

The destructive origins of capitalism - Robert Kurz



Brief essay on the role played by the "military revolution" in 16th century Europe in the genesis of capitalism and, among other things, the historical status of the soldiers of the new standing armies of the emerging nation-states as the "first modern wage workers" and the *condottieri* as the "prototypes of the modern businessman".

There are innumerable versions of the birth of the modern era. Historians do not even agree about the date of this event. Some make modernity begin in the 15th and 16th centuries, with the so-called Renaissance (a concept invented in the 19th century by Jules Michelet, as the French historian Lucien Lefevre has shown). Others see the real rupture, modernity's launching point, in the 18th century, when the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the beginnings of industrialization shook the planet. But whatever date historians and modern philosophers prefer for the beginning of their own world, they agree on one point: its positive conquests are almost always taken as its original impulses.

The artistic and scientific innovations of the Italian Renaissance are considered to be just as important for the rise of modernity as Columbus's great voyages of discovery, the Protestant and Calvinist idea of specific individual responsibility, the enlightenment liberation from irrational beliefs and the rise of modern democracy in France and the United States. In the technological-industrial field, the invention of the steam engine and the mechanical loom are recorded as the "starting guns" for modern social development.

This last explanation was emphasized above all by Marxism, due to the fact that it was in harmony with the philosophical doctrine of “historical materialism”. The true motor of history, according to this doctrine, is the development of the material “forces of production”, which repeatedly enter into conflict with the “relations of production” which have become too constraining and demand a new form of society. The leap into industrialization is thus the decisive point for Marxism: the steam engine, according to this simplified formula, was the first machine to break with the “current of the old feudal relations of production”.

At this point a lamentable contradiction in the Marxist argument arises. Thus, in the famous chapter on the “primitive accumulation of capital”, Marx occupied himself in his magnum opus with periods that predate the steam engine by centuries. Is this not a self-refutation of “historical materialism”? If “primitive accumulation” and the steam engine are to be found historically separated from one another, the productive forces of industry could not have been the decisive cause of the birth of modern capitalism. It is true that the capitalist mode of production was only definitively pushed forward by the industrialization of the 19th century, but, if we look for the roots of this development, we have to dig deeper.

It is also logical that the first seed of modernity, or the “big bang” of its dynamic, would have to arise in a largely pre-modern environment, since otherwise there could not have been an “origin” in the strict sense of the word. Thus, the very precocious “first cause” and the very late “full consolidation” do not represent a contradiction. If it is also true that for many regions of the world and for many social groups the beginning of modernization was delayed until the present day, it is equally certain that the very first impulse must have occurred in a remote past, when we consider the enormous temporal expanse (from the perspective of the lifetime of a generation or even of an isolated person) of social processes.

What was ultimately new, in a relatively distant past, which inevitably set the history of modernization into motion? One can fully concede to historical materialism that the greatest and principle point of relevance does not correspond to a simple change of ideas and mentalities, but to the full development of material and concrete facts. It was not, however, productive force, but on the contrary a resounding destructive force which opened up the road to modernization, that is, the invention of firearms. Although this correlation is much older than is generally recognized, the most celebrated and influential theories of modernization (including Marxism) always underestimated it.

It was the German economic historian Werner Sombart who, shortly before the First World War, in his study *War and Capitalism* (1913), subjected this question to an in-depth and detailed examination. Only in the last few years have the technological-military and war-economy origins of capitalism been widely discussed, as for example in the book *Cannons and Plague* (1989) by the German economist Karl Georg Zinn, or in the work *The Military Revolution* (1990) by the American historian Geoffrey Parker. But neither of these investigations found the reception they deserved. Evidently, the modern western world and its ideologues will only grudgingly accept the view that the ultimate historical foundation of their sacred concepts of “freedom” and “progress” must be sought in the invention of the diabolical death-dealing instruments of human history. And this relation also applies to modern democracy, since the “military revolution” remains to this day a secret motive for modernization. The atomic bomb was itself a democratic invention of the West.

The invention of firearms destroyed the pre-capitalist forms of rule, since it made the feudal cavalry militarily derisory. Even before the invention of firearms the social consequences of long-range weapons were anticipated; thus, the Second Lateran Council, in 1139, prohibited the use of the crossbow¹ against Christians. Not by chance, the crossbow, imported from non-European cultures to Europe, was until the year 1000 considered to be the weapon of

choice for bandits, outlaws and rebels. When the much more effective cannons came into use, the destiny of mounted and armored armies was sealed.

The firearm, however, unlike the crossbow, was no longer in the hands of an opposition “from below” which confronted feudal rule, but rather brought about a revolution “from above” with the help of princes and kings. The production and mobilization of the new weapons systems were not possible on the basis of local and decentralized structures, such as had until then characterized social reproduction, but demanded a completely new organization of society on various planes.

Firearms, and above all the large cannons, could no longer be produced in small workshops, like bows and catapults. Thus, a special weapons industry developed, which produced cannons and muskets in large factories. At the same time, a new defensive military architecture arose, in the form of gigantic fortresses which had to resist cannon-fire. A contest of innovation arose between offensive and defensive weaponry, as well as an arms race among the States, which continues to this day.

Firearms profoundly changed the structure of armies. Fighters could no longer equip themselves and had to be supplied with weapons by a centralized social power. For this reason, the military organization of society separated itself from the civilian. Instead of the citizens being mobilized in each case for campaigns, or the local lords summoning their armed retainers, “standing armies” arose: the “armed forces” were born as a specific social group, and the army became a foreign body within society. The officer corps was transformed from a personal duty of the wealthy citizenry into a modern “profession”. Parallel to this new military organization and the new war technologies, the size of armies grew enormously. “The number of men under arms, between 1500 and 1700, almost doubled” (Geoffrey Parker).

The arms industry, the arms race, and the maintenance of standing armies, divorced from civil society and at the same time rapidly growing, necessarily led to a radical upheaval within the economy. The vast military complex, separated from society, demanded a “permanent war economy”. This new economy of death spread like a shroud over the agrarian structures of the old society.

Because armies and their arms could no longer rely on local agrarian production, since they had to be supplied with resources on a large scale and within anonymous relations, they came to depend upon the mediation of money. The production of commodities and the monetary economy, as basic elements of capitalism, were stimulated at the beginning of the modern era by means of the military- and weapons production-based liberation of the economy.

This development produced and benefited capitalist subjectivity and its abstract mentality of “producing more”. The permanent money-shortages of the war economy led, in civil society, to the increase in the number of merchants and money-lending capitalists, of the great investors and war financiers. But the new organization of the army itself also created the capitalist mentality.

The old agrarian warriors were transformed into “soldiers”, which means people who receive “pay”. They were the first modern “wage workers” who had to reproduce their lives solely by means of monetary income and by the consumption of commodities. And for this reason they no longer fought for idealistic motives, but only for money. It did not matter to them whom they killed, since what “mattered” to them was their pay; in this way they became the first representatives of “abstract labor” (Marx) within the modern system of commodity production.

What interested the chiefs and commanders of the “soldiers” was gathering resources by means of pillage and converting them into money. Thus, the income from pillage had to be greater than the costs of the war. This is the origin of modern business rationality. Most generals and commanders of armies at the beginning of the modern era profitably invested the product of their spoils and they became partners of monetary and commercial capital.

It was not, therefore, the peaceful tradesman, the diligent hoarder, or the producer brimming with ideas who marked the beginning of capitalism, but quite the opposite: just as the “soldiers”, as bloody artisans of the gun, were the prototypes of the modern wage worker, so also the commanders of the armies and the *condottieri* “who multiplied money” were the prototypes of the modern businessman and his “risk-taking disposition”.

As independent entrepreneurs of death, the *condottiere* nonetheless depended upon the great wars between the centralized state powers and the financial capacities of the latter. The modern reciprocal relation between market and State has its origin here. In order to be able to finance arms industries and fortifications, gigantic armies and war, States had to bleed their populations, and they did this in a correspondingly novel fashion: instead of the old impositions of tribute in kind, they subjected their populations to monetary taxation. People were thus obliged to “make money” to pay their taxes to the State. Thus, the war economy indirectly as well as directly brought about the system of the market economy. Between the 16th and the 18th centuries, the peoples’ taxes in the European countries grew by almost 2,000%.

Obviously, people did not willingly allow themselves to be introduced into the new monetary and militarist economy. They were only compelled to do so by means of a bloody oppression. The permanent war economy of firearms led to centuries of permanent popular insurrection and, following in its wake, permanent war. In order to collect their monstrous taxes, the centralized state powers had to construct a monstrous police and administrative apparatus. All modern state structures proceed from this historical beginning of the modern era. Local self-administration was replaced by centralized and hierarchical administration, under the charge of a bureaucracy whose nucleus was formed with the support of taxation and domestic oppression.

The positive conquests of modernization always came marked with the stigma of these origins. The industrialization of the 19th century, in its technological as well as its organizational and spiritual historical character, was the heir to firearms, to the arms production of the beginnings of modernity and to the social processes to which the latter gave rise. In this sense, it is not surprising that the vertiginous capitalist development of the productive forces since the first industrial revolution could only have occurred in a destructive form, despite its apparently innocent technological innovations.

Modern western democracy is incapable of concealing the fact that it is the heir of the military and militarist dictatorship of the beginning of modernity—and not only in the technological sphere, but also in its social structure. Under the thin surface of voting rituals and political speeches, we discover the monster of an apparatus which continuously manages and disciplines the apparently free citizen of the State in the name of the total monetary economy and of the war economy to which it is linked to this day. No society in history has had such a large percentage of public functionaries and administrators of human resources, of soldiers and police; no society has wasted such a large part of its resources on arms and armies.

The bureaucratic dictatorships of “catch-up modernization” in the east and south, with their centralized apparatuses, were not the opposites, but the imitators of the war economy of western history, without, however, being able to equal it. After all, the most bureaucratized

and militarized societies are, from the structural point of view, the western societies. Neoliberalism, too, is a contemporary offspring of the cannon, as the gigantic militarism of “Reaganomics” and the history of the 1990s demonstrated. The economy of death will remain as the disturbing legacy of modern society based on the market economy until kamikaze-capitalism destroys itself.

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Note:

1. “The invention of this weapon dates from the 9th century, and it arose in response to the need for imparting greater force to arrows, when foot-soldiers adopted mail-coats. With the crossbow it was possible to launch an arrow with such powerful force that the projectile pierced coats of mail and steel helmets. The use of the crossbow became widespread in Europe after the Crusades, and it became the usual weapon of all armies between the 12th and the 16th centuries. It was displaced by firearms.” (*Diccionario Enciclopédico Ilustrado Plaza y Janés*, 1982).