

SAMIR AMIN

IMPERIALIST RENT AND THE CHALLENGES FOR THE RADICAL LEFT

Globalized capitalism – only yesterday having declared the "end of history" - did not survive more than two decades before imploding. But what "other world" is being called forth to succeed it? Will capitalism enter a new phase in its deployment, less unbalanced globally and more centered in Asia and South America? Or will we see a truly polycentric world in which various popular democratic alternatives that arise are confronted by violent measures of capitalist restoration? The way to shed light on the nature of the ongoing systemic crisis is to return to a reading of the historical trajectory of capitalism. Such a debate opens the way for the radical left, if it can be bold, to be major catalysing forces for change, capable of advancing the emancipation of workers and peoples.

THE TRAJECTORY OF HISTORICAL CAPITALISM

The long history of capitalism is composed of three distinct, successive phases:

- 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;
- a short period of maturity (the 19th century), during which the „West“ affirmed its domination;
- the long „decline“ caused by the „awakening of the South“ (Amin 2007) in which the peoples and their States regained the major initiative in transforming the world, the first wave having taken place in the 20th century.

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 inventions that were to constitute capitalist modernity.

The oldest wave came from China, where changes began in the Sung era (11th century), which developed further in the Ming and Qing epochs, giving China a head start in terms of technological inventiveness and the social productivity of collective work, which was not to be surpassed by Europe until the 19th century. This „Chinese“ wave was to be followed by a

„Middle Eastern“ wave, which took place in the Arabo-Persian Caliphate and then (as from the Crusades) in the towns of Italy.

The last wave concerns the long transition of the ancient tributary world to the modern capitalist world which began in the Atlantic part of Europe as from the conquest of the Americas, and took the form of mercantilism for three centuries (1500-1800).

Capitalism, which gradually came to dominate the world, is the result of this last wave. The European („Western“) form of historical capitalism that took place in Atlantic and Central Europe, their offspring in the United States and later on in Japan, developed its own characteristics, particularly its accumulation mode based on dispossession (first, of the peasants and then of the peoples in the peripheries, integrated into its global system). This historical form is therefore indissoluble from the centres/peripheries contrast that it endlessly constructs, reproduces and deepens.

Historical capitalism took on its final form at the end of the 18th 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 invented modern politics.

Mature capitalism developed over the short period that marked the apogee of this system in the 19th 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 labour) but it was, at the same time, destructive. Marx observed at an early stage 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 the third aspect of this destructive dimension of accumulation: the material and cultural dispossession of the dominated peoples of the periphery, which Marx had perhaps 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. He thus relegated this dispossession to a 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 a superior „mode of production“ because it is capable of accelerating the development of the forces of production and to associating them with an „equitable“ distribution of income. It is something else again: a higher stage in the development of human civilization.

The historical reading I propose is non-Eurocentric not simply because it includes contributions from other regions of the world to the invention of capitalism. It stems from a

non-reductionist reading of the concept of the mode of production. Capitalism is more than a mode of production at a more advanced stage of the development of productive forces; it is a more advanced stage of civilization. And for this reason, the invention of the social relations of capitalism is inseparable from that of other elements of what became "modernity", including the creation of a public service recruited by competitive examination and the idea of a secular state, the conviction that humans – not gods or aristocratic ancestors – make history, all developments which had started in China centuries before Europe.

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 they could, but they were always finally defeated 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 per cent of the planet's population in 1500, represented 36 per cent by 1900, increased by their descendants emigrating to the Americas and Australia.

THE INDISPENSABLE INTERNATIONALISM OF THE WORKERS AND THE PEOPLES

The 20th century saw the beginning of a reversal of the roles: the initiative passed to the peoples and nations of the periphery.

In 1871 the Paris Commune which was the first socialist revolution, also proved to be the last one to take place in a country in the capitalist center. The 20th century inaugurated – with the „awakening of the peoples of the peripheries“ – a new chapter in history, its first manifestations being the revolution in Iran of 1907, in Mexico (1910-1920), in China (1911), in „semi-periphery“ Russia in 1905, heralding 1917, the Arabo-Muslim Nahda, the constitution of the Young Turk movement, the Egyptian revolution of 1919, the formation of the Indian Congress.

In reaction to the first long crisis of historical capitalism (1875-1950), the peoples of the periphery began to liberate themselves as from 1914-1917, mobilizing themselves under the flags of socialism (Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba) or of national liberation, 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 the collapse of Sovietism in 1990: these were the initiatives that dominated the scene.

This first wave of the awakening of the peoples of the periphery wore out for many reasons, due both to its own internal limitations and contradictions and to the success of imperialism 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).

What the most important social and political struggles of the 20th century tried to challenge was not so much capitalism in itself as the permanent imperialist dimension of really existing capitalism. "Marxism" (or, more exactly, the historical Marxisms) is confronted by a challenge, which did not exist in the most lucid political consciousness of the 19th century, but which arose because of the transfer of the initiative to transform the world to the peoples, nations and States of the periphery.

As 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. And since 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 now 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.

IMPERIALIST RENT AND POPULAR FORCES IN THE NORTH

The limits of the advances made by the awakening of the South in the 20th century, and the exacerbation of the contradictions that resulted, was the cause of the first liberation wave losing its impetus. And it 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 peoples of the North. 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.

The passing of the socialist parties en masse into the "anti-communist" 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 20th century, monopoly capitalism shook off their alliance. They have not

learnt 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.

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 a proof, if it were necessary, that capital, when it is reinforced by its victories against the peoples of the periphery, is then able to frontally attack 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.

It is most likely 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 take their place in this great movement of liberation built on the solidarity of peoples and workers.

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. 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.

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”).

The political radicalization of the social struggles is the condition for overcoming their 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 gain real power.

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? There is no other solution than advances being made at the national level, perhaps reinforced by appropriate action at the regional level. They must aim at dismantling the world system (the

“delinking”) before eventual reconstruction, on a different basis, with the prospect of overtaking 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, need for the dismantling the European institutions (and that of the euro) is not yet envisaged, even by the radical left.

A SHIFT IN THE CENTER OF GRAVITY OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM?

Do victories of the anti-imperialist struggles of the states and peoples of the peripheries prepare the way for socialism or for the building of new centers of capitalism?

The present conjuncture seems to indicate an opposition between the decline of the old centers of the capitalist triad (the U.S., Europe and Japan) in crisis, with the surge in capitalism in the growth of emerging countries (China and others). Would the current crisis then not lead to a new rise of capitalism, now centered in Asia and South America? This would mean that the victories of the anti-imperialist struggles of emerging countries would lead not to socialism, but a new rise of capitalism, albeit less polarized than it was before.

The main argument of my critique of this popular thesis proceeds from the observation that the pattern of historical capitalism, now promoted as the only option, depended from the beginning (European mercantilism) on the production and reproduction of global polarization. This feature is itself the product of the mass expulsion of the peasantry on which the development of capitalism was founded. The model was sustainable only through the safety valve allowed by the mass emigration to the Americas. It would be absolutely impossible for the countries of the periphery today – who make up 80% of the world’s people, of which almost half are rural -- to reproduce this model. They would need 5 or 6 Americas to be able to “catch up” in the same way. “Catching up” is therefore an illusion and any progress in this direction can only result in an impasse. This is why I say that the anti-imperialist struggles are potentially anti-capitalist. If we cannot “catch up”, we might as well “do something else.”

Of course such a transformation in the long-term visions of emerging countries for “development” is by no means “inescapable.” It is only necessary and possible. The current success of emerging countries in terms of accelerated growth within globalized capitalism and with capitalist means reinforces the illusion that catching-up is possible. The same illusion accompanied the experiences of the first wave of “the awakening of the South” in the 20th century, even though at that time they were experienced as a “catch-up by the road of socialism.” I analyzed the contradictions of the “project of Bandung” (1955-1980), in the same terms, given the conflicting projects of the national bourgeoisies and working classes allied in the struggles for liberation.

Today the collective imperialism of the triad makes use of all the means at its disposal – economic, financial and military – to continue its domination of the world. Emerging countries that take on strategies to eliminate the advantages of the triad - the control of

technologies, control of access to the globe's natural resources, and the military control of the planet - are therefore in conflict with the triad. This conflict helps to dispel any illusions about their ability "to advance within the system" and gives popular democratic forces the possibility of influencing the course of events in the direction of progress on the long road of the transition to socialism.

THE NEW AGRARIAN QUESTION : ACCESS TO LAND FOR ALL PEASANTS OF THE SOUTH

All societies before modern (capitalist) time were peasant societies and their production ruled by various specific systems and logics sharing nevertheless the fact that these were not those which rule capitalism (i.e. the maximisation of the return on capital in a market society).

Modern capitalist agriculture, represented by both rich family farming and/or by agribusiness corporations, is now looking forward to a massive attack on third world peasant production. The project did get the green light from WTO in its Doha session. Yet, the peasantry still occupies half of humankind. But its production is shared between two sectors enormously unequal in size with a clearly distinct economic and social character and levels of efficiency.

Capitalist agriculture governed by the principle of return on capital, which is localised almost exclusively in North America, in Europe, in the South cone of Latin America and in Australia, employs only a few tens of millions of farmers who are no longer "peasants". But their productivity, which depends on mechanisation (of which they have monopoly worldwide) and the area of land possessed by each farmer, ranges between 10.000 and 20.000 quintals of equivalent cereals per worker annually.

On the other hand, peasant-farming systems still constitute the occupation of nearly half of humanity - i.e. three billion human beings. These farming systems are in turn shared between those who benefited from the green revolution (fertilisers, pesticides and selected seeds), but are nevertheless poorly mechanised, with production ranging between 100 and 500 quintals per farmer, and the other group still excluded from this revolution, whose production is estimated around 10 quintals per farmer.

The new agrarian question is the result of that unequal development.

Indeed modernisation had always combined constructive dimensions (accumulation of capital and progress of productivities) with destructive aspects (reducing labour to the statute of a commodity sold on the market, often destroying the natural ecological basis needed for the reproduction of life and production, polarising wealth on a global level). Modernisation had always simultaneously "integrated" those for whom employment was created by the very expansion of markets, and "excluded" those who, having lost their positions in the previous systems, were not integrated in the new labour force. But, in its ascending phase, capitalist global expansion did integrate along with its excluding

processes. But now, with respect to the area of Third World peasant societies, it would be massively excluding, including only insignificant minorities.

The question raised here is precisely whether this trend continues and will continue to operate with respect to the three billion human beings still producing and living in the frame of peasant societies, in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Indeed, what would happen as of now, should “agriculture and food production” be treated as any other form of production submitted to the rules of competition in an open-deregulated market as it has been decided in principle at the WTO conference (Doha, November 2001)?

Would such principles foster the acceleration of production?

Indeed one can imagine some twenty million new additional modern farmers, producing whatever the three billion present peasants can offer on the market beyond ensuring their own (poor) self-subsistence. The conditions for the success of such an alternative would necessitate the transfer of important pieces of good land to the new agriculturalists (and these lands have to be taken out of the hands of present peasant societies), access to capital markets (to buy equipments) and access to the consumers markets. Such agriculturalists would indeed “compete” successfully with the billions of present peasants. But what would happen to those?

Under the circumstances, admitting the general principle of competition for agricultural products and foodstuffs, as imposed by WTO, means accepting that billions of “non-competitive” producers be eliminated within the short historic time of a few decades. What will become of these billions of humans beings, the majority of whom are already poor among the poor, but who feed themselves with great difficulty, and worse still, what will be the plight of the one third of this population (since three-quarters of the underfed population of the world are rural dwellers) ? In fifty years” time, no relatively competitive industrial development, even in the fanciful hypothesis of a continued growth of 7 % annually for three-quarters of humanity, could absorb even one-third of this reserve.

The major argument presented to legitimate the WTO-competition doctrine alternative is that such development did happen in XIXth century Europe and finally produced a modern-wealthy urban-industrial-post-industrial society as well as a modern agriculture able to feed the nation and even to export. Why should not this pattern be repeated in the contemporary Third World countries, in particular for the emerging nations?

The argument fails to consider two major factors which make the reproduction of the pattern almost impossible now in third world countries. The first is that the European model developed throughout a century and a half along with industrial technologies which were intensive labour using. Modern technologies are far less. And therefore if the new comers of the third world have to be competitive on global markets for their industrial exports they have to adopt them.

The second is that Europe benefited during that long transition from the possibility of massive out migration of their “surplus” population to the Americas.

That argument – i.e. that capitalism has indeed “solved” the agrarian question in its developed centers – has always been admitted by large sections of the left, including within historical Marxism, as testified by the famous book of Kautsky – “the agrarian question” – written before world war I. Leninism itself inherited that view and on its basis undertook a moderation through the Stalinist collectivisation, with doubtful results. What was always overlooked was that capitalism while it solved the question in its centers did it through generating a gigantic agrarian question in the peripheries, which it cannot solve but through the genocide of half of humankind. Within historical Marxism only Maoism did understand the size of the challenge. Therefore those who charge Maoism with its so called “peasant deviation” show by this very criticism that they do not have the analytical capacity for an understanding of what is actually existing imperialist capitalism, that they reduce to an abstract discourse on capitalism in general.

Modernisation through market liberalisation as suggested by WTO and its supporters finally aligns side by side, without even necessarily combining two components : (i) the production of food on a global scale by modern competitive agriculturalists mostly based in the North but also possibly in the future in some pockets of the South ; (ii) the marginalisation – exclusion – and further impoverishment of the majority of the three billion peasants of present third world and finally their seclusion in some kinds of “reserves”. It therefore combines (i) a pro-modernisation- efficiency dominant discourse and (ii) an ecological cultural reserve set of policies making possible for the victims to “survive”. These two components might therefore complement one another rather than “conflict”.

Can we imagine other alternatives and have them widely debated. In that frame it is implied that peasant agriculture should be maintained throughout the visible future of the XXIth century but simultaneously engaged in a process of continuous technological/social change and progress. At a rate which would allow a progressive transfer to non-rural employment.

Such a strategic set of targets involves complex policy mixes at national, regional and global levels :

At the national levels it implies macro-policies protecting peasant food production from the unequal competition of modernised agriculturalists – agro-business local and international. With a view to guaranteeing acceptable internal food prices eventually disconnected from the so called international market prices (in fact also markets biased by subsidies of the wealthy North-USA/Canada/Europe).

Such policy targets also question the patterns of industrial – urban developments, which should be less based on export oriented priorities, themselves taking advantage of low wages (implying in their turn low prices for food), and be more attentive to a socially balanced internal market expansion.

A development strategy in keeping with the challenge must be based on the guarantee of access to land and to the means of its use to all peasants, as equally as possible. Yet the necessary progress of productivity of peasant family agriculture does need industries to support it. Industrialisation therefore cannot be escaped from, but its patterns should not reproduce those of capitalism, which generates growing inequalities and ecological devastation. Programs that substitute to the inventing of new patterns of industrialisation so called foreign aid, associated with empty discourses (good governance, alleviating poverty) are nothing but the continuation of colonial discourses. The real objective of imperialism is to marginalize peoples. For imperialism African natural resources (oil, minerals, land) are important, not African peoples who represent rather an obstacle to the plunder of resources.

Simultaneously such a choice of principle facilitates integrating in the overall scheme patterns of policies ensuring national food security, an indispensable condition for a country to be an active member of the global community, enjoying the indispensable margin of autonomy and negotiating capacity.

At regional and global levels it implies international agreements and policies, moving away from the doctrinaire liberal principles ruling the WTO, imaginative and specific to different areas, since they have to take into consideration specific issues and concrete historical and social conditions.

'THE ENVIRONMENT', OR THE SOCIALIST PERSPECTIVE OF USE VALUE? THE ECOLOGICAL QUESTION AND SO-CALLED SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Here too, the point of departure is an acknowledgement of a real problem, the destruction of the natural environment and, at last resort, the survival of life on the planet, which has been brought about by the logic of capital accumulation.

Here, too, the question dates back to the 1970s, more precisely the Stockholm Conference of 1972. But for a long time it was a minor issue, marginalized by all the dominant discourses and the practices of economic management. The question has only been put forward as a new central plank in the dominating strategy relatively recently.

Taking into account use value (of which the ecological footprint constitutes the first good example) implies that socialism must be „ecological“, cannot be anything but ecological. As Altvater has observed “Solar socialism” or “No socialism”(Altvater 2008).

In the time of Marx he did not However, it also implies that it is impossible for any capitalist system whatsoever, even „reformed“, to take it into account, as we shall see later.

only suspected the existence of this problem. He had already formulated a rigorous distinction between value and wealth, which were confused by vulgar economics. He said explicitly that capitalist accumulation destroyed the natural bases on which it was founded: human beings (the alienated, exploited, dominated and oppressed worker) and the land

(symbol of the natural wealth given to humanity). And whatever the limits of this expression, as always a prisoner of its epoch, it is nonetheless true that it shows a lucid awareness of the problem (beyond that of intuition), which should be recognized.

It is therefore regrettable that the ecologists of our era have not read Marx. It would have enabled them to carry their propositions further, to understand their revolutionary impact better and even, obviously, go beyond Marx himself on the subject. This deficiency of modern ecology makes it easier for it to be taken over by the vulgar economics that is in a dominant position in the contemporary world. This take-over is already under way – even well advanced.

Political ecology, like that proposed by Alain Lipietz, was first found in the ranks of the „pro-socialist“ political left. Then the „green“ movements (and after that, the „green“ parties) were classed as centre left, because of their expressed sympathies for social and international justice, their criticism of „waste“ and their empathy with the workers and the „poor“ populations. But, apart from the diversity of these movements, none of them had established a rigorous relationship between the authentic socialist dimension necessary to respond to the challenge and the no less necessary ecological dimension. To be able to do so, the distinction between value and wealth, as originated by Marx, cannot be ignored.

The take-over of ecology by vulgar ideology operates on two levels: by reducing the calculation in use value to an „improved“ calculation of exchange value and also by integrating the ecological challenge into a „consensus“ ideology. Both of these operations prevent a lucid awareness of the fact that ecology and capitalism are antagonistic in their very essence.

Vulgar economics has been capturing ecological calculation by leaps and bounds. Thousands of younger researchers, in the United States and, by imitation, in Europe, have been mobilized for that purpose.

The „ecological costs“ are thus assimilated to the externalities. The common method of cost/benefit analysis for measuring the exchange value (which itself is confused with the market price) is thus used to arrive at a „fair price“, integrating the external economies and the „diseconomies“. And the trick is done!

This capture of the ecologist discourse is providing a very useful service to imperialism. It makes it possible to marginalize, if not to eliminate, the development issue. As we know, the question of development was not on the international agenda until the countries of the South were able to impose it by their own initiatives, forcing the powers of the Triad to negotiate and make concessions. But once the Bandung era was over, it was no longer a question of development, but only of opening up the markets. And ecology, as it is interpreted by the In fact, as we can already see, the oligopolies have taken over ecologism to justify opening up new fields for their destructive expansion.¹ „Green“ capitalism is now

¹ François Houtart has given an excellent example in his book on agrofuels (François Houtart, *L'Agroénergie, solution pour le climat ou sortie de crise pour le capital?*; Couleur

the order of the day for those in power in the Triad (right and left) and the directors of oligopolies. The ecologism in question of course conforms to so-called „weak sustainability“ – to use the current jargon – that is, the marketing of “rights of access to the planet’s resources. All the conventional economists have openly rallied to this position, proposing “the auctioning of world resources (fisheries, pollution permits, etc.)”. This is a proposition which simply supports the oligopolies in their ambition to mortgage the future of the peoples of the South still further.

dominant powers, is just prolonging this state of affairs.

The taking over of the ecologist discourse through consensus politics (the necessary expression of the concept of end-of-history capitalism) is no less advanced. This capture has had an easy passage, for it responds to the alienations and illusions on which the dominant culture feeds, which is that of capitalism. It has been easy because this culture really does exist, is in place and dominant in the minds of most human beings, in the South as well as in the North.

In contrast, it is difficult to express the needs of a socialist counter culture. A socialist culture is not there, in front of us. It is the future and has to be invented, a civilization project, open to an inventive imaginary. Formula like “socialization through democracy and not through the market” and “cultural dominance instead of economics, served by politics” are not enough, in spite of the success they have had in initiating the historical process of transformation. For it will be a long „secular“ process: the reconstruction of societies on principles other than those of capitalism, both in the North and in the South, cannot be „rapid“. But the construction of the future, even if it is far off, starts today.

AUDACITY, MORE AUDACITY

The historical circumstances created by the implosion of contemporary capitalism requires the radical left, in the North as well as the South, to be bold in formulating its political alternative to the existing system.

Contemporary capitalism is a capitalism of generalized monopolies. By this I mean that monopolies are now no longer islands (albeit important) in a sea of other still relatively autonomous companies, but are an integrated system. Therefore, these monopolies now tightly control all the systems of production. Small and medium enterprises, and even the large corporations that are not strictly speaking oligopolies are locked in a network of control put in place by the monopolies. Their degree of autonomy has shrunk to the point that they are nothing more than subcontractors of the monopolies. The generalized monopolies now dominate the world economy.

The capitalism of generalized and globalized monopolies is a system that guarantees these monopolies a monopoly rent levied on the mass of surplus value (transformed into profits)

Livres, Charleroi, 2009. An English version will be published by Pluto Books, London, in Spring 2010 under the title *Agrofuels: big profits, ruined lives and human ecological destruction*).

that capital extracts from the exploitation of labour. To the extent that these monopolies are operating in the peripheries of the global system, monopoly rent is imperialist rent. The process of capital accumulation – that defines capitalism in all its successive historical forms – is therefore driven by the maximisation of monopoly/imperialist rent seeking.

This imbalance in continued growth is itself, in turn, the source of the financialisation of the economic system. By this I mean that a growing portion of the surplus cannot be invested in the expansion and deepening of systems of production and therefore the „financial investment“ of this excessive surplus becomes the only option for continued accumulation under the control of the monopolies. The implementation of specific systems by capital permits the financialisation to operate in different ways: (i) the subjugation of the management of firms to the principle of ‘shareholder value’; (ii) the substitution of pension systems funded by the capitalisation of systems of pension distribution (Pension Funds); (iii) the adoption of the principle of „flexible exchange rates“; (iv) the abandonment of the principle of central banks determining the interest rate - the price of „liquidity“ – and the transfer of this responsibility to the „market“. Financialisation has transferred the major responsibility for control of the reproduction of the system of accumulation to some 30 giant banks of the triad. What are euphemistically called „markets“ are nothing other than the places where the strategies of these actors who dominate the economic scene are deployed.

In turn this financialisation, which is responsible for the growth of inequality in income distribution (and fortunes), generates the growing surplus on which it feeds. The „financial investments“ (or rather the investments in financial speculation) continue to grow at dizzying speeds, not commensurate with growth in GDP (which is therefore becoming largely fictitious) or with investment in real production. The explosive growth of financial investment requires – and fuels – among other things debt in all its forms, especially sovereign debt. When the governments in power claim to be pursuing the goal of „debt reduction“, they are deliberately lying. For the strategy of financialised monopolies requires the growth in debt (which they seek, rather than combat) as a way to absorb the surplus profit of monopolies. The austerity policies imposed „to reduce debt“ have indeed resulted (as intended) in increasing its volume.

It is this system – commonly called „neoliberal“, the system of generalized monopoly capitalism, „globalized“ (imperialist) and financialised (of necessity for its own reproduction) – that is imploding before our eyes. The „crisis“ of the system is due to its own „success“. Indeed so far the strategy deployed by monopolies has always produced the desired results: „austerity“ plans and the so-called social (in fact antisocial) downsizing plans that are still being imposed, in spite of resistance and struggles. To this day the initiative remains in the hands of the monopolies („the markets“) and their political servants (the governments that submit to the demands of the so-called „market“).

Under these conditions monopoly capital has openly declared war on workers and peoples. This declaration is formulated in the sentence „liberalism is not negotiable.“ Monopoly

capital will definitely continue its wild ride and not slow down. The criticism of „regulation“ that I make is grounded in this fact. We are not living in a historical moment in which the search for a „social compromise“ is a possible option. There have been such moments in the past, such as the post-war social compromise between capital and labour specific to the social democratic state in the West, the actually existing socialism in the East, and the popular national projects of the South. But our present historical moment is not the same. So the conflict is between monopoly capital and workers and people who are invited to an unconditional surrender. Defensive strategies of resistance under these conditions are ineffective and bound to be eventually defeated. In the face of war declared by monopoly capital, workers and peoples must develop strategies that allow them to take the offensive.

Audacity, under such circumstances, involves engaging vigorously and coherently towards this end, bringing together the required measures of delinking with the desired advances in social progress. Delinking promotes the reconstruction of a globalisation based on negotiation, rather than submission to the exclusive interests of the imperialist monopolies. It also makes possible the reduction of international inequalities.

REFERENCES

Elmar Altvater, *The plagues of capitalism, energy crisis, climate collapse, hunger and financial instabilities*, paper presented to the World Forum for Alternatives, Caracas, 2008

Ending the crisis of capitalism or ending capitalism ?; Pambazuka, Oxford 2010

L'éveil du Sud, l'ère de Bandung (Le temps des cerises, 2008)

From capitalism to civilisation, Reconstructing the socialist perspective ; Tulika Books, Delhi 2010 31

Beyond US hegemony, Assessing the prospects for a multipolar world ; Zed, London 2006

The liberal Virus ; Pluto, London 2004

The globalization of the Law of Value ; Monthly Press, NY 2010