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‘Democracy’? or democratization associated with social progress?

It was a stroke of genius of Atlantic alliance diplomacy to choose the field of ‘democracy’ for their offensive, which was aimed, from the beginning, at the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the re-conquest of the countries of Eastern Europe. This decision goes back to the 1970s and gradually became crystallized in the Conference of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and then with the signing of the final Act in Helsinki in 1975. Jacques Andreani, in his book with the evocative title *Le Piège, Helsinki et la chute du communisme (The Trap: Helsinki and the Fall of Communism)*, explains how the Soviets, who were expecting an agreement on the disarmament of NATO and a genuine détente, were quite simply deceived by their Western partners.

It was a stroke of genius because the ‘question of democracy’ was a genuine issue and the least one could say was that the Soviet regimes were certainly not ‘democratic’, however one defined its concept and practice. The countries of the Atlantic Alliance, in contrast, could qualify themselves as ‘democratic’, whatever the limitations and contradictions in their actual political practices, subordinated to the requirements of capitalist reproduction. The comparison of the systems operated in their favour.

This discourse on democracy was then gradually replaced by the one supported by the Soviets and their allies: ‘pacific coexistence’, associated with ‘respect’ for the political practices of both parties and for ‘non interference’ in their internal affairs.

The coexistence discourse had had its important moments. For example, the Stockholm Appeal in the 1950s, reminded people of the real nuclear threat implied by the aggressive diplomacy employed by the United States since the Potsdam Conference (1945), reinforced by the atomic bombing of Japan just a few days after the conference.

However, at the same time the choice of this strategy (coexistence and non-interference) was convenient – or could be convenient, according to circumstances – to the dominant powers in both West and East. For it enabled the realities of the respective descriptions, ‘capitalist’ and ‘socialist’, to be taken for granted by the countries of both West and East. It eliminated all serious discussion about the precise nature of the two systems: that is, from examining the actually existing capitalism of our era (oligopoly capitalism) and actually existing socialism. The United Nations (with the tacit agreement of the powers of the two worlds) changed the terms of ‘capitalism’ and ‘socialism’ to the ‘market economies’ and the ‘centrally planned economies’ (or, to be mischievous, the ‘administered economies’).

These two terms – both of them false (or only superficially true) – sometimes made it possible to emphasize the ‘convergence of the systems’: a convergence that was itself imposed by modern technology (a theory – also false – derived from a monistic, technicist concept of history). It also accepted coexistence in order to facilitate this ‘natural’ convergence or, on the contrary, stressed the irreducible opposition between the ‘democratic’ model (associated with the market economy) and ‘totalitarianism’ (produced by the ‘administered’ economy), at certain moments during the cold war.

Choosing to concentrate the battle around the ‘democracy’ discourse made it possible to opt for the ‘implacability’ of systems and to offer the Eastern countries only the prospect of capitulation by returning to capitalism (the ‘market’) which should then produce – naturally – the conditions for democratization. The fact that this has not been the case (for post-Soviet Russia), or has taken place in highly caricatural forms (for ethnic groups here and there in Eastern Europe) is another matter.

The ‘democratic’ discourse of the countries of the Atlantic alliance is in fact recent. At the outset NATO accommodated itself perfectly well to Salazar in Portugal, the Turkish generals and the Greek colonels. At the same time the Triad diplomacies supported (and often established) the worst dictatorships that Latin America, Africa and Asia had ever known.

At first the new democratic discourse was adopted with much reticence. Many of the main political authorities of the Atlantic alliance saw the inconveniences that could upset their preferred ‘realpolitik’. It was not until Carter was President of the United States (rather like Obama today) that the ‘moral’ sermon conveyed by democracy was understood. It was Mitterand in France who broke with the Gaullist tradition of refusing the ‘division’ imposed on Europe by the cold war strategy promoted by the United States. Later, the experience of Gorbachev in the USSR made it clear that rallying to this discourse was a guarantee for catastrophe.

The new ‘democratic’ discourse thus bore its fruits. It seemed sufficiently convincing for ‘leftwing’ opinion in Europe to support it. This was so, not only for the electoral left (the socialist parties) but also those with a more radical tradition, of which the communist parties were the heir. With ‘eurocommunism’ the consensus became general.

The dominant classes of the imperialist Triad learnt lessons from their victory. They thus decided to continue this strategy of centring the debate on the ‘democratic question’. China is not reproached for having opened up its economy to the outside world, but because its policies are managed by the communist party. No account is taken for the social achievements of Cuba, unequalled in the whole of Latin America, but its one-party system is constantly stigmatized. The same discourse is even levelled against Putin’s Russia.

Is the triumph of democracy the real objective of this strategy? One has to be very naïve to think so. The only aim is to impose on recalcitrant countries ‘the market economy’, open and integrated into the so-called liberal world system. This is in reality imperialistic, its purpose being to reduce these countries to the status of dominated peripheries of the system. This is an objective that, once achieved, becomes an obstacle to the progress of democracy in the victimized countries and is in no way an advance in response to the ‘democratic question’.

The chances of democratic progress in the countries that practised ‘actually existing socialism’ (at least at the beginning) would have been much greater, in the medium term if not immediately. The dialectics of social struggles would have been left to develop on their own, opening up the possibility of outstripping the limits of ‘actually existing socialism’ (which had, moreover, been deformed by a partial adherence to the opening of the liberal economy) to reach the ‘end of the tunnel’.

In actual fact the ‘democratic’ theme is only invoked against countries that do not want to open up to the globalized liberal economy. There is less concern for highly autocratic

political regimes. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are good examples, but also Georgia (pro the Atlantic alliance) and many others.

Besides, at the very best, the proposed 'democratic' formula hardly goes beyond the caricature of 'multi-party elections' that are not only completely alien to the requirements of social progress but that are always – or almost always – associated with the social regression that the domination of actually existing capitalism (that of the oligopolies) demands and produces. The formula has already largely undermined democracy, for which many peoples, profoundly confused, have now substituted religious and ethnic attachment to the past.

It is therefore more than ever necessary now to reinforce the critique of the radical left (I underline radical to distinguish it from the critique of the left, which is confusing and vague). In other words it must be a critique that associates, rather than dissociates, the democratization of society (and not only its political management) with social progress (in a socialist perspective). In this critique, the struggle for democratization and the struggle for socialism are one and the same. No socialism without democracy, but also no democratic progress without a socialist perspective.

La démocratie, entendue comme un processus sans fin, s'oppose à la formule de la prétendue démocratie électorale représentative pluripartiste, idée de tout contenu capable de lui donner le pouvoir de transformer la société. Cette démocratisation est multidimensionnelle. Elle intègre la question majeure des rapports hommes/femmes. Comme elle intègre toutes les libertés individuelles qu'elle entend développer et non restreindre. Mais elle impose de surcroît la promotion réelle de droits sociaux collectifs, dans la perspective de la socialisation de la gestion de l'économie, au-delà du capitalisme fondé sur le caractère sacré de la propriété privée.

2) The new agrarian question : the 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 last WTO conference (Doha, November 2001) ?

Would such principles foster the accelerating 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 they 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 – non agricultural 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.

Une politique de développement à la hauteur des défis doit être fondée sur la garantie de l'accès au sol et aux moyens de l'exploiter au bénéfice de tous les paysans, dans la plus grande égalité possible. Le progrès nécessaire de la productivité de cette agriculture familiale ne peut être imaginé sans industrialisation qui la soutienne. Etant entendu que les modes de cette industrialisation incontournable ne sauraient reproduire l'essentiel des formes de ceux du capitalisme, qui accusent les inégalités sociales et détruisent les conditions écologiques d'une reproduction saine. Les programmes qui écartent cette exigence pour lui substituer l'aide extérieure, assaisonnée de discours creux (démocratie, bonne gouvernance, réduction de la pauvreté), relèvent de la tradition colonialiste. L'objectif réel de l'impérialisme est de gérer la marginalisation des peuples concernés. Du point de vue de l'impérialisme les ressources naturelles de l'Afrique (pétrole, minerais, terres) sont importantes, pas les peuples africains qui constituent plutôt un obstacle au déploiement du pillage de ces ressources.

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 WTO, imaginative and specific to different areas, since it has to take into consideration specific issues and concrete historical and social conditions.

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

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.

In the time of Marx he not 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!

In fact, as we can already see, the oligopolies have taken over ecologism to justify opening up new fields for their destructive expansion. 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 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*).

‘Green’ capitalism is now 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.

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 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.