04 2020

More than basic income. An income of emancipation

Raúl Sánchez Cedillo

Translated by Kelly Mulvaney

I am not sure that the best approach to analyzing the current state of liberties and rights in Spain, Europe, and increasingly the rest of the world is that of the rule of law and its enforcement during this pandemic and after it.

In the first place, because we immediately arrive at an impasse: the state of alarm (and increasingly, of exception) has been declared in conformity with the constitutional procedure set out in the corresponding organic law. The same could happen with the legal declaration of the state of siege or of exception if there is an absolute parliamentary majority that approves it.

The logic of the force majeure

We face a case of force majeure that is, moreover, planetary in scope. There is no example in the archives of a response of this kind to a global pandemic. Force majeure summons the force of law. Yes, the exceptional measures demonstrate that consent-building efforts are not enough to produce obedience in the

population. There is neither time nor space for differences of opinion or conduct. The naked coercion on the part of the governments awakens concern about the abuse of power by security forces and the bullying behavior of the spontaneous police of the residential balcony or neighborhood. In the Spanish case, some jurists are considering the constitutional illegality of the confinement measures and initiating a complaint against the Sánchez government.

The force of law and the return of the state that never left

That being said, if we look at the matters carefully, we can better notice the profound impotence of the states and the profound uncertainty in which they live. For example, the states of the EU are fighting amongst themselves in bids for medical devices of basic necessity, brought to their knees by speculators of second-hand goods. But this is also happening between states inside the United States. If the neoliberal governance of the social consequences of crises was not prepared or set up for a crisis of the financial system in 2008, in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic it can only declare the catastrophe and react like a robot gone mad: “save himself who can, which is to say, us.”

This collapse of the false security of neoliberalism brings the strong, interventionist, nationalizing State back to the fore. It has been claimed that this pandemic marks the historical inflection point of the change in world hegemony, from the Atlantic system dominated by the United States to the Chinese subsystem, to Tianxia. But this is only about a prediction, which does not account for the mode by which the displacement is carried out, including possible occurrences that could get in the way. The “end” of neoliberalism as a formula of government of the economy and

society does not mean that it has lost its effective power over financial institutions and state administrations nor, above all, its destructive capacity. It simply seeks to reconstruct conditions in the catastrophe for the permanence of its command. This is not only a matter of shock therapies, difficult to apply in the presence of a health and economic catastrophe that forces the reduction of economic activity to a minimum and draws close attention to the transactions of large corporations. It's more a matter of what we are seeing in the Eurogroup with the move by Merkel, Rutte, Kurz and Marin to block the adoption of the so-called coronabonds, that is, the primary form of mutualizing the public debts of EU states.

Rather than the consequences of ordoliberal ideological fanaticism, we are again seeing a game of chicken at the heart of the EU, a game in which the states with healthy fiscal accounts want to impose austerity programs on the countries with deficits, amplifying the Greek situation to the entire south of the EU. In this way, the paralysis of confinement will open the way for the general mobilization of the indebted to not succumb to hunger and total destitution, while the indebted states apply with blood and fire the programs of cuts to social spending that must be completed in order to be able to continue financing themselves on secondary markets. In this way, we see that the obstinacy of the neoliberal mode of domination with respect to its own survival creates unsolvable contradictions that pave the way, inevitably, towards the centrality of the state (or of confederated systems of states) as economic and financial power. So it is essential to determine what kinds of alternatives this transition opens up. Meanwhile, everywhere, these states dwindled in their operative capacities in the face of the pandemic are legitimizing themselves in the name of life.

A (de)mobilization for life

We are facing a total global mobilization without precedents in times of peace. But which presents itself as a (de)mobilization for life. In this lies its principal power for generating consent, without undermining the threat of the force of law. Those who do not collaborate or dissent on the measures are the object of repression and public opprobrium, as well as favorite prey for thugs in or out of uniform. That's just part of the (de)mobilization for life. "We're in this together." "Together we will get out of this."

It has been a while since Santiago López Petit described this kind of "total mobilization for the obvious," but he did so in the context of the urban governance of cities like post-Olympic Barcelona. For López Petit, this kind of total mobilization for life, which "nobody who's not a scoundrel" can escape, is a form of what he calls postmodern fascism. In this, life turns into the prison of the will to live, which can only be broken with hatred for (one's own) life. Nevertheless, this (de)mobilization is something different. Firstly, it does not consist in a comprehensive exploitation of the cooperation of vital forces, but in an immense suspension of the productive activities of capitalist profit and of the distribution of salary rents, which translates into a global economic catastrophe without precedents and which still remains incalculable.

The tensions that this is creating between governments and leaders of states, on the one hand, and executives and owners of capital, on the other, will only grow as the imperatives of profit enter into contradiction with the principle of preserving the vital forces of the populations or, speaking in Marxian, labor power. Without arms and brains, without hearts and muscles, there is neither consumption nor production, there is no future for the vampire of

rentier capitalism, nor is there one for the varieties of state capitalism that are starting to line up as replacements. We are, in fact, in a general strike by force majeure.[i]

In total confinement, our labor power has become abstract, potential, latent, but only for the system of the economy based on exchange value. The reality is that we continue working, cooperating, communicating, fighting to preserve our life and the life of our dear ones, producing common value. Facing this abstract situation that comes imposed by the force of law, our main goal is to equip ourselves with an equally abstract tool to sustain our labor power, the producer of the common. And here, the one of the mobilization for life necessarily divides in two. Not every body, not all labor power can preserve itself equally in confinement. The structures of class, gender and race and of age groups continue to operate in the concretion of the home and in the abstraction of the measures of confinement. The virtual bodies of administration raffle our flesh and propose quotes of human sacrifices in consideration of "economic recovery." This is where the divide grows, and where we notice that we will not get out of this together.

Against the abstraction of profit, income of emancipation

Never in history and, to boot, never in the long terminal crisis of neoliberal capitalism have the relations of forces, the wars of movement and positions, the possible and the real been so confused. The incompatibility between the abstract imperative of profit and the universality of common labor power impedes all unity not imposed by violence, just as it opens up an antagonism of the subaltern majorities against the regime of rent and parasitic profit. Will we be able to embody the common of confined labor

power? Will we be capable of pointing out the irreconcilable duality between the imperatives of its care and its reproduction, and the imperatives of parasitic profit and rent?

We are still confined, we don't know until when. Meanwhile, above our heads, the abstract figures of financial maneuvers for the salvation of profit, rent and property are moving around. Billions, trillions, digits that move from one balance to another like dice deciding the fortune of the lost and the saved of the planet. In this situation we cannot stop warning that the time of confinement is also a possible time for the constitution of the common in strike, struggle, resistance, disobedience, the duality of planetary living labor against the states of mobilization to restore profit and the extraction of rent from our vital forces. In this abstract universality of all being confined, in this unprecedented situation of the planet, the first act of constitution of the common of world labor powers is the prerequisite of guaranteeing the dignified reproduction of our lives everywhere. An imperative whose fulfillment depends only on a redirection of digits on the financial balance sheets, of a series of political decisions. We call the guarantee of this imperative the income of emancipation, rather than basic income. Because it is a matter of its unconditionality, individuality and universality being the sole conditions that can satisfy the universal imperative of dignified and free preservation of the common powers of labor.

Monetary abstraction has to place itself in the service of the universal concretion of our lives that are at stake. Where, when, how, with whom? All of this is being decided now. So it is, after twelve years of austerity-driven devastation, of authoritarianism and emerging fascism and unleashed global warming. Emancipation is being able to have a life that is not forced to be on the labor market of capital in order to live in dignity. It cannot be the deferred end point, but rather must be the point of departure so

that, during and after the pandemic, we are in circumstances that allow us, in struggle, to create the most favorable terms for living together with the system of profit and the destruction of the biosphere, while we prepare the decisive battles of their extinction, in the name of life emancipated from the blackmail of hunger and death. Common life is powerful and can show it.

---

[i] Translator's note: the Spanish version of this text presents a figure of three forces: fuerza mayor, or force majeure; fuerza de la ley, or force of law; and fuerza de trabajo, of which the standard English translation (linked to the German language concept Arbeitskraft) is labor power. In keeping with the standard, the relation drawn by the author between fuerza de trabajo and the other two forces is not preserved. At the same time, where fuerzas de trabajo is pluralized, the plural is maintained, against the standard English language practice of writing labor power only as a mass noun.