

The Trajectory of Historical Capitalism and Marxism's Tricontinental Vocation

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Contents

- [The Long Rise of Capitalism](#)
- [Monopoly Capitalism: The \(...\)](#)
- [The Initiative Passes to \(...\)](#)
- [Is Generalized Monopoly \(...\)](#)
- [Marxism's Tricontinental \(...\)](#)
- [Ending the Crisis of Capitalis](#)
- [The Indispensable Internationa](#)

The Long Rise of Capitalism

The long history of capitalism is composed of three distinct, successive phases: (1) a lengthy preparation—the transition from the tributary mode, the usual form of organization of pre-modern societies—which lasted eight centuries, from 1000 to 1800; (2) a short period of maturity (the nineteenth century), during which the “West” affirmed its domination; (3) the long “decline” caused by the “Awakening of the South” (to use the title of my book, published in 2007) in which the peoples and their states regained the major initiative in transforming the world—the first wave having taken place in the twentieth century. This struggle against an imperialist order that is inseparable from the global expansion of capitalism is itself the potential agent in the long road of transition, beyond capitalism, toward socialism. In the twenty-first century, there are now the beginnings of a second wave of independent initiatives by the peoples and states of the South.

The internal contradictions that were characteristic of all the advanced societies in the pre-modern world—and not only those specific to “feudal” Europe—account for the successive waves of the social-technological innovation that were to constitute capitalist modernity.

The oldest wave came from China, where changes began in the Sung era (eleventh century) and developing further in the Ming and Qing epochs gave China a head start in terms of technological inventiveness and the social productivity of collective work—not to be surpassed by Europe until the nineteenth century. The “Chinese” wave was to be followed by a “Middle Eastern” wave, which took place in the Arabo-Persian Caliphate and then via the Crusades and their aftermath, in the towns of Italy.

The last wave concerns the long transition of the ancient tributary world to the modern capitalist world. This began in earnest in the Atlantic part of Europe following the conquest/encounter with the Americas, and for three centuries (1500-1800) took the form of mercantilism. Capitalism, which gradually came to dominate the world, is the product of this last wave of social-technological innovation. The European (“Western”) form of historical capitalism that emerged in Atlantic and Central Europe, in its offspring in the United States, and later, in Japan, developed its own

characteristics—notably a mode of accumulation based on the dispossession, first, of the peasants and then of the peoples in the peripheries, who were integrated as dependencies into its global system. This historical form is therefore inseparable from the centers/peripheries contradiction that it endlessly constructs, reproduces, and deepens.

Historical capitalism took on its final form at the end of the eighteenth century with the English Industrial Revolution that invented the new “machine factory” (together with the creation of the new industrial proletariat) and the French Revolution that gave rise to modern politics.

Mature capitalism developed over the short period that marked the apogee of this system in the nineteenth century. Capital accumulation then took on its definitive form and became the basic law that governed society. From the beginning, this form of accumulation was constructive (it enabled a prodigious and continuous acceleration in the productivity of social labor). But it was, at the same time, destructive. Marx observed that accumulation destroys the two bases of wealth: the human being (victim of commodity alienation) and nature.

In my analyses of historical capitalism I particularly stressed a third dimension of accumulation’s destructiveness: the material and cultural dispossession of the dominated peoples of the periphery—whom Marx had somewhat overlooked. This was no doubt because, in the short period when Marx was producing his works, Europe seemed almost exclusively dedicated to the requirements of internal accumulation. Marx thus relegated this dispossession to a temporary phase of “primitive accumulation” that I, on the contrary, have described as permanent.

The fact remains that during its short mature period, capitalism fulfilled undeniable progressive functions. It created the conditions that made it possible and necessary for it to be overtaken by socialism/communism, both on the material level and on that of the new political and cultural consciousness that accompanied it. Socialism (and even more so, communism) is not, as some have thought, to be conceived as a superior “mode of production” because it is capable of accelerating the development of the forces of production and of associating them with an “equitable” distribution of income. Socialism is something else again: a higher stage in the development of human civilization. It is not, therefore, by chance that the working-class movement took root in the exploited population and became committed to the fight for socialism, as evident in nineteenth century Europe, and expressed in *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. Nor is it by chance that this challenge took the form of the first socialist revolution in history: the Paris Commune in 1871.

Monopoly Capitalism: The Beginning of the Long Decline

At the end of the nineteenth century, capitalism entered into its long period of decline. I mean by this that the destructive dimensions of accumulation now won out, at a growing rate, over its progressive, constructive dimension. This qualitative transformation of capitalism took shape with the setting up of new production monopolies (no longer only in the areas of trade and colonial conquest, as in the mercantilist period) at the end of the nineteenth century. This was in response to the first long structural crisis of capitalism that started in the 1870s, shortly after the defeat of the Paris Commune. The emergence of monopoly capitalism (as famously highlighted by Hilferding and Hobson) showed that classic, freely competitive capitalism, and indeed capitalism itself, had by now “had its day,” and become “obsolete.” The bell sounded for the necessary and possible expropriation of the expropriators. This decline found its expression in the first wave of wars and revolutions that marked the history of the twentieth century. Lenin was therefore right in describing monopoly capitalism as the “highest stage of capitalism.”

But, optimistically, Lenin thought that this first long crisis would be the last, with the socialist

revolution on the agenda. History later proved that capitalism was able to overcome this crisis, at the cost of two world wars, and was even able to adapt to the setbacks imposed on it by the Russian and Chinese Revolutions and national liberation in Asia and Africa. But after the short period of monopoly capitalist revival (1945-1975), there followed a second, long structural crisis of the system, starting in the 1970s. Capital reacted to this renewed challenge by a qualitatively new transformation that took the form of what I have described as “generalized monopoly capitalism.”

A host of major questions arise from this interpretation of the “long decline” of capitalism, which concern the nature of the “revolution” that was the order of the day. Could the “long decline” of historical monopoly capitalism be synonymous with the “long transition” to socialism/communism? Under what conditions?

From 1500 (the beginning of the Atlantic mercantilist form of the transition to mature capitalism) to 1900 (the beginning of the challenge to the unilateral logic of accumulation), the Westerners (Europeans, then North Americans and later, the Japanese) remained the masters of the game. They alone shaped the structures of the new world of historical capitalism. The peoples and nations of the periphery who had been conquered and dominated did, of course, resist as well as they could, but they were always defeated in the end and forced to adapt themselves to their subordinate status.

The domination of the Euro-Atlantic world was accompanied by its demographic explosion: the Europeans, who had constituted 18 percent of the planet’s population in 1500, represented 36 percent by 1900—increased by their descendants emigrating to the Americas and Australia. Without this massive emigration, the accumulation model of historical capitalism, based on the accelerated disappearance of the peasant world, would have simply been impossible. This is why the model cannot be reproduced in the peripheries of the system, which have no “Americas” to conquer. “Catching up” in the system being impossible, people of the peripheries have no alternative than to opt for a different development path.

The Initiative Passes to the Peoples and Nations of the Periphery

In 1871 the Paris Commune which, as mentioned, was the first socialist revolution, was also the last one to take place in a country that was part of the capitalist center. The twentieth century inaugurated—with the “awakening of the peoples of the peripheries”—a new chapter in history. Its first manifestations were the revolutions in Iran (1907), in Mexico (1910-1920), China (1911), and “semi-peripheral” Russia in 1905. This awakening of the peoples and nations of the periphery was carried forward in the Revolution of 1917, the Arabo-Muslim Nahda, the constitution of the Young Turk movement (1908), the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, and the formation of the Indian Congress (1885).

In reaction to the first long crisis of historical capitalism (1875-1950), the peoples of the periphery began to liberate themselves around 1914-1917, mobilizing themselves under the flags of socialism (Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba) or of national liberation (India, Algeria) associated to different degrees with progressive social reforms. They took the path to industrialization, hitherto forbidden by the domination of the (old) “classic” imperialism, forcing the latter to “adjust” to this first wave of independent initiatives of the peoples, nations, and states of the peripheries. From 1917 to the time when the “Bandung project” (1955-1980) ran out of steam and Sovietism collapsed in 1990, these were the initiatives that dominated the scene.

I do not see the two long crises of aging monopoly capitalism in terms of long Kondratieff cycles, but as two stages in both the decline of historical globalized capitalism and the possible transition to socialism. Nor do I see the 1914-1945 period exclusively as “the 30 years” war for the succession to

“British hegemony.” I see this period also as the long war conducted by the imperialist centers against the first awakening of the peripheries (East and South).

This first wave of the awakening of the peoples of the periphery wore out for many reasons, including its own internal limitations and contradictions, and imperialism’s success in finding new ways of dominating the world system (through the control of technological invention, access to resources, the globalized financial system, communication and information technology, weapons of mass destruction).

Nevertheless, capitalism underwent a second long crisis that began in the 1970s, exactly one hundred years after the first one. The reactions of capital to this crisis were the same as it had had to the previous one: reinforced concentration, which gave rise to generalized monopoly capitalism, globalization (“liberal”), and financialization. But the moment of triumph—the second “*belle époque*,” from 1990 to 2008, echoing the first “*belle époque*,” from 1890 to 1914—of the new collective imperialism of the Triad (the United States, Europe, and Japan) was indeed brief. A new epoch of chaos, wars, and revolutions emerged. In this situation, the second wave of the awakening of the nations of the periphery (which had already started), now refused to allow the collective imperialism of the Triad to maintain its dominant positions, other than through the military control of the planet. The Washington establishment, by giving priority to this strategic objective, proves that it is perfectly aware of the real issues at stake in the struggles and decisive conflicts of our epoch, as opposed to the naïve vision of the majority currents in Western “alterworldism.”

Is Generalized Monopoly Capitalism the Last Phase of Capitalism?

Lenin described the imperialism of the monopolies as the “highest stage of capitalism.” I have described imperialism as a “permanent phase of capitalism” in the sense that globalized historical capitalism has built up, and never ceases from reproducing and deepening, the center/periphery polarization. The first wave of constituting monopolies at the end of the nineteenth century certainly involved a qualitative transformation in the fundamental structures of the capitalist mode of production. Lenin deduced from this that the socialist revolution was on the agenda, and Rosa Luxemburg believed that the alternatives were now “socialism or barbarism.” Lenin was certainly too optimistic, having underestimated the devastating effects of the imperialist rent—and the transfer associated with it—on the revolution from the West (the centers) to the East (the peripheries).

The second wave of the centralization of capital, which took place in the last third of the twentieth century, constituted a second qualitative transformation of the system, which I have described as “generalized monopolies.” From now on, they not only commanded the heights of the modern economy; they also succeeded in imposing their direct control over the whole production system. The small and medium enterprises (and even the large ones outside the monopolies), such as the farmers, were literally dispossessed, reduced to the status of sub-contractors, with their upstream and downstream operations, and subjected to rigid control by the monopolies.

At this highest phase of the centralization of capital, its ties with a living organic body—the bourgeoisie—have broken. This is an immensely important change: the historical bourgeoisie, constituted of families rooted locally, has given way to an anonymous oligarchy/plutocracy that controls the monopolies, in spite of the dispersion of the title deeds of their capital. The range of financial operations invented over the last decades bears witness to this supreme form of alienation: the speculator can now sell what he does not even possess, so that the principle of property is reduced to a status that is little less than derisory.

The function of socially productive labor has disappeared. The high degree of alienation had already attributed a productive virtue to money ("money makes little ones"). Now alienation has reached new heights: it is time ("time is money") that by its virtue alone "produces profit." The new bourgeois class that responds to the requirements of the reproduction of the system has been reduced to the status of "waged servants" (precarious, to boot), even when they are, as members of the upper sectors of the middle classes, privileged people who are very well paid for their "work."

This being so, should one not conclude that capitalism has had its day? There is no other possible answer to the challenge: the monopolies must be nationalized. This is a first, unavoidable step toward a possible socialization of their management by workers and citizens. Only this will make it possible to progress along the long road to socialism. At the same time, it will be the only way of developing a new macro economy that restores a genuine space for the operations of small and medium enterprises. If that is not done, the logic of domination by abstract capital can produce nothing but the decline of democracy and civilization, to a "generalized apartheid" at the world level.

Marxism's Tricontinental Vocation

My interpretation of historical capitalism stresses the polarization of the world (the contrast of center/periphery) produced by the historical form of the accumulation of capital. This perspective questions the visions of the "socialist revolution," and, more broadly, the transition to socialism, that the historical Marxisms have developed. The "revolution"—or the transition—before us is not necessarily the one on which these historical visions were based. Nor are the strategies for surmounting capitalism the same.

It has to be recognized that what the most important social and political struggles of the twentieth century tried to challenge was not so much capitalism in itself as the permanent imperialist dimension of actually existing capitalism. The issue is therefore whether this transfer of the center of gravity of the struggles necessarily calls capitalism into question, at least potentially.

Marx's thinking associates "scientific" clarity in the analysis of reality with social and political action (the class struggle in its broadest sense) aimed at "changing the world." Confronting the basics—i.e., the discovery of the real source of surplus value produced by the exploitation of social labor by capital—is indispensable to this struggle. If this fundamental and lucid contribution of Marx is abandoned, a double failure is inevitably the result. Any such abandonment of the theory of exploitation (law of value) reduces the analysis of reality to that of appearances only, a way of thinking that is limited by its abject submission to the requirements of commodification, itself engendered by the system. Similarly, such abandonment of the labor value-based critique of the system annihilates the effectiveness of strategies and struggles to change the world, which are thereby conceived within this alienating framework, the "scientific" claims of which have no real basis.

Nevertheless, it is not enough just to cling to the lucid analysis formulated by Marx. This is not only because "reality" itself changes, and there are always "new" things to be taken into account in the development of the critique of the real world that started with Marx. But more fundamentally, it is because, as we know, the analysis that Marx put forward in *Capital* was left incomplete. In the planned sixth volume of this work (which was never written), Marx proposed treating the globalization of capitalism. This now has to be done by others, which is why I have dared to advocate the formulation of the "law of globalized value," restoring the place of the unequal development (through the center/periphery polarization) that is inseparable from the global expansion of

historical capitalism. In this formulation, “imperialist rent” is integrated into the whole process of the production and circulation of capital and the distribution of the surplus value. This rent is at the origin of the challenge: it accounts for why the struggles for socialism in the imperialist centers have faded, and it highlights the anti-imperialist dimensions of the struggles in the peripheries against the system of capitalist/imperialist globalization.

I shall not return here to discuss what an exegesis of Marx’s texts on this question would suggest. Marx, who is nothing less than a giant, with his critical acumen and the incredible subtlety of his thought, must have had at least an intuition that he was coming up against a serious question here. This is suggested by his observations on the disastrous effects of the alignment of the English working class with the chauvinism associated with the colonial exploitation of Ireland. Marx was therefore not surprised that it was in France—less developed than England economically, but more advanced in political consciousness—that the first socialist revolution took place. He, like Engels, also hoped that the “backwardness” of Germany would enable an original form of advance to develop, fusing together both the bourgeois and the socialist revolutions.

Lenin went still further. He emphasized the qualitative transformation that was involved in the passage to monopoly capitalism, and he drew the necessary conclusions: that capitalism had ceased to be a necessary progressive stage in history and that it was now “putrefied” (Lenin’s own term). In other words, it had become “obsolete” and “senile” (my terms), so that the passing to socialism was on the agenda, which was both necessary and possible. He conceived and implemented, in this framework, a revolution that began in the periphery (Russia, the “weak link”). Then, seeing the failure of his hopes in a European revolution, he conceived of the transfer of the revolution to the East, where he saw that the fusion of the objectives of the anti-imperialist struggle with those of the struggle against capitalism had become possible.

But it was Mao who rigorously formulated the complex and contradictory nature of the objectives in the transition to the socialism that were to be pursued in these conditions. “Marxism” (or, more exactly, the historical Marxisms) was confronted by a new challenge—one which did not exist in the most lucid political consciousness of the nineteenth century, but which arose because of the transfer of the initiative to transform the world to the peoples, nations, and states of the periphery.

Imperialist rent not “only” benefited the monopolies of the dominant center (in the form of super profits), it was also the basis of the reproduction of society as a whole, in spite of its evident class structure and the exploitation of its workers. This is what Perry Anderson analyzed so clearly as “Western Marxism,” which he described as “the product of defeat” (the abandonment of the socialist perspective)—and which is relevant here. This Marxism was then condemned, having renounced “changing the world” and committing itself to “academic” studies, without political impact. The liberal drift of social democracy—and its rallying both to the U.S. ideology of “consensus” and to Atlanticism at the service of the imperialist domination of the world—were the consequences.

“Another world” (a very vague phrase to indicate a world committed to the long road toward socialism) is obviously impossible unless it provides a solution to the problems of the peoples in the periphery—only 80 percent of the world population! “Changing the world” therefore means changing the living conditions of this majority. Marxism, which analyzes the reality of the world in order to make the forces acting for change as effective as possible, necessarily acquires a decisive tricontinental (Africa, Asia, Latin America) vocation.

How is this related to the terrain of struggle that confronts us? What I propose, in answer to this question, is an analysis of the transformation of imperialist monopoly capitalism (“senile”) into generalized monopoly capitalism (still more senile for this reason). This is a qualitative transformation in response to the second long crisis of the system that began in the 1970s, and that

has still not been resolved. From this analysis, I draw two main conclusions: (1) The imperialist system is transformed into the collective imperialism of the Triad, in reaction to the industrialization of the peripheries, imposed by the victories of the first wave of their “awakening.” This occurs together with the implementation by the new imperialism of new means of control of the world system, based on the military control of the planet and its resources, the super-protection of the exclusive appropriation of technology by the oligopolies and their control over the world financial system. There is an accompanying transformation of the class structures of contemporary capitalism with the emergence of an exclusive dominant oligarchy.

“Western Marxism” has ignored the decisive transformation represented by the emergence of generalized monopoly capitalism. The intellectuals of the new Western radical left refuse to measure the decisive effects of the concentration of the oligopolies that now dominate the production system as a whole, in the same way that they dominate all political, social, cultural, and ideological life. Having eliminated the term “socialism” (and, a fortiori, “communism”) from their language, they no longer envisage the necessary expropriation of the expropriators, but only an impossible “other capitalism” with what they call a “human face.” The drift of the “post” discourses (postmodernist, post-Marxist, etc.) is the inevitable result. Negri, for example, says not a word concerning this decisive transformation that, for me, is at the heart of the issues of our time.

The newspeak of these crazy ravings should be seen in the literal sense of the term, as an illusory imaginary detached from all reality. In French, *le peuple* (and better still, *les classes populaires*), as in Spanish *el pueblo* (*los clases populares*), is not a synonym for “everyone.” It refers to the dominated and exploited classes and therefore also emphasizes their diversity (of the kinds of relationship they have with capital), which makes it possible to build effective concrete strategies and to make them into active change agents. This is in contrast to the English equivalent: “people” does not have this meaning, being synonymous with *les gens* (everyone) and, in Spanish, *la gente*. Newspeak ignores these concepts (marked by Marxism and formulated in French or Spanish) and substitutes for them some vague word like Negri’s “multitude.” It is a philosophical delirium to attribute to this word (which adds nothing but subtracts a lot) a so-called analytical power, by invoking its use by Spinoza, who lived at a time and in conditions which have nothing to do with our own.

The fashionable political thought of new Western radical leftists also ignores the imperialist character of the domination of the generalized monopolies, replacing it with the empty term of “Empire” (Negri). This Western-centrism, taken to the extreme, omits any reflection on the imperialist rent without which neither the mechanisms of social reproduction nor the challenges that they thus constitute can be understood.

In contrast, Mao presented a view that was both profoundly revolutionary and “realistic” (scientific, lucid) about the terms in which the challenge should be analyzed, making it possible to deduce effective strategies for successive advances along the long road of transition to socialism. For this reason, he distinguishes and connects the three dimensions of reality: peoples, nations, states.

The people (popular classes) “want the revolution.” This means that it is possible to construct a hegemonic bloc that brings together the different dominated and exploited classes, as opposed to the one that enables the reproduction of the system of the domination of imperialist capitalism, exercised through the comprador hegemonic bloc and the state at its service.

Mention of nations refers to the fact that imperialist domination denies the dignity of the “nations” (call them what you will), forged by the history of the societies of the peripheries. Such domination has systematically destroyed all that give the nations their originality—in the name of “Westernization” and the proliferation of cheap junk. The liberation of the people is therefore

inseparable from that of the nations to which they belong. And this is the reason why Maoism replaced the short slogan, "Workers of all countries, unite!" by a more embracing one: "Workers of all countries, oppressed peoples, unite!" Nations want their "liberation," seen as being complementary to the struggle of the people and not conflictual with it. The liberation in question is not, therefore, the restoration of the past—the illusion fostered by a culturalist attachment to the past—but the invention of the future. This is based on the radical transformation of the nation's historical heritage, rather than the artificial importation of a false "modernity." The culture that is inherited and subjected to the test of transformation is understood here as political culture—care being taken not to use the undifferentiated term of "culture" (encompassing "religious" and innumerable other forms), which neither means anything, because genuine culture is not abstract, nor is a historical invariant.

The reference to the state is based on the necessary recognition of the relative autonomy of its power in its relations with the hegemonic bloc that is the base of its legitimacy, even if this is popular and national. This relative autonomy cannot be ignored as long as the state exists, that is, at least for the whole duration of the transition to communism. It is only after this that we can think of a "stateless society"—not before. This is not only because the popular and national advances must be protected from the permanent aggression of imperialism, which still dominates the world, but also, and perhaps above all, because "to advance on the long transition" also requires "developing productive forces." In other words, the goal is to achieve that which imperialism has been preventing in the countries of the periphery, and to obliterate the heritage of world polarization, which is inseparable from the world expansion of historical capitalism. The program is not the same as "catching up" through the imitation of central capitalism—a catching up which is, incidentally, impossible and above all, undesirable. It imposes a different conception of "modernization/industrialization," based on the genuine participation of the popular classes in the process of implementation, with immediate benefits for them at each stage as it advances. We must therefore reject the dominant reasoning that demands that people wait indefinitely until the development of the productive forces have finally created the conditions of a "necessary" passage to socialism. These forces must be developed right from the beginning with the prospect of constructing socialism. The power of the state is evidently at the heart of the conflicts between these contradictory requirements of "development" and "socialism."

"The states want independence." This must be seen as a twofold objective: independence (extreme form of autonomy) vis-à-vis the popular classes; independence from the pressures of the capitalist world system. The "bourgeoisie" (broadly speaking, the governing class in commanding positions of the state, whose ambitions always tend toward a bourgeois evolution) is both national and comprador. If circumstances enable them to increase their autonomy vis-à-vis dominant imperialism, they choose to "defend the national interest." But if circumstances do not so permit, they will opt for "comprador" submission to the requirements of imperialism. The "new governing class" (or "governing group") is still in an ambiguous position, even when it is based on a popular bloc, by the fact that it is animated by a "bourgeois" tendency, at least partially.

The correct articulation of reality at these three levels—peoples, nations, and states—conditions the success of the progress on the long road of the transition. It is a question of reinforcing the complementarity of the advances of the people, of the liberation of the nation, and of the achievements by the power of the state. But if contradictions between the popular agent and the state agent are allowed to develop, any advances are finally doomed.

There will be an impasse if one of these levels is not concerned about its articulation with the others. The abstract notion of the "people" as being the only entity that counts, and the thesis of the abstract "movement," capable of transforming the world without worrying about taking over power, are simply naïve. The idea of national liberation, "at all costs"—viewed as independent of the social

content of the hegemonic bloc—leads to the cultural illusion of irretrievable attachment to the past (political Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are examples) and is, in fact, powerless. This generates a notion of power, conceived as being capable of “attaining achievements” for the people, but which is, in fact, to be exercised without them. It thus leads to the drift to authoritarianism and the crystallization of a new bourgeoisie. The deviation of Sovietism, which evolved from a “capitalism without capitalists” (state capitalism) to a “capitalism with capitalists,” is the most tragic example of this.

Since peoples, nations, and states of the periphery do not accept the imperialist system, the “South” is the “storm zone,” one of permanent uprisings and revolts. Beginning in 1917, history has consisted mainly of these revolts and independent initiatives (in the sense of independence of the tendencies that dominate the existing imperialist capitalist system) of the peoples, nations, and states of the peripheries. It is these initiatives, despite their limits and contradictions, that have shaped the most decisive transformations of the contemporary world, far more than the progress of the productive forces and the relatively easy social adjustments that accompanied them in the heartlands of the system.

The second wave of independent initiatives of the countries of the South has begun. The “emerging” countries and others, like their peoples, are fighting the ways in which the collective imperialism of the Triad tries to perpetuate its domination. The military interventions of Washington and their subaltern NATO allies have also proved a failure. The world financial system is collapsing and, in its place, autonomous regional systems are in the process of being set up. The technological monopoly of the oligopolies has been thwarted.

Recovering control over natural resources is now the order of the day. The Andean nations, victims of the internal colonialism that succeeded foreign colonization, are making themselves felt on the political level.

The popular organizations and the parties of the radical left in struggle have already defeated some liberal programs (in Latin America) or are on the way to doing so. These initiatives, which are, first of all, fundamentally anti-imperialist, are potentially able to commit themselves along the long road to the socialist transition.

How do these two possible futures relate to each other? The “other world” that is being built is always ambiguous: it carries the worst and the best within it, both of them “possible” (there are no laws in history previous to history itself to give us an indication). A first wave of initiatives by the peoples, nations, and states of the periphery took place in the twentieth century, until 1980. Any analysis of its components makes no sense unless thought is given to the complementarities and conflicts on how the three levels relate to each other. A second wave of initiatives in the periphery has already started. Will it be more effective? Can it go further than the preceding one?

Ending the Crisis of Capitalism?

The oligarchies in power of the contemporary capitalist system are trying to restore the system as it was before the financial crisis of 2008. For this, they need to convince people through a “consensus” that does not challenge their supreme power. To succeed in this, they are prepared to make some rhetorical concessions about the ecological challenges (in particular about the question of the climate), green-washing their domination, and even hinting that they will carry out social reforms (the “war on poverty”) and political reforms (“good governance”).

To take part in this game of convincing people of the need to forge a new consensus—even defined

in terms that are clearly better—will end up in failure. Worse, still, it will prolong fatal illusions. This is because the response to the challenge raised by the crisis of the global system first requires the transformation of power relationships to the benefit of the workers, as well as of international relationships to the benefit of the peoples of the peripheries. The United Nations has organized a whole series of global conferences, which have yielded nothing—as one might have expected.

History has proved that this is a necessary requirement. The response to the first long crisis of aging capitalism took place between 1914 and 1950, mainly through the conflicts that opposed the peoples of the peripheries to the domination of the imperial powers and, to different degrees, through the internal social relationships benefiting the popular classes. In this way, they prepared the path for the three systems of the post-Second World War period: the really existing socialisms of that time, the national and popular regimes of Bandung, and the social-democrat compromise in the countries of the North, which had been made particularly necessary by the independent initiatives of the peoples of the peripheries.

In 2008 the second long crisis of capitalism moved into a new phase. Violent international conflicts have already begun and are visible: will they challenge the domination of the generalized monopolies, based on anti-imperialist positions? How do they relate to the social struggles of the victims of the austerity policies pursued by the dominant classes in response to the crisis? In other words, will the peoples employ a strategy of extricating themselves from a capitalism in crisis, instead of the strategy to extricate the system from its crisis, as pursued by the powers that be?

The ideologues serving power are running out of steam, making futile remarks about the “world after the crisis.” The CIA can only envisage a restoration of the system—attributing the greater participation of “emerging markets” in liberal globalization as to the detriment of Europe, rather than the United States. It is incapable of recognizing that the deepening crisis will not be “overcome,” except through violent international and social conflict. No one knows how it will turn out: it could be for the better (progress in the direction of socialism) or for the worse (world apartheid).

The political radicalization of the social struggles is the condition for overcoming their internal fragmentation and their exclusively defensive strategy (“safeguarding social benefits”). Only this will make it possible to identify the objectives needed for undertaking the long road to socialism. Only this will enable the “movements” to generate real empowerment.

The empowerment of the movements requires a framework of macro political and economic conditions that make their concrete projects viable. How to create these conditions? Here we come to the central question of the power of the state. Would a renewed state, genuinely popular and democratic, be capable of carrying out effective policies in the globalized conditions of the contemporary world? An immediate, negative response on the left has led to calls for initiatives to achieve a minimal global consensus, as a basis for universal political change, circumventing the state. This response and its corollary are proving fruitless. There is no other solution than to generate advances at the national level, perhaps reinforced by appropriate action at the regional level. They must aim at dismantling the world system (“delinking”) prior to eventual reconstruction, on a different social basis, with the prospect of going beyond capitalism. The principle is as valid for the countries of the South which, incidentally, have started to move in this direction in Asia and Latin America, as it is for the countries of the North where, alas, the need for dismantling the European institutions (and that of the euro) is not yet envisaged, even by the radical left.

The Indispensable Internationalism of the Workers and the Peoples

The limits of the advances made by the awakening of the South in the twentieth century and the exacerbation of the contradictions that resulted were the cause of the first liberation wave losing its impetus. This was greatly reinforced by the permanent hostility of the states in the imperialist center, which went to the extent of waging open warfare that—it has to be said—was supported, or at least accepted, by the peoples of the North. The benefits of the imperialist rent were certainly an important factor in this rejection of internationalism by the popular forces of the North. The communist minorities, who adopted another attitude, sometimes strongly so, nevertheless failed to build effective alternative blocs around themselves. And the passing of the socialist parties en masse into the “anticommunist” camp largely contributed to the success of the capitalist powers in the imperialist camp. These parties have not, however, been “rewarded,” as the very day after the collapse of the first wave of struggles of the twentieth century, monopoly capitalism shook off their alliance. They have not learned the lesson of their defeat by radicalizing themselves: on the contrary, they have chosen to capitulate by sliding into the “social-liberal” positions with which we are familiar. This is the proof, if such was needed, of the decisive role of the imperialist rent in the reproduction of the societies in the North. Thus, the second capitulation was not so much a tragedy as a farce.

The defeat of internationalism shares part of the responsibility for the authoritarian drifts toward autocracy in the socialist experiences of the past century. The explosion of inventive expressions of democracy during the course of the Russian and Chinese Revolutions gives the lie to the too easy judgment that these countries were not “ripe” for democracy. The hostility of the imperialist countries, facilitated by the support of their peoples, largely contributed to making the pursuit of democratic socialism even harder in conditions that were already difficult, a consequence of the inheritance of peripheral capitalism.

Thus, the second wave of the awakening of the peoples, nations, and states of the peripheries of the twenty-first century starts out in conditions that are hardly better, in fact, are even more difficult. The so-called characteristic of U.S. ideology of the “consensus” (meaning submission to the requirements of the power of the generalized monopoly capitalism); the adoption of “presidential” political regimes that destroy the effectiveness of the anti-establishment potential of democracy; the indiscriminate eulogy of a false, manipulated individualism, together with inequality (seen as a virtue); the rallying of the subaltern NATO countries to the strategies implemented by the Washington establishment—all these are making rapid headway in the European Union which cannot be, in these conditions, anything other than what it is, a constitutive bloc of imperialist globalization.

In this situation, the collapse of this military project becomes the first priority and the preliminary condition for the success of the second wave of the liberation being undertaken through the struggles of the peoples, nations, and states of the three continents. Until this happens, their present and future advances will remain vulnerable. A possible remake of the twentieth century is not, therefore, to be excluded even if, obviously, the conditions of our epoch are quite different from those of the last century.

This tragic scenario is not, however, the only possible one. The offensive of capital against the workers is already under way in the very heartlands of the system. This is proof, if it were necessary, that capital, when it is reinforced by its victories against the peoples of the periphery, is then able to attack frontally the positions of the working classes in the centers of the system. In this situation, it is no longer impossible to visualize the radicalization of the struggles. The heritage of European political cultures is not yet lost, and it should facilitate the rebirth of an international consciousness

that meets the requirements of its globalization. An evolution in this direction, however, comes up against the obstacle of the imperialist rent.

This is not only a major source of exceptional profits for the monopolies; it also conditions the reproduction of the society as a whole. And, with the indirect support of those popular elements seeking to preserve at all costs the existing electoral model of “democracy” (however undemocratic in reality), the weight of the middle classes can in all likelihood destroy the potential strength arising from the radicalization of the popular classes. Because of this, it is probable that the progress in the tricontinental South will continue to be at the forefront of the scene, as in the last century. However, as soon as the advances have had their effects and seriously restricted the extent of the imperialist rent, the peoples of the North should be in a better position to understand the failure of strategies that submit to the requirements of the generalized imperialist monopolies. The ideological and political forces of the radical left should then take their place in this great movement of liberation, built on the solidarity of peoples and workers.

The ideological and cultural battle is decisive for this renaissance—which I have summed up as the strategic objective of building a Fifth International of workers and peoples.

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P.S.

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