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Maddalena Celano - Julio Roldán

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"We all save ourselves or we all perish"

Interview with sociologist and philosopher Julio Roldán

For 30 years, living in exile, I have been stateless. A human being without a state, without a nation, without borders. It is an extraordinary experience that allows one to free oneself from the traps of identity, from the flaws of nationalism, from the opium of religion.



Maddalena Celano interviews Julio Roldán

Maddalena Celano: First of all, I would like to ask about the beginning of your career.



– Julio Roldán: *I am a sociologist, doctor of philosophy from the University of Bremen-Germany. I was a professor at several universities in Peru and Germany, at the University of Hamburg, Bremen, Potsdam and Libre Berlin. I have published historical-political and philosophical research works such as: Peru: Myth and Reality (1986), Gonzalo, the myth (1990), Vargas Llosa between myth and reality (2000), The 2 faces of the American continent and other essays (2002), Latin America. Democracy and transition at the beginning of the third millennium (2005), Latin America. The Colonial Mentality and Other Essays (2010), Global Citizenship (2014), Weimar. Three moments in the political-philosophical development in Germany (2015), My struggle. Ideological and political background from a controversial book (2018), The 20-Year War (2020), Capitalism and Revolution (2022). On the literary level, Viejas historias resamean (2002), Crónica de un trotamundo (2008), Hijas de la guerra (2014).*

I was born in Peru and have lived in Germany since 1993, as a political asylee. I am currently a political commentator, guest, at deutsche welle (German wave, in Spanish).

M.C: Currently, do you still teach at the University of Hamburg?

J.R: I don't work at that university anymore, nor at another.

M.C: How did you approach political theory?

–*J.R: It was in the first cycles of studies at the University. There we had the opportunity to meet some intellectuals who had worked on political theory. August Comte, Émile Durkheim, JGF Hegel, Max Weber, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Herbert Marcuse. That is, intellectuals, most of them considered sociologists who did political theory.*

M.C: What were the first political-intellectual references that influenced you?

J.R: The intellectuals mentioned above, especially Marx and Engels. They were the most read and debated in the college student years.

M.C: In the 60s and 70s, both in Latin America and the Middle East, much thought was done about the legitimacy of the nation-state. Do you still think in very national terms? Does the nation-state continue to play a progressive role in Latin America?

J.R: It is true that this concept of the nation-state was very much discussed. Even until now this concept is still used. I would separate the state from the nation. The state exists, it plays a central role in class society, like the capitalist system, which is predominant today. The best proof, against the arguments of neoliberals, is what has been evidenced in recent years with the financial crisis of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first case, many banks failed and it was the state that, by injecting fresh money, saved them from total ruin. In the second case, the health crisis was addressed by the State but not by the

private health system. Therefore, the role of the State remains central not only at the political-social level, but also, at precise junctures, at the economic level. Regarding the nation, I believe that a concept coined and developed by the theoretical representatives of the rising bourgeoisie is repeated. They raised the flags of the nation to achieve social cohesion as a homogeneous whole and, at the same time, to centralize the State. The idea of a common history, a delimited territory, a unified economy, a language and a culture for all, was an aspiration, an ideology, which was limited to it. The reality is different. In Europe, where the idea was born and systematized, there is no country that is a nation, that meets the requirements set out above. In other parts of the world even less; however, many theorists, politicians, continue to use the concept of the nation-state.

M.C: Do you still think in very national terms?

J.R: I'm not a nationalist. I oppose nationalism with revolutionary internationalism. Nationalism, in many cases, is the basis for fascism. I would only support nationalism when a country dominated by capitalist imperialism fights for its liberation and, moreover, has socialism as its goal, otherwise I am opposed. The proletariat, the poor of the world, have no nation or homeland. Their nation is alienated labor. Their homeland is exploitation. I fight for global citizenship. For a world without borders, for a universal language. By the way, I have written a book entitled Global Citizenship (2014). For 30 years, living in exile, I have been stateless. A human being without a state, without a nation, without borders. It is an extraordinary experience that allows one to free oneself from the traps of identity, from the flaws of nationalism, from the opium of religion.

M.C: What is the role of the revolt?

J.R: Revolt is not revolution, it is just rebellion that appears as a desperate attempt to reform things. For example, if the Black Lives Matters movement in the US tries to put cameras on the police force, this is not revolutionary, but it has to do with control over police. That is, it is essentially reformist. In various ways, revolt always calls into question the morality and justice of existing reality. The revolts are different from each other, but they all question the world in which they take place. They all point to the immorality and injustice of the existing reality. And the same goes for philosophy. Good philosophy questions the morality and justice of the world in which it develops. Philosophy forces us to think and rethink the reality in which we live. It is no coincidence that all his essays have an exquisite philosophical flavor. In the twenty-first century, thinking about revolution is too theoretical, too philosophical, because if you look at what is happening in the world, it is no longer what Edmund Burke or Marx called "revolution."

M.C: Do you think that a "rebellion" (of the revolutionary aftertaste) in the "existentialist" modalities, a la Sartre or Camus, could still be current and possible?

J.R: In your long question, there are many ideas and several questions. First, we must understand revolt, rebellion, revolution, as related concepts. Second, they are stages, moments, of the level reached by the class struggle in a given society. Third, they are moods of the population. Finally, they are expressions of social unrest or discontent. Social revolt is usually a passing action that usually has no clear or definite goal. At the same time, there is no political organization to guide this revolt. Rebellion is a political-social action of greater scope and repercussion. It is often a consequence of the contradictions within the ruling classes that resort to this type of action, even armed, to solve their internal contradictions. The theme of revolution is another. It is the qualitative change of the dominant order. It happens when the objective and subjective conditions are given, within the population, for the transformation of society. We are talking in the times of capitalism. It is guided by a political organization, the modern Prince, said Antonio Gramsci, that has organic influence on the population and at the same time has a systematized and coherent ideology to thus clearly foresee where these revolts or eventually those rebellions are oriented. Finally, a group of revolutionary leaders. The experience of the 4 great triumphant revolutions in the stage of capitalism, the English (1642-1688), the French (1789), the Russian (1917) and the Chinese (1949), evidence this.

M.C: How is this conception of revolt as a rupture of order related to the theoretical proposals of post-Marxism?

J.R: I don't know what post-Marxism is, what its philosophical, ideological, political, organizational approaches are; what is their tactics and what is their strategy for the seizure of power. Every revolution, worth its salt, within the Marxist conception, necessarily implies a break with the established order. That is, the seizure not only of the Government but of the State, which is the Power. Lenin said: Except for Power, everything is illusion! The revolt, as we made clear in the previous question, would be more linked to anarchism than to Marxism.

M.C: Do people fear anything more than the status quo? American liberals, for the most part, are unaffected by mass demonstrations filled with young people talking about equity and debt. The whole system, called democratic, is configured not to appreciate the demonstrations and their demands, but to be able to silence them. And this is the basis of hatred of democracy. The most recent work he has published, Capitalism and Revolution, proposes a critical reading of the capitalist system mediated by philosophical criticism, as

a destructive force. I would like to question his idea of philosophical criticism, which, with few exceptions, is possible to find in political science and in the social and human sciences in general.



J.R: The many manifestations of social protest within developed societies, capitalistically speaking, make us see that the system has not been able to solve the underlying problem of society. That is, the capital-labor contradiction or private appropriation vs. social production. In some societies, the material living conditions of the majority of the population have been significantly improved. We are thinking of the countries where the welfare state worked, capitalism with a human face, capitalism with a heart, which were carried out by the social democratic governments on the basis of the theoretical orientations formulated by John Maynor Keynes. On a political level, the bourgeoisie has not fulfilled its 3 principles that were the key to bringing together the majority of the population behind it. We are thinking about equality, freedom and fellowship. These are the 3 principles on which democracy would rest and rise as a system of government. The problem is that the bourgeoisie has betrayed these principles. There is no country in the world, called democratic, where justice exists. In the absence of justice, there is also no freedom and less human fraternity. Finally, in these countries, the most democratic, there is a deeper problem. Capitalism has provided relative material well-being to the population; but on condition of taking away spiritual well-being. The vast majority of the population, in these societies, suffer from the evil of stress and this is the product of the demands, punctuality, performance, at work. This problem leads to widespread depression as workers find no meaning in their lives beyond work. They have lost the charm of living. Work, alienation, has become an obligation but not a desire. The demand for

psychologists and psychiatrists is very high and increasing in these societies. They are spiritually sick societies. Capitalism is a system that breaks down inside. The new society that replaces it, for the moment, the great majorities of the population still do not see it clearly. Most theorists, philosophers, political scientists, sociologists, do not see or do not want to see this problem in which the system is debated. It can be for ideological or pecuniary interests. It is more comfortable to justify the evils of the system by resorting to a series of theories or concepts. But the fundamental problems of the capitalist system not only persist but are becoming more acute every day.

M.C: In your most recent work, Capitalism and Revolution, you quote Marcuse and Fromm, for example. It was interesting to me that political theory has only marginally touched on the problem of "love" (understood as human relationships based on empathy and attention to others) as a political concept, because I think that in Fromm it is an important issue. In books such as "Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Society," "The Art of Loving," and "Having and Being," Fromm understands one aspect, which was later relegated by contemporary theorists such as Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser. Fromm says, "If we think of love not so much as possession but as practice, what does it mean to practice love in a relationship between people?" Thus he concludes that the practice of love implies following a logic contrary to the logic of capital. We do not treat people through love in the same way that we treat them through the logic of the mercifying change of capitalist societies. But what if we thought of love not as the private relationship between 2 people, but as a different logic from capitalist exchange relations?

J.R: I agree with Herbert Marcuse when he talks about the emotional breakdown in consumer society that he analyzed in one-dimensional Man and in Eros and Civilization. Similarly with Erich Fromm, when he discusses the subject of love, the types of love, in the historical development of society in the books mentioned by you. The concept is directly linked to the historical process of society, to economic relations, to culture and above all to the psychological aspect of human beings in particular. In the system in which we live it is very difficult to find simple, spontaneous, clean and sincere love, it can exist only as an exception. That idea of exchanging love for love, trust for trust, momentarily integrating into each other and then regaining their individuality in direction as Alfred Adler understands it is exceptional. The underlying reason is that we come from thousands of years in which love has been used for control, power, blackmail, the enjoyment of a few against the discomfort of the vast majority. It is very difficult to practice love with full freedom in a classist, sexist, sexist, patriarchal society, such as capitalism. In this type of

society, love is totally commodified, sexualized, resorting to images linked to the dominant cultural order, to figures worked by advertising according to the taste of the established order.

M.C: In relation to the idea of communism, in *Grundrisse*, Marx speaks of communism in the terms *gemeinwesen*, which in German refers to "common sensibility" or "common being in the world". Marx constantly thinks of communism as something that is destroyed by the mercantile relation. That is, he thinks of communism when he tries to understand how social relations have been replaced by mercantile relations. Marx tries to understand what happened to us. I think if we wanted to understand Marx's project, at its deepest levels, we have to understand that what he is thinking about are the ways of life. And it is not surprising that Marxism speaks of ways of life. Reading Rosa Luxemburg, Alexandra Kollontai or Jenny Marx, you can see that love (understood as relationships based on "care") is within the theory of communism and that it has a lot to say about life forms. Marx says in the *Grundrisse* that relations of exchange begin outside the community. To speak of communism as a "cure" (care for the community and human relations) therefore implies relating to the original ideas of the communist tradition, which go back to Marx's concerns for the human being. Someone might say – the Althusser, for example – that this is too humanistic. When reading the *Grundrisse*, if law of the *gemeinwesen*. And when he silences Marx, he sees him confront Manchester's political and economic reality. Therefore, communism in Marx is entirely related to the question of the life forms in which we live. It is not a naïve or romantic question, but quite the opposite. It is rooted in the concrete experience of real people in the real world. That is, could we think of the soul of the world (*alma mundi*) in materialistic terms? Why should we leave this problem to theology? Has Latin America, with Liberation Theology, faced this problematic knot?

J.R: Yes, I agree with what you have transcribed from Marx. The central theme in Marx is the human being as such. Everything human is ours. We are all saved or we all perish. Moreover, Marx goes much further with that idea that appears in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, he states: "We have to naturalize the human being and humanize nature." That is one of the great tasks of the society of the future which in turn will have to humanize the same bourgeois who is totally alienated as dominant and return to him his human condition. Regarding Liberation Theology, which, by the way, has very little presence in Latin America today, it was an attempt to make some reform within the Catholic Church, so that it is more in tune with the desire of the needy population that still believed in this institution. Despite this attempt, the advance of the

churches, sects, Protestants on the Continent is notorious. I end by paraphrasing Marx. In The Jewish Question, he argued, more or less, the following: All political criticism begins by criticizing religion. Religion remains the opium of the people and its purpose is not to prohibit it but to change the bases that generate it and at the same time as permanent criticism.

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