

Development & Resistance

to the Empire of Capital

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Realizing “developmental socialism” which, as recently as the 1970s, seemed a prospect worth fighting for has come, to many, to seem much less so now. True, the goal still has moral force, this encompassing the judgment that the people can resolve economic and political tensions and potential contradictions collectively and democratically rather than having to build centrally on competition and the entrepreneurial greed of the few as the ultimate central keys to the welfare of everybody else. One cannot afford to be naïve, of course. Quite apart from questions of divergent class interests, it is also true that “human nature,” however much misshaped and distorted it may be within a world of ascendant market norms, will, even in the best and most propitious of times, be pulled between the claim of individuality (and family) on the one hand and that of humane collectivity on the other. It is the relative balance between the two that is the issue, however, not classic appeals to “fallen man” [sic] and the supposed fall-out of original sin. Some human inequality of condition is, perhaps, to a degree inevitable but it is indefensible nonetheless and should always be reduced. So says the socialist.

Nor is the case against capitalism (and also for socialism) merely expressive of a moral distaste for the former. There is also a powerful practical logic to socialism, especially in the settings of the global South. As Giovanni Arrighi and I wrote, in *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa* (1973), of Africa almost forty years ago:

One does in fact find the productive potential of African societies and therefore their development and structural transformation, constrained by the present pattern of world and domestic economy and society; the available surplus is ill-utilized – drained away as the repatriated profits of overseas firms or consumed by self-indulgent domestic elites – and the generation of a larger surplus from, for example, an aroused and mobilized populace discouraged. As this suggests, it is the pattern of current inequality, in particular, which tends thus to hamper a rise in productivity.

We did acknowledge that perhaps “the changes of surplus utilization [centred around ‘a serious attempt at disengagement from international capitalism or reform of the power base of the African governments involved’] which we have seen to be necessary for real development are not possible under [then] present historical conditions.” But this could not, we concluded, “invalidate the historical necessity of the change itself, which should therefore be of central importance in socialist debate.” In fact, such

changes seem equally necessary now – for, as Colin Leys and I have much more recently noted, “the dream of a transformative capitalism in Africa remains just that: a dream.” This is true even if, confronted with an ever more ascendant globalized capitalism, the goal of a developmental socialism, key to the only genuine “development” that is really possible for Africa, seems at least as difficult to realize as it did when Arrighi and I first wrote.

Of course, the African case may be, globally, the most extreme example of capitalist failure. Nonetheless, more generally, the logic of socialism (but also the extreme difficulty of realizing it) seems clear, at least to those who care to look. For Africa, like much of the rest of the underdeveloped world, is now “invited” (in fact, largely forced – by the IMF, World Bank, WTO and the individual governments of the advanced capitalist world) to “compete” in the global market place by entering, without any resort to the defensive mechanisms of local state action open to them in the immediate post-colonial period. The result is, perhaps, predictable, but at the very least clear. Them as has gets more and the grim workings of a global hierarchy, created over centuries by imperial dictate, colonialism and unequal “market forces,” become, in Arrighi’s phrase, grim manifestations of an “iron law of global hierarchy” that locks the presently impoverished in their millions, notably throughout the global South, into a place of subordination for the foreseeable future.

Renewing a Socialist Imaginary

What is needed, then, in the present movement for resistance and change is a greater sense of why one is both against “Western imperialism” and also against “global capitalism” and, more precisely, how, and in terms of what imaginary, one might work to displace the malign ubiquity of both. For me at least it seems impossible to so imagine the necessary historical initiative without returning, self-consciously, to the thrust of an overtly (and, it bears stressing, decisively renovated) socialist project, one that is at once firmly anti-capitalist and firmly democratic. In short, it is not enough, however important it may be also to do so, to attack the symptoms of capitalist induced distemper – to either excoriate it on the one hand or merely seek to reform it bit by bit on the other – without ever quite advertising, even to oneself, just what one is doing. How much more effectively might this might be done, I would argue, in terms of a renovated socialist imaginary – and this, too, without abandoning battle along the full range of other fronts (patriarchy, racism, religious intolerance, ethnic oppression) upon which injustice is encountered? In fact, this is the best way

to give each such front greater resonance as a salient node of progressive struggle.

At the core, then, but not exclusively so, should be the goal of collective ownership of the means of production by a democratically empowered and self-conscious majority of the affected population – initially, perhaps, in diverse corners of the world by mobilized peoples prepared to defend themselves and such projects but also as linked to others in other such “corners” similarly motivated. An increasingly socialist South against a capitalist North: perhaps in part, although this in itself will not be easy to conceive of nor to achieve, especially as China, prior to any revolution of its own by its horribly exploited domestic population, slips further into, in effect, “the Northern column.” Nor should “Northern” mobilization and resistance be merely and summarily written out of the revolutionary equation. For everywhere, within the swirling milieu of anti-war and anti-globalization preoccupations there has begun the revival of some signs of relevant and apposite practices grounded in increasingly socialist understandings and assertions. To concrete signs that such a revival is occurring we now turn. “Capitalism has an address,” Brecht once famously asserted, in order to help focus and concretize ever more relevant attacks on wielders of power. Similarly, and crucially, socialism has an address too.

The Revival of a Socialist Practice for the 21st Century

For there is emerging a conjuncture that manifests a certain revival of global confrontation along these lines – one highlighted by a move from diverse, if bracing, active expressions of “mere” resistance to capitalist globalization towards the clear signs of attempts to retotalize diverse experiences and understandings in ways that seek more hegemonically to contest the empire of capital. Though, Africa – despite the momentary promise of a more radical fall-out from the victorious liberation struggle than has proven possible to sustain – seems, for the moment, fairly firmly ensnared within the toils of global capitalism, this has not proven to be the case in other settings. Perhaps the most salient front of a new and assertive practice of active skepticism concerning global neoliberalism is much closer geographically to the United States itself, in Latin America. Said to now be the ‘continent on the left’ and driven by “Latin America’s new consensus” in terms of which “the region’s emerging leaders are making deals that threaten U.S. dominance.” As Greg Grandin has recently written of it:

Over the course of the past seven years, Latin America has seen the rebirth of nationalist and socialist political movements, movements that were thought to have been dispatched by cold war death squads. Following Hugo Chavez’s 1998 landslide victory in Venezuela, one country after another has turned left. Today, roughly 300 million of Latin America’s 520 million citizens live under governments that either want to reform the Washington Consensus – a euphemism for the mix of punishing fiscal austerity, privatization and market liberalization that has produced staggering levels of poverty and inequality over the past three decades – or abolish it altogether and create a new, more equitable global economy (*The Nation*, April 19, 2006).

Momentarily Brazil seemed poised to take the lead in this increased tilt leftward that Latin America was evidencing. Here the focus was on Lula and his Worker’s Party (PT). But, many would now argue, this was not to be, as Brazil seemed instead to follow the path to dramatic accommodation with global capitalism that South Africa, for example, has also been evidencing, despite the momentary promise of something more positive. Thus, after only two years of Lula’s PT government, and “to the astonishment of his followers, Lula’s government opted for conservative economic policies, with strict adherence to IMF rules, and even introduced some of the neoliberal reforms that the Workers Party had formerly resisted...” As Branford and Kuchinski, in *Lula and the Workers Party* (2005), conclude,

the dominant view within [his] party [had become] that Lula’s neoliberal policies were not just an imposition from outside nor a tactical option to last only until he felt strong enough and confident enough to implement change, but rather that Lula [had] made an ideological option and that his policies will not change. As a result, Lula will not substantially alter the structure of power in Brazil, far less change Brazil...The left now defines Lula’s government as “social-liberal” – social on account of some important programmes it is implementing to help the poor, and liberal due to its adherence to a neoliberal view on how the economy should be run.

Thus, Lula’s various “progressive public policies,” important as some of them have been in their own right, “are unable alone to annul the overall neoliberal character of the government’s macroeconomic policies.” Of course enough was done that, by 2006, his project could be electorally reconfirmed in dramatic fashion. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the answer of many in Brazil continues to emphasize the need for *more* democracy if any real progress is to be sustained. As Marcus Arrada, a Rio-based militant, argued: “We need to mobilize to get the authorities to move away from anti-social policies like those imposed by the IMF. The only way we will get change is through pressure from below, from the landless, the poor, workers, the unemployed, the marginalized.” More, and even more effective, democracy – imagined and articulated from the left – is needed then: in Brazil, too, the struggle continues.

Meanwhile, Latin America’s radical centre-of-gravity has apparently shifted. As Branford and Kuchinski continue, in sharp contrast to Lula’s enthusiastic reception at the Third World Social Forum’s rally of progressive forces from around Latin America and around the world, “at the Fifth World Social Forum in January 2005, also held in Porto Alegre [Brazil], Lula was no longer seen a solution in the struggle against neoliberalism, but rather, for many, as being part of the problem. Indeed, Lula’s two-year experiment was seen as additional evidence of the strength of world financial capital and its grip on political structures worldwide.” And, in that forum, “Hugo Chavez, the combative president of Venezuela, replaced Lula as the dominant left-wing Latin American icon” and Venezuela became, increasingly, a point of reference for a global left that continues to insist on seeing its hopes reignited. An analysis of this case would therefore be in order, although it is possible to sketch only the baldest and most →



preliminary lineaments of such an analysis here. In fact, other sources should therefore be canvassed, but perhaps it will be useful to at least note the following not only of the Venezuelan case but of Latin America more generally.

For Venezuela seems a particularly promising case of “structural reform” in one country. Of course, the regime has been given room for manoeuvre denied to Lula by virtue of large oil revenues. But it has also begun to entangle capital within the terms of a nationalist project that begins to manifest and keep alive the parameters of a possible long-term socialist practice. Not that this is an entirely straightforward process. While praising the impressive sweep of the Chavez regime’s egalitarian social and political practices Richard Gott quotes one left economist’s view of Chavez that “He’s very radical everywhere else but he’s conservative in the economic sphere” (*Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution*, 2005). Yet Gott also notes the ever increasing economic-policy radicalism of many of those politicians around Chavez, driving to beef up the democratic state’s activist economic role. As for the evolution of Chavez himself, there is this recent testimony by one well-informed commentator:

...on January 30, 2005, in a speech to the 5th world social Forum, President Hugo Chavez announced that he supported the creation of [a] socialism of the 21st century in Venezuela. According to Chavez, this socialism would be different from the socialism of the 20th century. While Chavez was

vague about how this new socialism would be different he implied it would not be a state socialism as was practiced in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe or as is practiced in Cuba today. Rather it would be a socialism that would be more pluralistic and less state-centered.

Indeed, as Chavez has said in another more recent speech (mid-2006), “We have assumed the commitment to direct the Bolivarian Revolution towards socialism and to contribute to the socialist path, with a new socialism, a socialism of the 21st century, which is based in solidarity, in fraternity, in love, in justice, in liberty and in equality.” Nor is the form of this socialism pre-defined and predetermined. Rather, added Chavez, we must “transform the mode of capital and move towards socialism, towards a new socialism that must be constructed every day.” And, even as he moved in early 2007 to nationalize companies in the telecommunications and electricity industries and promised to seek greater control over natural gas projects, he greeted his own inauguration as freshly re-elected President by “vowing socialism” and citing Jesus as “the greatest socialist in history”!

In short, neoliberalism increasingly is seen to call for a socialist response in Venezuela but, it is broadly hinted, socialism must itself be recast in such a way as to be far more responsive than previously to the full range of democratic rights and legitimate demands that the exploited and oppressed are more conscious of in the 21st century than ever before. For, as Mike

Leibowitz has effectively argued of Venezuela, the struggle to establish more firmly the political and cultural prerequisites of transformation (in which the further focusing of power “from below” and the assault on “continuing patterns of corruption and clientalism” must figure prominently) will indeed continue.” For there can be no doubt that historically significant questions of great importance are being reinvented and clearly posed there.

Moreover, in Latin America, Chavez seems determined that his leftist, Bolivarian project not be trapped in one country but instead reach out, across national boundaries, to magnify the project’s significance through links with emerging left wing assertions throughout his region (and around the world). And, indeed, one does begin to see the stirrings of new demands, new imaginaries elsewhere in Latin America as well: in Bolivia, under Evo Morales who states firmly that “capitalism has only hurt Latin America,” extensive nationalization has recently been carried out; in Argentina, under Kirchner, and elsewhere; even in Mexico where, after a recent flawed election of the more conservative of the presidential candidates, a “class war” is said to “loom.” Here is a kind of multi-national “structural reform” wherein the growing radicalization of an entire region may, quite possibly, be carrying radical assertions forward, increasingly self-consciously, towards an envisaging of the possibility and practice of yet more radical transformation. As some form of struggle revives (and continues), in Latin America and elsewhere, a culture of left/socialist entitlement and forward momentum may be reestablished beyond the seminar room. It can begin, in short, to provide a global re-grounding, real rather than merely theoretical, for ever more tangible socialist resistance to the empire of capital. True, it can be argued “that the Latin American left remains riddled by contradictions,” protagonists of a “rebellion against unbridled [capitalist] globalization that risks [merely] falling back on nationalism and the developmental state.” Clearly, there is much political work to be done, but can we not say that the work has at least begun?

We must also remind ourselves of the full implications of the broader context within which this is all occurring, a context at once both daunting and, paradoxically, encouraging. For the war in Iraq certainly cuts both ways in global terms. It does mean that, for the moment, in Iraq and perhaps throughout the Middle East the central position within the anti-imperialist phalanx has been occupied by religious fundamentalist categories (and sub-categories) of people, rather than by protagonists of more secular and socialist initiatives. Nonetheless, world-wide, the picture is far from being entirely rosy for the empire of capital either. For the United States and its coalition of willing class allies has not been able to impose its will by the arbitrary exercise of imperial might as it no doubt envisaged. Moreover, so preoccupied has the “coalition of the imperially-minded” been with the problems confronted by “empire” in just one-country that it has had less energy and weaponry at its disposal for, say, suppressing Chavez as one fears it might have moved to do in the absence of entanglements in Iraq to pin it down.

Resisting the Empire of Capital

How, then, to conceive a growing and grounded resistance to the empire of capital in the 21st century? The question marks

are many. I’m tempted myself, as seen, to advocate working towards democratic and open movements that, nonetheless, aspire to enough discipline of purpose and organization to mount an appropriately hegemonic/counter-hegemonic project. Such a movement would also, I think, be one embracing a necessarily national setting for primary, but not exclusive, revolutionary attention (and one that would, in addition, build out from a working-class base while expanding upon it both definitionally and practically). Moreover, this would, at its core, imply a project that prioritized – beyond “anti-capitalist,” “radical democratic” and human rights claims – an explicitly socialist imaginary (albeit one complemented by firmly and overtly gender – and other emancipatory aspirations), a project set in opposition, at local, national and world-wide levels, to a globally capitalist one.

Of course, I return by this route towards a projected re-grounding of socialist practice that may sound to be lodged in a very old place and to echo what may seem to some to be an all-too familiar refrain. But, as stated the principal enemy of emancipation contemporaneously remains capitalism, however much it may also be inflected by patriarchy, racism and western arrogance of purpose. Moreover, we have learned something. For there will be, must be, important variations upon what was preached by many on the left so often in the past: we need, for example, increased sensitivity to democratic imperatives (and to the more subtle and finely-balanced workings of the dialectic of leadership and mass action); we need increased attention, as suggested, to the expansiveness of the notion of class (not least “working class”) and the greater openness of such a class-problematic to the parallel claims for redress cast in terms of gender, race, religion, ethnic and environment; and we need increased awareness of the imperative of sharing sensibilities and struggles across borders in a firmly global and internationalist manner, a form of ever more positive “globalism” made especially imperative in our current quite shameless era of capitalist-driven “globalization.”

As a result, just what the continuing failure of capitalism – at the vast “margins” of the system and as expressed in human terms, in environmental terms, in terms of genuine equity – will bring remains to be seen; similarly “remaining to be seen” is the ultimate response by the “wretched of the earth” to their relentless “recolonization.” The permutations and combinations of a possible global struggle against the empire of capital in its various guises are legion of course – whether they be expressed vis-a-vis issues of arrogant political power and/or of rapacious economic capital, whether found in the global North and/or in the global South, in the “centre” and/or on the “periphery” of the global system, and whether focused primarily at local, national, regional or global sites. Self-evidently, any struggle (for liberation from capital and on behalf of democratic socialism) that is either in train or possibly forthcoming in such a context is and will be extremely complex and endlessly challenging – and, of course, eminently debatable. At the same time, the costs of not winning such a struggle will also be substantial. *On s’engage, puis on voit.* **R**

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