

On the Possibility of Building Castles in the Air

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Premières mesures révolutionnaires. By Eric Hazan and Kamo (Paris: La Fabrique, 2013.) 116 pp. \$14.95 softcover.

In the last two decades, simultaneously readable, sophisticated, and daring condemnations of the capitalist world as we know it have been few and far between. *Premières mesures révolutionnaires* is one of those rare works of critical synthesis, of which the French radical left has been in desperate need for at least the last thirty years. The book in itself is not path breaking. The format is not new: it is that of Marx's and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. As in the latter, the prose is clear, the subsections are generally short and jargon free, and most importantly the arguments are thought-provoking and concisely laid out.

However, the book only resembles the *Manifesto* from a structural viewpoint. The type of socialism that Hazan and Kamo advocate does not belong to the Marxist type, but to the anti-authoritarian, anarchist one. More precisely, *Premières mesures* implicitly rejects Marx's emphasis on a dialectical model whose logic relies on the rise and expansion of *bourgeois* democracy and capitalism as a vehicle for the development of a class-conscious proletariat. To the authors, "[l]'abolition du capitalisme, c'est avant tout l'abolition de l'économie, la fin de la mesure, de l'impérialisme de la mesure" (48). What they recommend, then, is an uncompromising form of communism, one that rejects the Marxist category of objective conditions and refuses to acknowledge capitalism, even as a means to an end.

The book's point of departure is what Hazan and Kamo call the corrosion of "légitimité démocratique" (16). Although this democratic deficit has been plaguing the *liberal world* (for lack of a better phrase) for several decades, the media only began to publicise the fact that the Emperor had no clothes in the wake of the 2007-8 financial crisis. Thus, the crisis has revealed that "le pouvoir n'est autre, comme on le dit pudiquement, que celui des 'marchés', lesquels ont leurs craintes, leurs lubies, leurs exigences exprimées sur les manchettes des journaux et commentées par des experts de tous bords (l'expert étant, avec le vigile, le personnage emblématique de notre temps)" (17). However, unlike other critiques of the system, the authors speak against a reformist approach to the crisis. To them, the solution is not to demonstrate against the system, like the *Indignados* and *Occupy* movements, which implicitly recognise the legitimacy of their opponents, but a radical revolution (22).

Premières mesures is an axiomatic exercise, in that it presupposes that the revolution has already been successfully led to completion. As an economist would phrase it, the authors implicitly take a *ceteris paribus* (“with all other things being equal”) approach. First of all, the book attempts to describe what a *truly* (i.e. non-Stalinist) communist society would look like. Secondly, the authors focus on the French case without taking a multitude of variables into account – but again, the reader is expected to accept the postulate that liberal democracy is now defunct. Among those variables, one could mention the reaction of other countries (the European Union, the USA etc.) to so radical an insurrection, shortages of consumer and producer goods, etc. Thus, it is a prerequisite for the reader to suspend his or her disbelief in order to fully understand and enjoy this work.

Overall, the book reads like an optimistic call for the complete, uncompromising overthrow of the capitalist system. The latter, according to the authors, should be thoroughly abolished. The prerequisite for attaining this goal is for would-be revolutionaries to deny any usefulness to capitalism and, by extension, to any kind of liberal democracy. Essentially, *Premières mesures* can be understood as a reflection on a more than two-century-old pattern: the *post-revolutionary hangover syndrome* – or, to put it less colloquially the observation that revolutions, like Saturn, usually end up devouring their own children. The authors’ claim that “[l]a séquence *révolution populaire – gouvernement provisoire – élections – réaction* se retrouve à plusieurs reprises dans l’histoire” thus seems to suggest that their analysis is far from utopian, but rooted in the careful study of insurrections and revolutionary processes (33). Paradoxically, then, the authors’ radicalism is by no means naïve. The conclusion they draw from revolutionary processes from the 1789 French Revolution to the 2011 Arab Springs is that the only way to prevent the *reactionary* stage from setting in is to prevent the successive *provisional government* phase from even beginning. In addition to avoiding the Scylla of counterrevolution, the insurgents should also resist the Charybdis of the “communisme de caserne” (79), what Jacques Attali called “la tentation – ou plutôt nostalgie – léniniste” (Attali, 71).

As a result, the solution would consist in rejecting any kind of alleged honest brokerage from reformist factions, and in refusing to work within the rules of the current system. The bureaucracy and the political class should not be relied on or even harnessed, but neutralised, made obsolete (37). But the revolution should not confine itself to overthrowing the government. What the authors recommend is to go as far as to get rid of the notions of work and economics. Unlike Marx and most socialist thinkers (even Bakunin and the nineteenth-century anarchists), Hazan and Kamo do not conceive of the economy as a broad concept that can be interpreted by any ideology. As a result, “il n’existe pas une économie réelle qui serait la victime du capitalisme financier mais seulement un mode d’organisation *politique* de la servitude. Sa prise sur le monde

passe par sa capacité de tout mesurer grâce à la diffusion planétaire de toutes sortes de dispositif numériques – ordinateurs, capteurs, iPhones, etc. – qui sont immédiatement des dispositifs de contrôle” (48). The alternative to the market economy would be the development of local cooperatives, a model that is referred to as “*coopérative intégrale*” (64). This part of the book could be expanded, for it is hard not to conceive of a cooperative-based system as not reflecting an economic model. Unless the authors intended their aim to abolish the economy as a mere provocation, it would be hard to imagine, even for a Nestor Makhno or a Louise Michel, an anarchist society without a basic economic programme. Barter, gift, and mutualist economies, while often associated with the anarchist tradition, are nonetheless economic models.

In the purest anarchist tradition, *Premières mesures* calls for a return to a sense of human scale not just in the economic realm, but also in the political, social, and administrative ones. Parliamentary democracy, to the authors, is as wasteful and alienating as the capitalist economy. Thus, once the latter’s parasitical elements (marketers, merchandisers etc.) and professional politicians will have been made obsolete in the wake of a successful revolution, all decision-making processes will take place at the local level (64-69). In the same vein, the health care system should be reformed radically. For instance, the redundant, noxious pharmaceutical companies should be nationalised or integrated into the new society’s cooperative model (69).

As in their critique of capitalism and parliamentary democracy, the authors take issue with what they view as the absurdity of the responses to the environmental crisis. Since ecology is the new “opium du peuple,” in that it brings “la dose de morale indispensable au marketing moderne – voitures vertes, lessives biologiques, poulets fermiers,” it should be as peremptorily disposed of as economics (79). Thus, it is the root causes of the environmental crisis that should be fought, not the symptoms. One of the root causes in question is overurbanisation, which not only destroys the environment, but also contributes to impoverishing populations in the developed and in the developing worlds. Thus, the large industrial monocultural complexes that have been feeding the self-serving Molochs of capitalism have contributed to the overpopulation of cities where precarious sub-proletarians accumulate, stripped from any control over what they eat and deprived of meaningful professional prospects (80-81).

But again, *Premières mesures* is not a doom-and-gloom overview of the most nonsensical aspects of capitalist production. Hazan and Kamo seem to have a solution for every problem. Beside the all-too-easy proposition to abolish ecology, they make a case for the feasibility of locally based cooperatives. While they acknowledge that “[a]ujourd’hui, les pauvres partent rarement s’établir à la campagne ... parce qu’à la campagne, on ne trouve pas de travail,” (83) they mention two examples of rural communes: Millevaches, in central France, and Marinaleda in southern Spain (83-86). According to the authors, the two communes are

cases in point that the redistribution of resources at the local level constitutes a viable alternative to the humanly and environmentally harmful current capitalist model.

The final part of the book calls for a thorough cultural revolution in the media, the university, and the entertainment industry. Since, still according to the authors, nine-tenth of the media are owned (in the French case) by “financiers” (90), the goal of the revolutionaries should consist of opening “à tout le monde les journaux et les émissions audiovisuelles” (91). Another victim of the new system will be the university, viewed as sclerotic and sterile. Thus, the disappearance of academia as we know it “libèrera des énergies et des talents qui trouveront mieux à faire que la rédaction d’articles destinés à l’ascension dans la hiérarchie mandarinale” (94). As far as the condemnation of *ivory tower* economics is concerned, *Premières mesures* has the merit of being consistent with the authors’ support for the total abolition of most kinds of economic models – except for the cooperative one (the only contradiction in their project). The subtext here is that the commodification of knowledge is as absurd, harmful and wasteful as the capitalist system as a whole.

In brief, Hazan and Kamo advocate a free society based on economic, social, political, and functional equality at all levels. The administrative basis of this new system would be the commune. Whether the latter should invariably be a small village, a medium-sized town, or a city, is not specified.

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Though forward-looking, *Premières mesures* should be read as a continuation of the age-old struggle that has opposed two schools of socialism: the anarchist/anti-authoritarian left and Marxism. The defining moment in that confrontation was the eviction of Mikhail Bakunin and his anarchist followers at the 1872 congress of the First International. While many factions had fought one another since the founding of socialist organisations in the first half of the nineteenth century, the 1872 events set in motion a dichotomy that has handicapped the socialist left for the last one hundred and forty years. While Hazan and Kamo do not explicitly refer to the conflicts that have opposed the two traditions, they reflect upon the dangers of both reformism and totalitarianism. Thus, the alternative they propose finds its roots in the anti-authoritarian tradition of Bakunin and Kropotkin.

At first glance the book seems to be a sequel of a 2007 book entitled *L’Insurrection qui vient*, written by the mysterious Comité Invisible. The two books were both published by La Fabrique, use a similar language, and address common themes. Although Hazan and Kamo do not mention that particular work, *Premières mesures* begins where *L’Insurrection qui vient* ends, with the injunction: “[t]out le pouvoir aux communes” (123). Unfortunately, while the earlier work

had a certain punch to it, the sequel reads like a series of diatribes against the world as it is and does not provide a synthesis of the ways in which post-revolutionary measures are supposed to be enacted and, more specifically, by whom. In that regard, readers expecting the book to end with its own version of “[w]orking men of all countries, unite!” are in for disappointment (Marx and Engels, 500). Indeed, the final sentence in *Premières mesures*, “[d]onc voilà, puisque le temps presse, pressons le pas, mesurons notre puissance, rencontrons-nous,” reads like the punch line in a shaggy dog story.

Premières mesures, while critical of Stalinism, unwittingly falls into the same trap as some early Soviet revolutionaries. For instance, the proposal to abolish economics is reminiscent of Andrei Platonov’s epically sarcastic, tragically burlesque novel *Chevengur*. The novel, which takes place in a fictional village in the early Soviet era, consists of an absurdist parody of the early years of the Soviet regime. *Chevengur* essentially describes the lives of a group of delusional revolutionaries convinced that communism has automatically become a reality with the victory of the Bolsheviks. Communism, like terror, capitalism, or economics, cannot easily be abolished or decreed. In that regard, it is difficult to take *Premières mesures* as anything other than a provocation, a rant against the established order.

Nonetheless, the authors’ probable intentions are understandable. *Premières mesures* was clearly the result of a frustration common to many leftwing socialists over fifty, for whom Mitterrand’s rightward shift in 1983, less than two years after he was elected president of France, was felt as a betrayal (19). Hazan, born in 1936, seems to fit the profile of the disappointed leftist now trying to instil new life into an adulterated, conformist, and skittish *Parti socialiste français* (PS). As for the mysterious Kamo, the absence of any biographical information can only lead to speculations on his or her political trajectory. The authors thus attempt to find a radical alternative to the ideological trajectory of the PS, which Alain Bergounioux and Gérard Grunberg have called a “parti révolutionnaire qui ne fait pas la révolution” (14-15). In brief, the realisation that the history of the French socialists’ experience in power has been one of brief honeymoon periods, disappointment, and broken promises led Hazan and Kamo to advocate a different route to a more egalitarian society.

Finally, who is Kamo? Whereas Hazan is famous enough, it is impossible to find anything on his co-author. The only Kamo a reader acquainted with Soviet history would know is the Georgian revolutionary, one of Stalin’s henchmen in the 1900s-1910s. The website of the publisher only provides a biography of Hazan and does not give any information on the co-author.

In conclusion, the two authors’ views, while geared towards the future, are rooted in the history of French socialism. As a result, *Premières mesures* should be understood as an instruction manual, a warning to would-be revolutionaries not to replicate the mistakes of their predecessors. Although many readers might

be tempted to take the book as a delirious joke, *Premières mesures* has the merit of vulgarising (in the good sense of the term) and synthesise several key elements in the current radical left's critique of capitalism.

NOTES

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