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EDITORIAL

The crisis of capital, human rights and class struggle

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The issue of human rights (HR) has raised a number of polemics, theoretical and political challenges that concern, among other aspects, the conception and social function that they can play as a strategy of survival, endurance, and struggle of the working class or, on the other hand, as a tool of the dominant classes for the naturalization of social inequality and ideological domination. Therefore, by raising the debate on human rights in the context of the crisis of capital, acknowledging the class struggle as the motor of History, in this issue of the *Katálysis* journal, through the articles published here, it offers us a critical reflection on the theme in its multiple possibilities: the crisis of capital and its implications in the lives of different segments of the population and in phenomena such as femicide and mass incarceration; the contradictory nature of social reality; the characteristics and trends of capitalist barbarism, the ideological decadence of bourgeois thought, and theoretical pluralism in the field of human rights. The range of issues permeating the structural crisis of capital strikes, in a destructive way, at labor, nature, the subjectivity of individuals and the collective organization of the working class. In this sense, it becomes necessary to think with dialectical reasoning to overcome unhistorical approaches and reinforce the contradictions of the struggles for human rights, which favor the process of class consciousness development, especially in the special characteristics of Brazil and Latin America.

Regarding the conceptualizations of human rights, we have criticisms of their classical liberal approaches, within the Marxist field of thought¹ and leftist political practices, among other schools, that allow us to discuss their categorization and distinguish themselves from them. The liberal approach underlies the bourgeois ideology and has gained notoriety by achieving, especially through ideological impositions, its pervasiveness in everyday life. One of its main features is to take the form of law (formal equality) as the starting point to approach the individual, society and violations of rights. The central idea of this school of thought consists in the naturalization of social inequality and its implications in the lives of subjects, holding the individual person responsible for his or her living and labor conditions, isolated from social relations.

Among the critical approaches to liberal thought, we highlight the economic determinism² that reduces social rights to an epiphenomenon of capitalist social relations and conceives human rights as a mere expression of the bourgeois class project. It is the interpretation that the bourgeoisie, in its eagerness to control social life, ideologically disseminates values, ways of being and living, projecting them as if they were universally valid. Thus, human rights would be nothing more than an ideological device to ensure the interests and political will of the bourgeois class, with the purpose of preserving the material conditions that cause the exploitation of the labor force and the violation of rights. In this sense, even though we agree with the fact that the dominant classes seek to impose their particular



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interests as universal, naturalizing the social processes, we oppose the economic determinism current due to its incapacity to provide categories for the apprehension and analysis of reality, considering its complexity through contradictions; the range of determinations that appear in the phenomena; the dialectical relationship between economy, politics, and culture; the relationship between individuality, sociality, and the existence of a multiplicity of collective subjects, with issues and claims that express capitalist barbarism. This reality needs to be confronted in different ways, both in its immediate expression and in its theoretical dimension. The former can be seen in situations of extreme impoverishment (as in the case of individuals who are surviving, subjected to hunger, unemployment, complete absence of social policies, as well as situations of violence in its different forms). Economy-centered readings tend to establish heroic purposes for the working class, with their backs to the real daily life of this class.

In confrontation with this current of economic determinism, the perspective of political primacy, also formed within the framework of critical thinking, by making economic determinations secondary, paved the way for the creation of a true fetish of law, by assuming that the juridical-political dimension is enough as a real space for the resolution of social conflicts. Despite the recognition and valorization of the collective subjects and their claims, this theoretical-political view tends to fragment the analyzed reality; attempting to convert daily life as a space-time dimension autonomous from the economic determinations of the social relations of capitalist production. Furthermore, social struggles are understood, preferably, in opposition to and even in denial of the existence of social classes and the centrality of the class struggle.

The field of economic determinism standardizes the understanding of the class struggle and, as such, devalues the agenda of human diversity and the new political subjects and social movements that are being formed in the course of the struggle in defense of human rights. The field of political primacy, on the other hand, by submitting the contradictions present in reality to the solution of the state, neglects the core of the determinations that explain, in all its historical density, the exploitation of labor force and the violations of human rights and diversity. It is the very dynamics of the class struggle in the heart of the structural crisis of capital that is sidelined.

In the universe of Marxist thought, through Lukács' reading of Marx's work, notably with the ontological foundations developed by the former, it has been possible to overcome reductionisms and simplifications in the understanding of human rights. And thus, reinterpret, in a dialectical way, the social function of law in capitalist society, grasping their historical necessity, the limits and contradictions of this partial social complex. According to Mészáros (1986, p. 197):

The widespread idea that Marxism is a crude economic reductionism according to which the functioning of the legal system is directly and mechanically determined by the economic structures of society, represents a Liberal interpretation of Marx's radical rejection of the Liberal conception of law. To be sure, no one could deny that Marx had no use for the "juridical illusion" which treats the sphere of rights as independent and self-regulating. However, the rejection of an illusion does not mean in the slightest that the legal sphere as whole is considered to be illusory.

Let's address just two aspects that, in this editorial, are relevant to contribute in overcoming the three approaches (liberal, economic determinist and political primacy) that express theoretical and political limitations in understanding social life and the complex of Law in capitalist society, the action of the state and its relation to human rights, the organization of the working class and the formation of class consciousness. First, the challenge and the historical need to understand human rights from a totality perspective. This implies capturing the contradictory relations and determination between the social complex of law and the social totality, with due articulation and synthesis between economics, politics, and culture. It is a matter of transcending an "information widely disseminated as truth, that the defense of human rights necessarily leads to a conception of the primacy of politics or, in another way, that the critique of human rights is always one based on an economic determinism and contrary to human rights" (SANTOS, 2016, p. 63). The theoretical and methodological approach based on a totality perspective has also been fruitful in confronting the liberal perspective and its imposition of the abstract universalism attributed to human rights.

The second aspect refers specifically to the issue of universality, which has been the subject of discussion in the contemporary debate. This is because various agents organized around the human rights agenda have

declared their criticism of the notion of universality seen within the framework of modernity, given its inability to consider the plurality of themes, questions, subjects and demands. Thus, this criticism characterizes it as an abstract universality, which hovers over particularities, such as those of race, sexualities, gender identity; anti-ableism, among many others. In opposition to this idea of an abstract universality, it proposes the recognition of fundamental mediations to achieve a concept of concrete universality. The starting point is the individual in his material conditions of existence, the historical, social and diverse individual, of flesh and blood. On this, when beginning the critique of the capital system's notion of universality, Sartori (2013, p. 15) states that:

It is a form of socialization whose answers and resolutions are found in the field of politics and, thus, also in the field of domination, no matter how permeated by a form of universality this domination may be. Since it is a society founded on class antagonism and on the division of labor [...] the way in which universality is revealed cannot but have particularistic overtones, the particularism of bourgeois-civil society itself.

The strategic defense of human rights³ is not a premise, disconnected from the dynamics of the class struggle, but is made in its front line, always remembering the limits of the illusory universality posed by capital. That is exactly why it is so significant that *Katálysis* journal allows in this issue diverse and plural reflections on human rights. We are in the middle of 2023, when we celebrate 30 years of the Social Worker's Code of Professional Ethics, which greatly favored the insertion of human rights in the professional agenda. Historical questions arise: do human rights serve unilaterally to reproduce the interests of capital? Or can they favor gains for the working class? How can the critical culture built in the field of Human and Social Sciences, including Brazilian Social Work, contribute to overcome simplistic ways of understanding reality, rooted in determinism, unilateralism and an abstract notion of universality? Can the legacy of Marx, Lukács and other contemporary authors contribute to the understanding of the complex relationships between political emancipation and human emancipation today? What historical lessons can we take from the struggles of indigenous peoples; from the demands that configure the confrontation of class, race, sexuality relations, and from the broad spectrum of struggles against the violation of human diversity? All these questions underlie the fundamental themes of the struggle for human rights in their variety presented in the articles that make up this issue.

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Notes

- ¹ See, among others, Tonet (2002), Mézáros (2008), Trindade (2011) e Iasi (2013).
- ² It is worth mentioning that when we refer to the economic determinism approach, besides referring to the Marxism of the Second International and the implications in the organization of the working class, we are admitting the updated continuity of this perspective in the contemporary debate. In fact, economic determinism is modernized through analyses that, detached from the daily life of struggles, assume that the class content, the strategies developed and the anti-capitalist potential of certain actions are necessarily jeopardized because they are struggles for rights.

- ³ “[...] the social history of human rights is the result of class struggle, of people’s pressure, of the worker’s organization and of political actors in the face of oppression, exploitation and inequality. It is a history of specific progressive struggles that connect with other types of forms of struggle: anti-capitalist, revolutionary, national liberation, etc., having as their common thread the defense of freedom and social justice” (BARROCO, 2008, p. 12).

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