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Marxism

On the contribution of the outstanding Hungarian Marxist philosopher István Mészáros (1930-2017) to critical thinking

- Features -

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István Mészáros, an outstanding Hungarian Marxist philosopher, died on October 1st 2017 in London. [1] Born in Budapest in 1930 into a working-class family, brought up by his mother, he began working in industry at the age of twelve. He actually lied about his age, claiming to be sixteen, in order to be accepted by the factory. Thus, "as an adult", his pay was higher than that of his mother, a qualified employee of the US transnational Standard Radio Company. The considerable difference between their weekly earnings was his first and most tangible experience of the particularly severe exploitation of women by capital. This was in 1942... [2]

It was only at the end of the Second World War that he was able to begin his studies, thanks to the change of social system, and to become first of all a student of György Lukács and then his assistant to the chair of aesthetics. He was part of what can be defined as the first Budapest school, along with Agnes Heller, Ferenc Feher, Istvan Hermann, Dene Zoltai and Miklos Almasi. He said in an interview in 1992:

"I started at university in September 1949, and the attacks against Lukács had begun in July 1949. I always risked being expelled from the university by attending his seminars. In reality, as the attacks against Lukács were so violent that his Institute was almost deserted, he had very few students." [3]

He was a member of the Hungarian Writers' Association, which engaged in the fight against Stalinism and sectarianism with enthusiasm, but not in a subversive or violent way [4], and then became "a true community with a real national consciousness and a sense of responsibility." [5] Following the Russian intervention, many members of the Association were arrested, tried and convicted, but that did not stop this group from continuing to support the revolution and the imprisoned Prime Minister Imre Nagy, until the dissolution of the Association in January 1957 and its replacement by a "Council of Literature" composed only of faithful followers of Kádár. [6]

Editor of the review of the Academy of Sciences, *Magyar Tudomány*, he was also part of the Petöfi Circle, which from 1954 regrouped critical intellectuals, gained popularity after the 20th Congress of the CPSU and was banned by Rákosi following a meeting on freedom organized on June 30, 1956. His essay on the "National character of art and literature" was chosen as the central theme of one of the debates of this circle of intellectuals.

Envisaged to replace Lukács at the University of Budapest to teach aesthetics, he decided to go into exile following the Soviet intervention against the Hungarian revolution in 1956 - teaching first in Italy, then in Scotland, Canada and England. He explained his choice: "At the time I did it, Lukács had been arrested, but I decided a little before that, at the time of the second Russian intervention, because I became convinced that there was no more hope for a socialist transformation of Hungary. They repressed what was then very far from being counter-revolutionary. It was a very promising uprising to start something new; in no time at all, workers' councils were formed all over the country. The question of a return to capitalism had never been envisaged" [7].

A Marxist against dogmas

Unlike a large number of exiled intellectuals from the "Soviet bloc", István Mészáros did not abandon Marxism, but instead continued his work of analysis. He remembered:

"I worked with Lukács for seven years, before leaving Hungary in 1956, and we continued to be good friends until his

death in 1971. We always understood each other, that's why I wanted to study with him. (...) Lukács used to say, quite rightly, that without strategy, you cannot have tactics. Without a strategic view of problems, there are no everyday solutions. So I tried to analyse problems systematically, because they cannot be treated simply at the level of an article dealing only with what is happening at the time of writing, although there is a great deal of temptation to do so. On the contrary, it must be done in a historical perspective. Since my first substantial essay was published in a literary magazine in Hungary in 1950, I have published and worked hard as much as I could. As modest as it may be, we make our contribution to change. That is what I have tried to do all my life" [8].

His contribution to Marxist thought was considerable. He wrote works on the Marxist theory of alienation, the elaboration of Lukács (history and class consciousness, conception of dialectics), the need for social control, the power of ideology, neo-colonial identity and counter-consciousness, Sartre's search for freedom, the theory of the transition beyond capital, the historical relevance of the socialist offensive, the socialism of the twenty-first century, social structure and forms of consciousness... Whereas his works are known, discussed and appreciated in the English-speaking, Spanish-speaking and Portuguese-speaking world - he is considered in Brazil, where all his writings have been translated and where a book of tributes has been published, as one of the most important Marxist thinkers of our time - unfortunately they have not (yet?) been translated into French. [9] This Marxist commitment, which he shared with his wife Donatella (1936-2007), earned him repression in the "free world": while he was teaching at the University of York in Toronto, the Canadian government considered him to be a danger and wanted to deport him.

Among Marxists, István Mészáros held a special position. He did not belong to any party, considering that "the old-fashioned political parties are integrated into the parliamentary system, which has itself lost its historical relevance. (...) The working class has accommodated itself to that and constrained itself according to the possibilities offered by this framework, which consequently could only produce defensive organizations". He called for another form of organization:

"There will be no progress until the workers' movement, the socialist movement, redefines itself by becoming capable of offensive action, through its appropriate institutions and through its extra-parliamentary strength. Parliament, if it wants to become meaningful in the future, must be revitalized, and it can only be revitalized if it acquires an extra-parliamentary force in conjunction with the radical political movement, which can also be active through parliament." [10]

His criticism of parliamentarism was severe. In a letter of July 2000 he said:

"My criticism does not relate to politics in general or to "democratic politics", but to the degradation of politics, going as far as a nightmarish accommodation to capital, in the name of "democracy", promulgating the most authoritarian measures through submission to the domination of capital." [11]

He supported Chavez's experiment, hoping to help in the reflection on the necessary transition to socialism, never hiding his criticism of the concrete policies that were conducted - which earned him the esteem of the Venezuelan president. In the same way, he discussed with Cuban leaders, trying to convince them, in order to prevent Cuba from following the Soviet or Chinese road. He was also excited when Syriza won the elections in Greece and when in the Spanish state a new leftist party, Podemos, appeared.

In solidarity with steps forward, critical of errors, insisting on the vision of socialism that the experience of the failure of the attempts in his country enabled him to elaborate, Mészáros, without being a militant of a party, tried to carry out a Marxist praxis.

Lessons from the Soviet system

He was not a Trotskyist, but he was neither a sectarian nor a Stalinist. The British Marxist Hillel Ticktin [\[12\]](#) recalls that when they were discussing Lukács and he mentioned his antagonism to Trotsky, Mészáros commented that "that is a question of the limits" of the one who had been his master and his friend.

In the interview already quoted, he said:

"The Soviet Union was not capitalist, not even state capitalist. But the Soviet system was very much dominated by the power of capital: the division of labour remained intact, the hierarchical command structure of capital was maintained." [\[13\]](#)

In 2015 he explained: *"The implosion of the Soviet system had its deep foundation of determinations. To name but a few: the explosive contradictions of a multinational empire, inherited from the tsars, repressing its national minorities on the one hand, and on the other, the proclamation of 'socialism in one country' on the post-revolutionary terrain dominated by the reality of the capital-system. With regard to the first fatal contradiction - whose dangerous fallout can still be heard today - Lenin advocated the 'right to autonomy up to secession' for national minorities, and he strongly criticized Stalin as an arbitrary 'national -socialist' and a 'great-Russian tyrant', whereas Stalin degraded national minorities to the status of 'border regions' necessary to maintain 'the power of Russia'. As for the second problem, Stalin and his supporters claimed the 'full realization of socialism in one country', in total contradiction with Marx's opinion that an alternative social order is only possible as an act of ruling peoples, which presupposes the universal development of the productive forces and the world relations which correspond to that."* [\[14\]](#)

Because for Meszáros:

"What is at stake, of course, is that the object, the target, of socialist transformation overcomes the power of capital. Capitalism is a relatively easy object in this endeavour because you can, in a sense, abolish capitalism through a revolutionary uprising and intervention at the political level, the expropriation of the capitalist. You have ended capitalism, but you have not even touched the power of capital when you did it. Capital is not dependent on the power of capitalism and this is important also, in the sense that capital precedes capitalism for thousands of years. Capital can survive perfectly, not for thousands of years, but when capitalism is overthrown in a limited area, the power of capital continues, even though it is in a hybrid form. (...) In the Soviet Union the surplus labour was extracted in a political way and it is that which entered into crisis over the last years. (...) In the Soviet system, this was done in a very improper way from the point of view of productivity, because labour retained a lot of power in the form of negative acts, defiance, sabotage, work in the black economy, etc., through which one could not even dream of attaining the kind of productivity that is achievable elsewhere, and that undermined the raison d'être of this system under Stalin and under his successors - politically enforced accumulation. (...) What is absolutely crucial is to recognize that capital is a metabolic system, a socio-economic metabolic system of control. You can overthrow the capitalist but the factory system remains, the division of labour remains, nothing has changed in the metabolic functions of society. Indeed, sooner or later, you find the need to reallocate these forms of control to personalities, and this is how the bureaucracy begins to exist. Bureaucracy is a function of this command structure in changing circumstances where, in the absence of the private capitalist, you have to find an equivalent to this control. I think that's a very important conclusion, because very often the notion of bureaucracy is advanced as a mythical and explanatory framework, and that explains nothing. The bureaucracy itself requires explanation. How is it that this bureaucracy appears? When you use it as a kind of deus ex machina, which explains everything in terms of bureaucracy, if you get rid of the bureaucracy, everything will be fine. But you do not get rid of the bureaucracy unless you attack the economic and social foundations and devise another way to regulate the metabolic process of society so that the power of capital is first reduced and, at the end, it ends up disappearing completely. Capital is the controlling force, you cannot control capital, you can suppress it only through the transformation of the whole

complex of metabolic relations of society, you cannot just touch it at the margin. Either it controls you or you get rid of it, there is no middle road, and this idea of market socialism could not work from the beginning. The real need is not the restoration of the capitalist market, under the name of a fictitious "social market", but the adoption of an appropriate system of incentives." [15]

Capital, capitalism, socialism

For years, István Mészáros worked with the American Marxist magazine *Monthly Review*, which published many of his books. John Bellamy Foster, who wrote the introduction to his book *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, regarded him as a "scout of socialism". He presented his analysis thus:

"For Mészáros "the structural crisis of capital" arises not simply from the fact that the system is now face to face for the first time with its own "absolute limits," but also from the reality that the necessary conditions of a mass-based, hegemonic socialist alternative are emerging, providing the bases of a new revolutionary situation globally.... His critique of capital (as opposed to capitalism) is equally a critique of the early "socialist" (or post-capitalist) experiments, which in failing to eradicate the capital relation in its entirety, but merely mediating this via the state, ended up in a historically dead end while nevertheless illuminating the path that socialism of the twenty-first century must take. In Mészáros's analysis, this path can be summed up as "substantive equality," "self-critique," and communal self-organization of productive relations, which taken together define a sustainable socialist society.... Opposing those who claim that the working class has been integrated into the system, he makes it clear that this is a systemic impossibility even in the wealthiest capitalist states, and at most extends to the trade union leadership (190-95). The working class remains everywhere an alienated power, the indispensable agent of potential revolutionary change. Still, in responding to the question of whether such a revolutionary transformation will actually take place, Mészáros answers bluntly: "It depends" (p. 187). Genuine human emancipation, altering society "from top to bottom," in Marx's terms, can only be brought about through unrelenting struggle and hence is a contingent aspect of history (85)." [16].

"That is why socialists, in order to have any hope of success, must deny capital itself - as an unalterable causa sui (its own cause) - and not just one of its historically contingent variants as, for example, the current dominant system of global capital." [17]

Convinced that the future potential socialist society already exerts its influence on the contemporary world and that the capitalist world is in the process of disintegration, Mészáros was far from sowing illusions about any "historical inevitability" of socialism. In his book *The Necessity of Social Control*, he reflects on the state, this "mountain that we must conquer". Interviewed on this subject, he explains:

"The state as such cannot reshape the social reproductive order of capital because it is an integral part of it. The great challenge for our historical time is the necessary eradication of capital from our social metabolic order. And this is inconceivable without eradicating at one and the same time the state formations of capital historically constituted in conjunction with the material reproductive dimension of the system and inseparable from it. (...)

"To say that the 'withering away of the state' is necessary only means that it is a vital condition required to solve the problems at stake. But it does not claim that the stated requirement will inevitably be achieved. On the contrary, with the underlying idea of the danger that the state, with its overwhelming power of destruction, could catastrophically end any transformative and emancipatory effort, it opposes any illusion of so-called 'historical inevitability'."

There can be no 'historical inevitability' in the direction of the future. History is open, for better or for worse. Stressing

the demand for the 'withering away' of the state was primarily to counter the anarchist illusion/vow that 'overthrowing the state' can solve the problem in question. The state as such cannot be 'overthrown', given its profound social and metabolic roots. The private capitalist property relations of a given state can be overthrown, but that is not a solution in itself. Because everything that can be 'overthrown' can also be restored, as the fate of Gorbachev's 'Perestroika' has amply demonstrated. Capital, labour and the state as such are deeply related to the organic ensemble of the historically constituted social metabolism. None of them can be overthrown by itself, or even 'reconstituted' separately.

"Making the change that is required calls for the radical transformation of the social reproductive metabolism in its entirety and in all its deeply interconnected constituent parts. And this can only be done successfully in accordance with changed historical circumstances, within the limited framework of our global home. This is the meaning of the socialist alternative to the social metabolic order of capital, now dangerously overwhelmed and dangerously wasteful. And such an alternative is not a question of 'inevitability'. Inevitability must be left to the law of gravity by which the stones thrown by Galileo from the top of the leaning tower of Pisa were to reach the ground with certainty. This is why I wrote in the conclusion of my book that 'what the socialist alternative calls for is the tangible requirement of historical sustainability. And this is also offered as a criterion and measure of its possible success. (...) It is defined in terms of historical viability and practical sustainability, or not, as the case may be'." [18]

When the journalist asked him if, "more than 20 years after the end of the Soviet Union" he still believes that "the socialist alternative is not only possible, but necessary", Mészáros responded:

"In historical terms, 20 years is a very short time. Especially when the magnitude of the task presents itself as the need to radically change the social reproductive metabolism as a whole, from an order of substantial inequality to a substantial state of equality. And the historic challenge of achieving a substantial order of equality is not a question of the last few decades. Babeuf and his comrades from the 'Society of Equals' eloquently put forward this demand, not 20 years ago, but exactly 220 years ago, when they insisted that 'we need not only the equality of the Rights of Man and the Citizen; we want it in our midst, under the roofs of our houses'". Their demand was totally incompatible with the order of consolidation of capital, and they were executed for it. But the historical challenge did not die with them, since it involves the whole of humanity. And no partial solution or its failure can eliminate this condition." [19]

Saving human existence

Asked about criticisms of the Marxist conception of history, which is supposed to announce "the inevitability of the collapse of the state" and described as "teleological", István Mészáros replied sharply:

"Only dogmatic and mechanistic Marxists would argue in those terms. Marx never did it. After all, he wrote seven decades before Rosa Luxemburg's 'socialism or barbarism' that the recommended alternative was necessary for human beings 'to save their very existence'. In other words, if a thinker makes it clear that ongoing self-destructive human action - which results from the internal antagonisms and dangerous contradictions of the given social reproductive system, established by human beings themselves - can put an end to historical development, that is the opposite of the belief in a mysterious teleology of historical inevitability, and not a plea in its favour". And he continued: "Babeuf and his comrades appeared tragically at the beginning of the historical scene with their radical demand. At that time, capital still had the potential for a conquering global expansion, even if its mode of functioning could never overcome the problematic characteristics of what even its best advocates in the field of political economy described as creative or productive destruction. Because destruction was always an integral part of it, in view of the growing waste that is inseparable from the inexorable impetus of self-expansionism, even in the ascending phase of the historical development of capital. The greatest and most perilous irony of modern history is that the once-defended 'productive destruction' has become in the descending phase of the systemic development of capital

a destructive production that is increasingly untenable, both in the domain of commodity production and in that of nature, supplemented by the ultimate threat of military destruction for the defence of the established order. This is why the socialist alternative is not only possible - in the sense of its historical sustainability mentioned above - but also necessary, in the interest of the survival of humanity." [20].

This ecological dimension is central in his most recent works. [21]

István Meszáros is no longer with us. But his work will long remain a source of inspiration for critical thought, for the elaboration of the socialist alternative and for the critique of capital. One can only hope that his writings will finally be translated into French.

[1] Other articles about or by Istvan Meszaros are at [After Alienation](#) and [The Only Viable Economy](#).

[2] The author thanks Michael Löwy and Jean-José Mesguen for their comments on this article

[3] Interview conducted by Joseph McCartney and Chris Arthur, *Radical Philosophy* 62, Fall 1992, under the title "Marxism Today".

[4] István Meszáros, *La rivolta degli intellettuali in Ungheria*, Turin 1958, Einaudi, p. 163 (Cited by Laura Ceresa, "[Censure, Limitazioni e Limitazioni delle letterature ungherese degli 'anni Cinquanta'](#)", [Thesis of the University of Padua 2017](#)).

[5] Ibid, p. 142.

[6] 4. Ibid, p. 164.

[7] 5. Op. Cit., Note 1.

[8] Interview by Judith Orr and Patrick Ward, "A structural crisis of the system", *Socialist Review* No. 332, January 2009.

[9] The list of his works is long: *Satire and Reality* (1955), *La rivolta degli intellettuali in Ungheria* (1958), *Attila Jozsef e l'arte moderna* (1964), *Marx's Theory of* (1970), *Aspects of History and Class Consciousness* (1971), *Lukacs' Concept of Dialectic* (1972), *Neo-Colonial Identity and Counter-consciousness: Essays in Cultural Decolonization* (1978, with Renato Constantino), *The Work of Sartre: Search for Freedom* (1979), *Philosophy, Ideology and Social Science: Essays in Negation and Affirmation* (1986), *The Power of Ideology* (1989), *Beyond Capital : Toward a Theory of Transition* (1995), *L'alternativa alla società del capitale: Socialismo o barbarie*, (2000), *Socialism or Barbarism : From the "American Century" to the Crossroads* (2001), *A educação para além do capital* (2005), *O desafio e o fardo do tempo histórico* (2007), *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time : Socialism in the Twenty-First Century* (2008), *Historical Actuality of the Socialist Offensive* (2009), *The Structural Crisis of Capital* (2009), *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness, Volume I : The Social Determination of Method* (2010), *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness, Volume II : The Dialectic of Structure and History* (2011), *The Work of Sartre : Search for Freedom and the Challenge of History* (2012), *The Necessity Of Social Control* (2014).

[10] Op. cit., note 1.

[11] Quoted by Maria Cristina Soares Paniago, "[Les impératifs d'expansion du capital et l'impossibilité ontologique de contrôle sur le système du capital, selon Istvan Mészáros](#)".

[12] Hillel Ticktin, "[A Marxist philosopher](#)".

[13] Op. Cit., Note 1.

[14] "The mountain we must conquer - An interview with István Mészáros", by the journalist Leonardo Cazes for the daily *O Globo*, republished in its complete English version by the Brazilian publishing house Boitempo on April 22, 2015 [here](#).

[15] Op. Cit., Note 1.

[16] John Bellamy Foster in Introduction to István Meszáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, Monthly Review Press, New York 2010, "[István Mészáros, Pathfinder of Socialism](#)". Many texts of István Mészáros in English are available on [the website of [Monthly Review](#)].

[17] Istvan Meszaros, *Beyond Capital*, London 1995, The Merlin Press, p. 72.

[18] Op. Cit., Note 12.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] See, for example, his essay, "[Socialism: the Only Viable Economy](#)," which we translated into French for *Inprecor* n° 644 "[Socialisme : la seule économie viable](#)".