

MARXISM

Capitalism and socialism in the twentieth century

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Marx once wrote that “history weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living,” and even twenty years after the Soviet Union’s collapse activists are still confronted by the legacy of Stalinism. At the same time, capitalism has failed millions of working and poor people around the world. The following is a speech given by Tariq Ali at the New York City launch of his book, *The Stalinist Legacy: Its Impact on Twentieth Century World Politics*.

I’M VERY happy that Haymarket Books has reprinted this collection which, as time goes on, I had almost forgot existed. I barely remembered it until Anthony Arnove dug it out from somewhere or the other. Penguin Books published it because at that time, in the 1980s, there was a huge debate about which way forward—a decrepit capitalism or a revived living socialism—and this was a big debate. That debate is now returning in a modest way. One shouldn’t exaggerate, but people are getting interested in socialism again, so I think it’s timely. And to show you how it’s coming back again, I will tell you a little story.

About a year ago, I was rung up by a German theater in Essen, which is a big industrial town in Germany like Manchester in England, an historically working-class town. The dramaturge at the theater in Essen said, “We want you to write a play for us.” I said, “I might be interested; what do you want me to write a play about?” She said, “We want you to write a modern version of Don Quixote.” So I said, “Yes, it’s a tall order.”

Then I met with a French director who works with the theater a lot, and I said, “Look, it would be absolutely crazy to do a play which presents the old characters in modern clothes; it’s not going to work. The only way to do it, I think, is to bring in Don Quixote and Sancho Panza out of the seventeenth century world into the twentieth-first century world in their medieval clothes and let them see what’s happening in this world.” I continued, “I just want to be very clear that if I write this play, it really will be a defense of radical ideas and anticapitalism and we will show the audience what is happening in this world.” He said, “Well, yes, but show them how?” I said, “We will show them how bankers and politicians are in bed with each other—sometimes literally. We will show them what happens when you fight wars. We’ll have a huge scene in a US military hospital in Germany where veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan are hanging around without legs and arms.”

“It’s not going to be a feel-good play in that sense.” I continued, “Lastly we will tackle the thorny questions of sexuality and politics in the Middle East.” He said, “Could you just write this down in two or three pages?” And I did, and it’s happening, and they are going to do it and everything is now being designed. I said, “Any problems?” He said, “No, no, everyone is very keen. But do be aware

that Brecht is regarded by half of Germany as a Stasi agent.” I said, “Well that’s totally disgusting.” He said, “It is totally disgusting, but that is the reality. So you just have to be aware of that.”

Bertolt Brecht as a Stasi agent brings us to the topic of socialism in the twentieth century, and what happened to it. I’ll just spell out my views on it, and then we can discuss and argue. The basic thing to understand about the twentieth century is that this was the first time in the history of the world that a revolution had been made (in 1917) by political revolutionaries who had set out with the idea of making a socialist revolution.

This wasn’t accidental like the English and French bourgeois revolutions were. It’s not that the English puritans and the French enlightenment revolutionaries set out with the idea that we’re going to make a bourgeois revolution that will complete the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and these are the institutions we’ll set up, and then we’ll execute a tiny proportion of the aristocracy.

No. They didn’t set out like that. It happened, but it happened because there were movements, class forces, social forces from below, political struggles, and social struggles in a congealed way, not like we know them now from the top. And these revolutions, including the bourgeois revolution in sixteenth-century Holland were, if you like, uncoordinated and not thought-out revolutions. The Russian Revolution was the first revolution in the history of humanity which was totally thought-out and Lenin (not very fashionable these days) said, “This is what we are going to do; we may not succeed, but this is the attempt to create on a global scale a power structure that will benefit not just Russians, but the entire world.”

If you look at the impact of that revolution, it had a completely international impact. It was like lightning. It created anticolonial movements. It encouraged liberation movements, which were not communist in any sense of the word, but inspired by this event to challenge imperialism. The Bolsheviks did think sometimes in slightly crazy ways. For instance, in 1919 they thought: how are we going to stop these imperial powers that are intervening in our country and waging a civil war? Trotsky says to Lenin: “Why don’t we hit them where it will hurt them at the heart of their empires?” So Lenin said, “Yes, that’s a good idea; what are we going to do?” Trotsky finds out that there are only 36,000 English soldiers controlling India, and he’s astonished when he finds this out. He says, “Thirty-six thousand white soldiers—that’s all?” So he asks his generals and marshals to prepare an emergency plan for a red cavalry of 25,000 soldiers—recruited largely from Central Asia—that can go through Afghanistan into India, defeat the British Imperial Army, and declare Indian independence. That’s how they thought. I’m glad they didn’t try it, because who knows where it might have led us, but the thinking was absolutely clear: Hit the capitalist powers at their weakest points.

The entire leadership of the Marxist movement in Russia—both Bolshevik and Menshevik—was agreed that it was a backward country. A large bulk of the country was unorganized peasants barely liberated from serfdom. The size of the working class was miniscule compared to the countries of Western Europe, especially Germany. So they said, “What are we going to do?” And for a long time they said it’s not going to be possible. What transformed their thinking was World War I, because the First World War politicized the peasantry who were recruited as soldiers into the imperial army to go and fight, and the defeats they suffered radicalized them considerably. It was the soldiers and workers (and for soldiers, read peasants in uniform) who effectively provided the base for the revolutionary movement that won.

Despite this, the thinking of the entire Bolshevik leadership at that moment was that if the revolution doesn’t take seed in Germany we are sunk. There is no way we can build socialism in Russia. We do not have the industrial base to do it. We need German industry and the German working class to do

it. Every single thing was linked to the German Revolution. If you read the writings now, which I've been doing for other purposes, it's a constant theme. If you look at the pamphlets at the time—in 1917, Lenin wrote *Can The Bolsheviks Retain State Power?*—it wasn't a stupid question.

And so they pushed and pushed and pushed. Hungary fell for a short time to a communist uprising. There was an uprising in Munich—foolish, because the conditions weren't right. The leader of the communist uprising in Munich, Eugen Leviné, said to the leaders in Moscow, "I don't think the timing is right, let's don't go for it; the timing is never right"—which is also true. He went for it and the revolt failed, and he made one of the most moving speeches in communist history. "Yes, we lost. But you have to understand," he said to the court. "We communists are dead people on leave. Our lives don't matter. We will carry on. You can execute me." They executed him the following day.

Then the revolutionaries tried it in Berlin. Rosa Luxemburg was completely opposed to it, because, she said, "It is not right. We do not have a majority of workers with us. Many of them are still loyal to the German Social Democratic Party. It's an adventure." But the decision had been taken by the Spartakusbund, and they went for it, and they lost. In this process we lost in Germany the most capable, intelligent, gifted leaders of the German working class. This is what happens when you have revolutions full stop. The successful revolutionary country wants to push and push, because it knows it can't survive on its own.

The French did it. They did it in a deformed way via Napoleon, who said, "Unless we gain Europe they will surround and destroy the gains of the French Revolution." He was right on that, completely right. Had he succeeded in destroying czarism—when he invaded Russia, the plan was to destroy czarism. The initial plan was to completely give rights to the peasants, give them the Code Napoleon [which prohibited privilege by birth], and distribute the land. Had they done that, it might have been a different story. They didn't do that; Napoleon fought the war in a conventional way. But the aim was that, and also to set up republics. If you don't set up republics, it creates little monarchies. But that was the plan.

Forget the French Revolution. In the modern world, it's the Cuban Revolution. I'm just saying that this is a weakness of successful revolutionary movements.

The Cuban Revolution succeeded through a combination of circumstances—one is that the Americans were totally unprepared for this event on their doorstep, completely unprepared for it. The revolution succeeded, and they chuck out all the American companies, etc. Then they realize: "We're a tiny island and we need other Latin American countries with us." In Cuba it worked in the sense of being successful by keeping the United States at bay. It worked because it was not simply the armed struggle groups that were very important; there was also a mass movement, the July 26th movement, in the cities. They had urban organization. The guerrilla foco theory—that a small group of armed revolutionaries can trigger off a revolution anywhere—when you think back on it now, it's completely schematic.

It was tried in Argentina, where you have a huge workers movement due to the end of the hegemony of Peronism, which is a mixed blessing, but it is a blessing because Peronism gave the workers a lot of rights in Argentina. And to think you can climb or jump over the Argentinean workers' movement with the crazy idea of a foco in a very obscure part of the country on the Bolivian border, it was a disaster.

Okay, so it's a disaster, and you learn from it. But then you repeat that disaster a year later in Bolivia. These are very intelligent people. The Bolsheviks of course were the most gifted political leaders that Europe had produced. But the Cuban leadership wasn't stupid either, nor was the French before them. It's the arrogance, in a way, of success—that success creates. You think you can

do it because someone else has done it [in another context—World War I] and by God they didn't think they'd be able to do it, but they did it, and we can do it too. The analysis of conditions—social conditions, relationship of social forces—is never worked out. The groups in these countries are so much in awe of the people who succeeded that they go against their own better judgments and carry out the orders. It's always a mistake to blindly carry out the orders of some parent group in some other country without thinking about the concrete conditions in your own country—always a mistake. If the conditions are right fine, great, but if they are not. The result is that in South America again we lost in every single country incredibly gifted, courageous people.

The same people in Germany who killed Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were the same people who then brought the fascists to power. One shouldn't isolate these two processes, because they are very closely linked. But for me the question is: Okay, the revolution has been defeated. It has not taken off in Europe, so the Russian Revolution is totally isolated. What do you do? That was the big debate that gripped Russia in 1920, and that is still a debate of importance to us today—not just as history, but to learn its lessons.

Under these conditions, the one thing you never do is disenfranchise the people who made the revolution. We know they are demoralized. It's true. They've had enough. They've suffered the First World War in which millions died. They've suffered their own civil war in which twenty-two foreign armies intervened on the side of the Whites against them. The masses get exhausted, naturally. Look at the peasants in Afghanistan today. They've been fighting since the Russians went in, and they haven't stopped fighting. I mean it is amazing they still do it. But I know from talking to people that they just are now reaching their limits and saying, after we kick the Americans out we hope no one else intervenes, because we don't think we would be able to handle it. I was told this by an Afghan in Pakistan six months ago.

When the masses are exhausted, you have to understand that it's a hiatus. The decision the Bolsheviks made—largely I think because the revolution failed in Germany—was to completely become an iron curtain, and I hate that phrase, but a fortress state. It's one thing to say all the political formations who are helping the Whites, like conservatives and the cadets, can't be allowed legality because they've taken up arms against us. That's acceptable, but to ban all left organizations because they are not in your own party is a huge error, a huge error. And this error became institutionalized after the death of Lenin.

I want to advise those who haven't read it to read Lenin's last will and testament. It's a very moving document just on a human level. Here is a leader paralyzed by a stroke in 1922 about to die who looks at what has been created and is partially horrified. In his letter he apologizes to the Russian working class. He says, "I apologize. I am sorry that I allowed this to happen." He accepts responsibility. But that also indicates that had he been in full health, together with others, they might have been able to stem the rot. But once you ban all other parties you then ban dissent in your own organization. It's logical. So anyone who is trying to argue against the leadership is regarded as an enemy and driven out or killed—in the case of the Stalinist takeover—within the Bolshevik party. And then follows the purges and the trials. The fact of the matter is that Stalin killed more Bolsheviks and revolutionaries than the czar did. That's just a fact of history.

That then creates further demoralization, and a monstrous dictatorship sets in. This dictatorship is then presented to the world as socialism, and many people look to it, millions and millions accept it. Small minorities don't, but they are small, tiny. But by and large the world accepts it and the world thinks this is the way things have to be if we are going to get socialism—and that was not the case.

This wretched institutional structure created by Stalinism then becomes the norm and the model for many liberation movements that were fighting against imperialism, because imperialism is the

enemy. They link any form of democracy with imperialism, saying, "We were screwed up by democracies—Britain, France, the Germans, the Dutch—who created these huge empires that are democracies. Why should we mimic that?" They completely equate democracy and imperialism, and therefore they go for the Stalinist structure, which also helps the local bourgeois elites fighting for independence, but very much within a bourgeois nationalistic framework. Throughout Africa, this meant one party, one state, and one leader.

The Cubans accepted that model—admittedly under pressure, because they have no options left once there were no revolutionary developments in the rest of South America; but still a huge mistake in my opinion. And with that went a monopoly of politics and a monopoly of information. And while that monopoly of politics and information is wrong, it is not for moral reasons, but for very practical reasons. If you completely close down all debate and discussion in the country, then who the hell is going to tell you that you're wrong? Neither in Russia nor in Mao's China were they prepared to listen to people who said, "You are going wrong," because there was no institutional structure in which workers or peasants or intellectuals could express it.

I'm not even now talking about alternative parties, though I'm in favor of them; I'm saying soviet-style structures—workers councils, peasants councils—in which you have regular meetings attended by representatives from workers and peasants who say, "Hey guys, this idea of transforming everything into peoples' communes isn't working. We can't build a furnace in every backyard." Saying to Stalin, "The industrialization process and the way you've pushed it through is not working. The result is mass famines and millions are dying and if the revolution is going to produce cannibalism in the Ukraine, we're not going along with it." I mean no structures existed for arguing that. And then the term enemies of the people was invented. But these are the people who are effectively wanting these changes.

For a variety of reasons, subjective and objective, that is what we were landed with, and as long as you had a strong workers movement in Western Europe, these things could be argued still. But with the weaknesses of the workers movement, you got total bourgeois domination. I'm not exaggerating; living in Britain today is really depressing. I know it's not great here in the US, either, but in Britain it's a tiny country now, effectively a vassal state of the United States—its culture wrecked, its political parties in general agreement with each other. The hegemony of the United States globally—economically the States is suffering and it's weakened by rivalries—but politically and militarily it remains very strong. So you have a Europe, which is effectively being Americanized, not to put too fine a point on it. Labour and conservatives are very similar to the Republican and Democratic parties. One has a layer of people who are people we could run into and have a drink with—not go beyond that, but certainly we could do that. Germany is virtually the same.

Look at Italy today. It's a complete mess. This is a country that produced the finest Marxist intellectuals in Western Europe—gone, dead. The Communist Party self-destructed. They had no option. It moved to the right. The trade unions, weak, politically and organizationally; and the basis on which this happened is neoliberalism, which is de-industrialization, which means—we don't want a strong working class.

The destruction of the mining communities in Britain was not because [Thatcher] was convinced that this was a demand, and we were going to have nuclear power or gas—it was not; it was to destroy the absolute foundations of the English labor movement, and [Conservatives] are very open about it. Seumas Milne has written a very good book, *The Enemy Within*, which maps out how Thatcher destroyed the miners' community, which is why many miners were celebrating when she died. The only victory they had was her death.

The debates in the *The Stalinist Legacy* are all about what I've been talking about—debates which

erupted after the Stalinization of the Soviet Union in one form or another. Not popular debates, but debates between people trying to analyze what had happened, people who refused to go to the right. One thing that unifies all the contributors to this collection is that none of them moved towards the right. They said, "Okay. It's a screw-up, but there's a lot to fight for." I think that is still the case. However bad times are, one doesn't give up because what do you give up for? For a better world? No. And this also I think explains the hatred with which the media still treats anything mildly radical. It's much worse now. The time when the Western media was more diverse and allowed more space to dissenting voices and why books like this were published by mainstream houses, one reason for it was that they wanted to show the Soviet Union and the Eastern Europeans, "Look, this is what democracy means." Now they don't need to show anyone. Why should they bother allowing divergent dissenting voices?

The Economist of course symbolizes this, and you have these two issues of the Economist, one cover in praise of Margaret Thatcher and one cover with Hugo Chávez's picture saying "Chávez's rotten legacy." And the rotten legacy is what? That he was using state money to push through a radical social democratic program. Even that is now unacceptable, and that is what the culture tells us day in and day out—an alternative is not possible, and you see the effect of this in what is going on in the mainstream capitalist world. You have the Wall Street crash in 2008, bankruptcy, financialization, neoliberal ideas, neoliberal politics.

People blame the banks, concentrating their fire on the banks—which is of course totally correct—but miss out the fact that the people who gave the bankers these powers were the politicians. That it was a combined ruling class. It wasn't just a few bankers going crazy and saying "Hey, should we do this as well? Should we do futures or just do retail banking?" It wasn't that. It was: this is the way that capitalism is going to go. And they decided effectively to destroy the workers movement—not openly, not through brutality, but defeating strikes and moving production overseas.

Someone once asked me, "What do you think about the American working class now?" And I said the bulk of it is working in China. That is what is happening. It wasn't at all necessary, but it happened to maintain and preserve capitalist profits in the countries, a combination of financialization and using reserve armies of labor in huge third world countries.

This process has not played out as yet, neither in China nor India. There the game is not over. It has barely started, because you now have the largest proletariat in the world in China. You have large numbers of Western countries, if not the bulk of the continents, dependent on cheap commodities from China, and if that blows, which it could well do in the next ten years in some shape or form—or to be more pessimistic, twenty years—the effect of that is going to be global. Have no doubt about it.

Likewise in India, it's not a settled, stable state, and what you are not having in China and India are what they all said was going to happen, that of course we will have European development replicated in China and India, peasants coming into the town, the creation of a new, wonderful urban civilization based on democracy, this that and the other—like hell it is. In fact the Chinese demonstrated very concretely that there is no link between democracy and capitalism, that you can run an extremely dynamic capitalist state without giving an inch to democracy or democratic rights to anyone.

So this one central theme of bourgeois theology throughout the twentieth century, that democracy and capitalism go together, that dictatorship and communism or socialism go together—it's absolute rubbish, but it's rubbish based on historical facts of course for which we are still paying the price. The way they won these countries back to capital and Western investments was essentially through maneuvers and negotiations. The Chinese did their own version by saying, "We are going to

introduce capitalism under our own control.” Whether you like them or not that is what they are doing and it’s true, the state has much more control over what is happening in China.

In Russia the party and bureaucracy, totally bankrupted, had no way of looking forward to the future. They just caved in. They didn’t even ask anything in return, not even the disbandment of NATO, which they could have demanded, saying we’re going to disband the Warsaw Pact, let’s do this for starters to show our goodwill. We’re going to disband the Warsaw Pact, you disband NATO, then we will talk about what will happen in East Germany. No, no, no, no—it was not there. It was on their knees before the West saying, “We love you, we really want to be like you. Help us.” And this happened virtually all over Eastern Europe.

There’s a very interesting passage in Trotsky’s book—which was published here as *The Revolution Betrayed*, but is actually titled *Where Is Russia Going?*—in which he said that there are two choices facing Russia in the foreseeable future: either it moves towards socialism and democracy—socialist democracy—or sections of the bureaucracy will basically sell out and become capitalists, private capitalists as we know them. This was written in the early 1930s. It was pretty much vindicated, because a lot of these joker mafia-millionaires you see creating mayhem on the streets of New York and London, or their agents, most of them were members—or in the case of the Russian billionaires in London who own football clubs and newspapers and stuff—quite a lot of them were activists in the Young Communist League in Russia, that’s their background. And they talk about it. They say, “Yeah, but we did learn how to run organizations.”

Despite the 2008 crisis, nowhere in Europe or North America has there been any attempt by any mainstream party, center left or center Right, to say enough is enough. This can’t go on because our people are suffering and we are not—just a simple thing—we are not going to allow the rich to benefit permanently—not to pay taxes, not to have their special bank accounts in safe havens, not to rob, to steal, to pay themselves huge bonuses. We are not going to allow these. Quite honestly, what I’m saying is not even that radical, it is capitalist legality. But they won’t even legalize their own system properly, because they are fearful that if the state begins to intervene again people might get encouraged to demand more. It could change the political situation. It could lead to a change in consciousness. Better not to go in that direction. So the direction they are going on is more of the same; just carry on doing what we were doing, and this is creating mayhem.

Yesterday, in New York, I ran into one of the theorists of this mayhem, Michael Hart, and I said, “Europe is in a really bad state,” and he said, “But why is being ungovernable bad?” I said, “Being ungovernable is bad because if there is no Left or progressive organization, the people who benefit from this ungovernability are by and large the Right.” I took him through what’s happening in Europe. I said, “That’s what happens. You think a bunch of clowns have won in Italy; the guy is a clown but he’s a sinister clown.” It’s not an innocent thing. The ideology behind all of this is elitist and quite right wing. Just like the pirate parties in Germany and in Sweden, it’s not innocent, and quite a lot of them are already being infiltrated by dangerous people. In Greece, the Golden Dawn is a Nazi organization—there’s no two ways about it.

In France, you have a huge social and political crisis at the moment. The large demonstrations that take place organized by the right and the Catholic Church are against gay marriages. A million people marched in Paris against gay marriage, and against gay weddings, which had been legalized. This is a country that is supposed to be secular. This is a country that bans Muslim women from wearing the hijab; and they are showing their secularity in their republicanness by marching a million people out in the streets—a million against gays. And there is no march, no demonstration against the huge unemployment figures, against the total failure of the Socialist Party.

It’s true, I think the Left is going to organize in France. There should be this week, a big

demonstration for a new republic, a sixth republic. We've seen how many people that gets. I don't think there are going to be a million coming out saying, "Get rid of this entire corrupt structure. Let's have a new constituent assembly to prepare a new constitution which takes the presidential powers away, gives powers back to parliament, not one semi-monarchical president." It's a good thing the Left is doing this, and we'll see what happens. (It's not the center Left, it's the Far Left and its allies who are doing this, but good, it's at least doing something.) But within mainstream politics there is no movement at all, and this I think is going to lead to much more of the unpleasantness that we've seen.

And so when I am asked to speak all over Europe, which I am often, I say, "The solution is socialism." I don't mean this in an abstract way, a utopian socialism. No, I mean the state and working-class people and public-sector workers have to do something to safeguard their interests—the interests of the poor, the interests of the unemployed, the interest of kids who can't afford to pay for their education. The number of working-class kids going into universities all over Europe has come right down. Who is going to defend them?

So that is the level of the debate, and that is why there is so much hatred and anger—in fear of Chávez—because I've written about him at length. I knew him very well and he was very clear in what he was doing. It was essentially a left socialist democratic program. I mean they used rhetoric—"this is a revolution"—fine, good, but effectively that's what it was. And that is the example they [American and European] ruling class really wanted to wipe out. Not permitted—verboten.

It's astonishing, the uniformity of views and opinions about Chávez in the American and European media—virtually the same. In Britain it is slightly different—we still have the *Guardian*. But in France *Le Monde* devoted three pages of pure poison. *El Pais*, the same. The Germans are marginally more nuanced. The American press was beyond belief, but then we know that, and the American television networks likewise. This is why no alternative is permitted. This is why we have to struggle in small and big ways for that alternative, because quite honestly if we don't, the people who are organizing all over the place in different ways, whether it's through the church and religion, or openly as semi-fascist or right-wing populist, it's the Right that's on the move. They are on the march and the Left is extremely weak, and one reason the Left is weak is because it hangs onto the coattails of the Center Left in my opinion.

Look at this country. Ninety percent of the things Obama is doing, had they been done by Bush there would have been uproar. If Bush had arrogated powers to kill any American citizen it would have effectively put civil liberties on the agenda of American politics. There would have been an up roar if there had been a hunger strike of Guantánamo prisoners under Bush. In fact, Bush released more Guantánamo prisoners than Obama has done—just a fact by the way. There have been more drone attacks on Pakistan under Obama in the first two years than throughout the Bush term.

American liberalism is just dying on its feet. They can't see this happening, and what this creates is effectively a precedent. The next time a Republican gets elected and does this, you won't have a leg to stand on—not you people here, but I mean those who have just decided to back Obama for whatever reason. He's a Democrat, I guess, and he's mixed race, and he looks good, but I mean, this is not a sufficient reason. Politics has gone out of the window.

In a different way, these politics are being refracted in Europe. I do not exaggerate. You know this vacuous slogan by Obama "Yes we can," which even he in private admits is vacuous? It was used by an Italian leader of the left party during the last campaign, in English to Italians, "Yes we can." Looking at it, you say, what the hell is going on? Have you got nothing else to say? And the answer is, "No they haven't." They haven't. All they want to do is run the system, make money, and so it's, "Yes we can." We can make more money. If we are in power the people backing us will benefit.

Berlusconi's benefitted for a long time.

Exactly the same thing is happening in Britain. Tony Blair has turned out to be one of the more corrupt politicians we've seen. He's currently on the payroll of the Kazakhstan government, and here let me tell you an interesting story. The Kazakhstan PR people who run that country's public relations rang up Clinton who is also on that payroll, and they said, "We need some Europeans," and Clinton said, "Why don't you try my friend Blair?" They said, "Fine, great." So they rang up Blair, and Blair's office spoke to them and they said, "We would like Blair to come and meet our president and be seen with him and give him advice," and Blair's agents said, "How much?" And they said, "Well, a million." He said, "We'll give you a reply," and Blair's people said "No." This is all public, by the way. They rang up Clinton and said, "You told us Tony Blair was willing to come on and you know he's fucking saying no." Clinton said, "How much did you offer him?" They said, "A million." He said, "Come on, pull it up. Pull it up a bit." So they said, "How much should we offer him?" Clinton said, "You know, I'm not saying you should give him what you gave me, but at least offer him five." So they offered him five, deal done. Blair flies off to Kazakhstan with his old advisors from New Labour in tow.

Meanwhile, they all unite again to commemorate Margaret Thatcher's legacy. Just one word on Thatcher's legacy—this legacy could have been destroyed. It was never popular, by the way. If you look at the votes with which she was elected, it was always a minority vote, never a majority vote in the country. So the legacy was up for being destroyed. New Labour effectively built on that legacy and created the current structure in Britain. It was Labour that did that. Until this day, whenever the Tories are going to privatize something and introduce more neoliberal measures, Labour can't speak. When they get up, the Tories say, but hang on, these papers we've got from the civil servants, you wrote them, you guys. You approved them, and now you've got the nerve to attack us.

There's a huge anger in Britain that Thatcher was being given a public funeral at public expense as if she was some great entity. Huge anger. Some Conservative MPs privately told the media without being named, "Well look, we didn't want to do this, but the entire plan for the funeral was set up under Gordon Brown's government. We are just implementing it," and this was absolutely true. So Labour even wanted to send her off like this.

So the lesson from all this is bad things are happening, and will happen, and will carry on happening, and we are living in bad times to a certain extent, but we must never give up because you know to give up, to despair, what's the point of doing that? I mean despair is a very passive emotion. It creates passivity, whereas hope even in bad times is important to keep your minds active. It's very important, and you know, you think about midpoints of the twentieth century, were they worse than now? Yes, they bloody well were, when you had most of Europe under the Nazis, Russia under hard Stalinism. The reforms came after 1956. But that's what you had. The midnight of our century is what Victor Serge called it. It's not as bad as that now, so one has to have a sense of perspective. But it means that the need to exploit and use every space, every date, and struggle forward. We have some advantages which we didn't have in those periods.

Politics becomes extremely important. The Middle East explosions teach us that. If you think that just having uprisings on its own is enough, it isn't, because ultimately people have to choose what's on offer, and so they choose Islamist parties, socially, politically, economically, conservative Islamist parties, partially because they were repressed by the dictatorships, but mostly because there is nothing else on offer. In both Tunisia and Egypt it's a mess, and the lesson of this mess is not to say the uprisings were wrong—far from it. It is to say politics remains extremely important. Without politics remaining in command, or by hiding one's politics, you can't move forward, and others take over.

This is a quite popular theme, even a semi-anarchist theme (though that was not the problem in Egypt by the way). In the Occupy movements it's a similar thing—no demands. But if you don't make any demands, however modest, you can't move forward, you can't win over other people. You have to have at least a minimum charter of ten demands—"This is what we need today, the country needs today. We're prepared to fight for it." To pose no demands at all is to give up, and then you are forced to celebrate on the Web or on paper your successes, and the successes were that you occupied a space, which was great and we all supported it, but on its own it's not enough. Observing anniversaries of it every year doesn't help either, because it shows up what our weaknesses are. I will stop there; you are getting nervous.

Tariq Ali

Excerpts from the discussion:

Do you know of any historical cases of high unemployment similar to today?

The 1920s and 1930s were periods of huge unemployment and a breakdown of the social order. This breakdown in parts of Europe created a big struggle between the Left and the Right, in which the Right won in Germany. That's what the struggle was about, a different dispensation. The victory of fascism in Germany was a huge disaster for the European working class, but that grew out of two things. One, the depression, and prior to that, the way in which the Germans were treated after World War I—punished, not allowed their own sovereignty, completely kept under foreign control. That created German nationalism. Then came the depression. You had large number of people on the streets unemployed, inflation rose to amazing heights, and the result was a confrontation in which the German capitalist class backed the fascists because, they said, a Bolshevik victory in Germany would finish us all. In the United States, you had an aggressive rise of the labor movement, in the fight for trade unions, against the post-depression measures. Factories were occupied.

The working class in the US, in my opinion—not all of it, but its most advanced elements—were politicized in the 1930s like at no other time. The New Deal was a response to that pressure from below. It was a response to the existence of the Soviet Union, too, which on paper had no unemployment. People saw it as a model—whether we like it or not. It was seen as that, and the bourgeoisie saw it as a model. Movements from below created that conjuncture. But even the New Deal measures were not, on their own, enough to stave off the depression. This is not often discussed. What finally helped American capitalism to recover was the war. The Second World War revived the American economy much more than the measures that were taken during the depression. It's a horrific thought, but it's something that we now know. The military-industrial link still to this day keeps a lot of American industry going.

What accounts for the ultimate failure of the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalinism?

In my opinion—and of course there is tremendous debate about this—it was a combination of two factors. One, of course, is that the revolution was isolated. Second, the working class and the forces that made the revolution were either exhausted or dead, killed during the civil war. What's often not known, but some scholars have told us and found evidence that a lot of the most active Russian workers, the most politically advance, went into the Red Army to fight off the Whites. They needed these elements. Lots of them were killed. The combination of that created a mood in which people were ready almost to accept anything for a quiet life, politically. For me, the central problem with

the revolution was that it failed to institutionalize soviets and the instruments of workers' democracy that did exist. This was the most original form within the political structures of revolutionary Russia that were thrown up. Tsarism was an absolutist dictatorship.

The soviets were a response by workers and other sections of the community, to create a popular sovereignty. Lenin understood that very well. It was only when the Bolsheviks had won a majority in the Petrograd and Moscow soviets that they went for power. They said, now we have a majority. They understood the need for this. This, for reasons that I've outlined, disappeared. So I think political democracy is absolutely key for the success of socialism and socialist upheavals and revolution. That's the key lesson that has to be learned. Economically we'll have problems—who won't? But unless you have political democracy, which is more meaningful now than capitalist democracy—and we see what it is producing—I think we're lost. It is on the level of political structure that socialism has to be taken forward. I always say that, not demagogically, but because I mean it. The number of times capitalism has failed? Dozens. Socialism has failed once. And therefore we can never have it again? We will have it again.

P.S.

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