that the wars themselves constitute, that their military objective becomes their own continuity in the time of war. That is to say, it is no longer a question of imposing a certain regime but of the pure liquidation of nations, while obtaining profit from the war situation:

In the war in Syria] it should be the goal of the United States to maintain a stalemate. And the only possible method to achieve this is to arm the rebels when it appears that Assad's forces are on the rise and to stop the supply of the rebels if they really seem to be winning²⁵.

The other means mentioned for questioning even the most elementary democratic procedures, which is required for the imposition of destructive policies²⁶, is the construction of undemocratic supra-state institutional frameworks. The establishment of the European Union, with its spearhead of the euro and the ECB, is the best example of how they lead to the negation of the framework in which democratic and workers' rights are historically institutionalised, for which Europe has historically become a reference on a global scale²⁷.

Two concrete examples are worth mentioning: newspaper headlines such as “the party that wins the early elections will have to apply a very tough adjustment plan”, referring to the legislative elections of June 5, 2011 in Portugal, and statements such as those of the

²⁵ Luttwak, Edward N. (2013); “Keep Syria in a stalemate”, International Herald Tribune, 24 August. On the website of the Center for Strategic & International Studies, of which he is a Senior Associate, he is presented as a “consultant to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council, the Department of State, the U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force, and allied governments as well as international corporations and financial institutions” (<http://csis.org/expert/edward-n-luttwak>).

²⁶ For a full explanation of them, see Arrizabalo (2014a: 369-488).

²⁷ The link between destructive policies in advanced economies and wars in other regions was one of the axes of the International Emergency Conference “Against Wars of Occupation, Against Interference in the Internal Affairs of Countries, in Defense of the Integrity and Sovereignty of Nations”, held in Algiers from 10 to 12 December 2011, as reflected in its final declaration, known as the Algiers Manifesto: “We oppose all foreign military intervention anywhere in the world (...) with or without the endorsement of the UN (...) There is a situation of urgency, when the imperialist powers themselves, and the international institutions unleash a social war in Europe and the United States, through plans of murderous rigour, to save speculators, banks and private insurance. There is a situation of urgency when the great powers erect interference in the affairs of countries in the world system, arrogating to themselves the right to dispose of the fate of nations and peoples (...) We reject the denial of the achievements of human civilization, of which the existence of nations is a condition for democracy. Véase Arrizabalo (2014a: 625-650).

then member of the Executive Committee of the European Central Bank, José Manuel González Páramo: “it is over that labour policy is a matter for each country”²⁸. Even jurists who defend the Spanish monarchical constitutional order describe the situation as a “state of exception”:

we are in a good part of the countries of the European Union before a state of exception, that is to say, before the de facto suspension of the validity of the principle of democratic legitimation of power. In theory, the principle of democratic legitimation continues to preside over the life of the political system, but in practice it is not respected. It happened in Greece when Papandreou wanted to put to referendum the acceptance of the rescue conditions approved by the European Commission. It also happened with the appointment of Monti as President of the Government in Italy. It is happening in all the vicissitudes that Portugal is going through. It is happening again in Italy after the result of the last elections. And we have been installed in that state of exception in Spain since November 20, 2011²⁹.

The serious economic problems and their social corollary inevitably leap into the political arena. The OECD itself notes the risks:

The world economy is facing the worst recession of the post-war period and unemployment is at an all-time high in many countries. Governments are intervening to prevent the financial and economic crisis from turning into a total social crisis, a calamitous one for vulnerable workers and low-income households³⁰.

Particularly for the Greek case before the elections of May 6, 2012, the Swiss bank UBS prepares a report whose title is very eloquent speaks of being worried, very worried. The cause for concern is the serious political difficulties in implementing its policies:

A major risk factor is the political outlook after the Greek elections on Sunday. According to recent opinion polls, support for political parties in Greece has fragmented significantly in the last six months or so, with voters seeming to have moved their support from the two big parties - centre-right New Democracy (ND) and centre-left PASOK - in favour of smaller parties. Many of these advocate renegotiation of agreements with public sector creditors, a rejection of austerity measures, or even abandoning the euro as a whole³¹.

It could not be otherwise: the seams of the current “order” are beginning to give way everywhere due to social pressure, fuelled by the regression inevitably provoked by the policies applied in response to the demands of capital. This is the case of some Latin American nations, in which the situation has been largely reversed in order to impose policies against the current of the fondomonetarists. This is also the case of the revolutionary processes underway in North Africa, especially since January 2011. It is also the situation in Palestine and the whole Middle East, farther than ever from being able to close in a way that is in line with the interests of US imperialism in the region. They are also the mobilisations throughout Europe in the face of the impositions of the troika, the so-called triumvirate made up of the European Commission, the ECB and the IMF, which in reality camouflages the direct presence of the latter by directly taking the reins of economic policy in European economies (and endorsing that there can be adjustment without the euro, but what can never happen is the euro without adjustment, because its *raison d'être* is precisely the subordination of economic policy to the guidelines of the IMF,

²⁸ *El País*, 27 March 2011, supplement “Negocios”, p. 4, and Agencia EFE, Berlin, 8 April 2010.

²⁹ Pérez Royo, Javier (2013); “Estado de excepción”, *El País*, 27 April. In the same article, the author defends, however, that Rajoy's accession to the presidency of the government was carried out “in conditions of undisputed legitimacy”.

³⁰ OECD (2009); “Facing the Jobs Crisis”, Employment Outlook 2009, Paris, pág. 111.

³¹ UBS Investments Research (2012); “Greek elections: Be worried, be very worried”, *European Economic Focus*, 2 May, p. 5 (title: “Greek elections: to be worried, very worried”). The document explains that: “although both ND and PASOK have given their written support to the MoU, both have been trying to distance themselves from the MoU during the campaign” (p. 8). The MoU is the Memorandum of Understanding, i.e. the adjustment package imposed by the IMF.

the institutional expression of the global hegemony of US financial capital³². These are the increasingly widespread attempts to set up independent trade union organisations in China, in order to preserve the gains and reject the setbacks. They are the very mobilizations in the United States against attacks on collective bargaining by public employees (in Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin...).

5. Conclusions

According to theoretical and empirical analysis, what are the prospects for the world economy? Under the predominance of capitalist production relations, contradictions will not cease to grow. The increase in productivity that can be expected from the higher qualification of the labor force, which relies on the scientific and technical advances that it itself makes possible, automatically implies a greater possibility of producing use values. But it is only a possibility that, moreover, will not be able to materialize because the objective of capital is its valorization, not the production of use values. And such valorization faces the growing difficulties that underlie the law of the trend decline in the rate of profit, so that to try to counteract them requires an ever-increasing exploitation, “restore the right relationship between the necessary work and the surplus work, on which everything is ultimately based”³³.

This is the relationship between the “necessary work” for the reproduction of the labor force (paid work expressed in the worker's salary) and the “surplus work” for the production of surplus value (unpaid work that is appropriated as profit by the capitalist). That is to say, it is the exploitation of the working class, which not only constitutes the basis of profit and, therefore, the driving force of capitalist accumulation; it must also be constantly increased, which leads to an inevitable flight forward of capital which is expressed in the fact that necessarily the destruction of productive forces is more and more systematic.

At this point the great constitutive contradiction of capitalism culminates, since impoverishment is the final result of the increase in productivity, which can serve to produce more use values but not the value that capital requires:

it is only in the mode of production founded on capital, where pauperism is presented as the result of work itself, of the development of the productive force of work (Marx, 1857-58, II: 111).

For that reason there is no possibility of an ordered or civilized capitalism. A balanced reproduction cannot be decreed:

What controls the world economy is not the IMF or the WB or the US Treasury or Wall Street. What the world capitalist economy controls is rather an impersonal law, the law of value. It is largely impersonal in the same way as the law of gravity is: it functions independently of anyone's will or intention³⁴.

And the law of value that governs the world capitalist economy leads to the law of the trend decline in the rate of profit that denies any possibility of unrestricted development of the productive forces, thus pointing to the historical limits of capitalism:

There is a limit that is not inherent to production in general, but to production based on capital (...) capital contains a limitation of production that is particular (...) thus exposing that, contrary to what

³² See Arrizabalo (2014b).

³³ Marx (1857-58, I: 407).

³⁴ Kliman, Andrew (2000); “Talk to IMF-World Bank Teach-in”, *Students for Solidarity and Empowerment*, Judson Memorial Church, New York, 3 March.

economists claim, capital is not the absolute form of development of the productive forces, the absolute form that, as a form of wealth, would absolutely coincide with the development of the productive forces (...) the greater the development of capital, the more it will present itself as a barrier to production - and therefore also to consumption - ignoring the other contradictions that make it appear as an unbearable barrier to production and circulation (Marx, 1857-58, I.): 367-369)

In the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, within the European economies, in which feudal production relations predominated, potential developments of the productive forces were incubated, associated with demographic changes, scientific discoveries and access to natural resources from colonial expansion. However, their materialization in an effective development of the productive forces clashed with the demands of feudal production relations, which acted as a kind of corset. To put it graphically: there were people, raw materials, tools and even machines, so it might seem that factories could already be set up with many workers and more advanced means of production, in which productivity would skyrocket. False appearance because in order to set them in motion, it was not necessary to have a population, etc., but rather a labor force, which could not be disposed of since most of the population was subjected to the servitude of feudalism, which prevented them from being able to sell their capacity to work as a labor force. In other words, there was a clash between the potential development of the productive forces and the survival of previous production relations.

Today it is substantially the same: in the heart of the world economy in which capitalist production relations predominate, potential developments of the productive forces have been incubated that clash head-on with the demands of such relations. Then, especially since the mid-eighteenth century, the rising class, the bourgeoisie, led a successful class struggle that allowed it to overthrow the old ruling class, the landed oligarchy, both from its economic position setting the tone of the accumulation process, and from its political position controlling the state apparatus.

The bourgeoisie, which then played a progressive role, can no longer be more than an obstacle to the development of the productive forces. But the bourgeoisie, like any social class that throughout the history of humanity has enjoyed privileges, will not only not renounce them, but will fight hard to preserve them, even though only its defeat can prevent humanity from precipitating to barbarism:

The bourgeoisie is a living class that has grown on certain economic and productive bases. This class is not a passive product of economic development, but a historical, active and living force. This class has survived itself, that is, it has become the most terrible brake on historical evolution. But this does not mean that this class is willing to commit historical suicide, that it is willing to say: "having recognized the scientific theory of evolution that I have become reactionary, I leave the scene". The bourgeoisie, totally contrary to the needs of historical evolution, is still the most powerful social class. Moreover, it can be said that, from the political point of view, the bourgeoisie reaches the maximum of its power, of the concentration of its forces and its means, political and military means, of lies, violence and provocation, that is, the maximum of the development of its class strategy, at the very moment when it is most threatened by its social loss³⁵.

That the survival of the capitalist mode of production precipitates the world to barbarism is not a rhetorical formulation, but the confirmation of a threat that is already materializing: it is the questioning of the living conditions of the immense majority of the world's population,

³⁵ Trotsky (1921); "Report of the 3rd World Congress of the Communist International in front of the Moscow organization of the Bolshevik Party, 1921", taken from Mazet, G. (1971); "Crise monétaire et crise économique", *La Vérité*, nos 554-555, n. 554-555, Paris, October.

the working class³⁶. In 1915, Rosa Luxemburg attributes to Engels the formulation of the dilemma facing humanity: socialism or barbarism.

Federico Engels said: “Bourgeois society is faced with a dilemma: either progress towards socialism or relapse into barbarism”³⁷.

In other words, the social organization based on the private ownership of the means of production by capital, and its search for profit from the exploitation of labour, can only lead to an ever-increasing social regression, as can be seen from an increasingly marked form. Therefore, the only alternative is the expropriation of capital and the setting in motion of a socialist accumulation that allows the possibilities developed by humanity to materialize effectively in the development of the productive forces, in the sustained improvement of the living conditions of the population as a whole.

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³⁶ In some areas, such as cancer medical research, backtracking threatens even the richest: “Draconian cuts to biomedical research will slow down our progress at a time of greatest scientific potential and growing need worldwide,” said Sandra M. Swain, M.D., President of the American Society of Clinical Oncology at the opening press conference of its 49th annual meeting (EFE Agency, May 31, 2013, www.efesalud.com/noticias/los-avances-en-investigacion-contra-el-cancer-en-eeuu-peligro-con-los-recortes/). The new President of that society, Dr. Clifford A. Hudis, echoes his well-founded concern: “The stagnation and decline in the value of federal funds is causing researchers to leave the field of study and is eroding the cancer research infrastructure. These developments have serious potential long-term consequences (...) Opportunities for advancing patient care will be lost or delayed. And once past, it will take many years to rebuild our research workforce and research infrastructure”; American Society of Clinical Oncology (2013); “Federally Funded Research: The Politics and Process of Medical Research Funding”, ASCO, September 14 (<http://www.asco.org/advocacy/federally-funded-research-politics-and-process-medical-research-funding>).

³⁷ Luxemburg, Rosa (1916); “La crisis de la socialdemocracia” in *Obras Escogidas*, 2, Ayuso, Madrid, 1978, p. 20. This text was written in prison in 1915 and finally published in April 1916, signed under the pseudonym Junius.

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