

The drama of the great revolutions

The ‘great revolutions’ stand out because they projected themselves far into the future, unlike ‘ordinary revolutions’, which merely respond to the need for change on the immediate agenda. In the modern era, only three major revolutions may be considered great in this sense – the French, the Russian and the Chinese; while comparable revolutions occurred on a smaller scale in Mexico, Yugoslavia, Vietnam and Cuba. Consequently, all the great revolutions suffered the effects of being ahead of their time and had great difficulty stabilizing themselves; their brief moments of radicalism were succeeded by retreats and reactionary restorations. By contrast, the other revolutions (such as those in England and the United States) heralded a calm and stable deployment of the system, merely registering the requirements of social and political relations already established within the framework of nascent capitalism. In fact, they do not really deserve the name ‘revolutions’, so striking were their compromises with the forces of the past and their lack of vision for a more distant future.

In spite of their ‘defeats’, the great revolutions made history – if we consider their long-term impact. By virtue of the avant-garde values defining their project, they enabled creative utopias to seek to win over people’s minds and, in the end, to achieve the highest goal of modernity: to make human beings the active subjects of their history. These values contrast with those of the bourgeois order established elsewhere, which, by fostering passive adaptation to the supposedly objective requirements of the deployment of capital, gave full force to the economic alienation underlying such adaptation.

Since its inception, and at every stage in its history, the global deployment of capitalism has always been polarizing. What imperialism has brought about is not so much a maturing of conditions for ‘socialist revolutions’ (or accelerated tendencies in that direction) in the centres of the world system, as challenges to its order through revolts in the periphery. It is no accident that Russia was the ‘weak link’ in the system in 1917, or that revolution in the name of socialism then shifted eastward to China and elsewhere, whereas the collapse in the West on which Lenin pinned his hopes failed to materialize. The countries that underwent revolution therefore faced the dual, contradictory task of ‘catching up’ (with methods similar to those of capitalism) and ‘doing something else’ (‘building socialism’). This combination turned out as it did in the various countries; it might perhaps have been better, in the sense of allowing communist aspirations to grow stronger as advances were made in catching up. In any event, this real contradiction crucially shaped the objective conditions under which the post-revolutionary societies evolved.

The Soviet Union, and later China, found themselves confronted with a dominant capitalism and Western powers systematically seeking to isolate them. It is easy to understand that, since revolution was not on the immediate agenda elsewhere, the priority was usually given to defence of the post-revolutionary states. This became the central issue shaping political strategy – in the Soviet Union under Lenin and then Stalin and his successors, in Maoist and post-Maoist China, in the national-populist regimes of Asia and Africa, and among the Communist vanguards (whether lined up behind Moscow or Beijing or neither).

The Soviet Union and China experienced the vicissitudes of a great revolution at the same time that they faced the consequences of the uneven expansion of world capitalism. Both post-revolutionary regimes gradually sacrificed their original objectives to the immediate requirements of “catching up” a slide which, by substituting state management for Marx’s communist goal of social ownership and by using brutal (sometimes bloody) dictatorial methods to stifle popular democracy, paved the way for the later rush towards capitalist restoration that is common to the two countries (despite the different roads they have travelled). The instruments deployed internally for ‘defence of the post-revolutionary state’ went hand in hand with external strategies that prioritized the same goal. Communist parties were asked to line up behind these choices, not only in their general strategic direction but even in their day-to-day tactical adjustments. This could not fail to produce a rapid weakening of their capacity for critical thought, an abstract talk of revolution (still supposedly ‘imminent’) and the maintenance of quasi-military forms of organization come hell or high water

detached them from analysis of the real contradictions of society. The vanguards that refused such a crippling alignment, in some cases daring to look the post-revolutionary societies in the face, did not give up the original Leninist hypothesis of the imminence of revolution, even though it had been ever more visibly refuted in reality. This was the case with Trotskyism and the parties of the Fourth International.

It was also true of many activist revolutionary organizations: from the Philippines to India (Naxalite inspired by Maoism), and from the Arab world (Arab nationalists and their followers in South Yemen) to Latin America (Guevarism).

The great national liberation movements of Asia and Africa that came into open conflict with the imperialist order, like those that led revolutions in the name of socialism, had to face the conflicting demands of ‘catching up’ (‘nation-building’) and transforming social relations in favour of the popular classes. With regard to the second of these tasks, the ‘post-revolutionary’ (or simply post-independence) regimes of Asia and Africa were certainly less radical than the Communist regimes – which is why I call them ‘national-populist’. Sometimes they drew inspiration from organizational forms (single party, undemocratic rule, a state-run economy) that had been developed in the experiences of ‘actually existing socialism’, but they generally watered them down through vague ideological choices and compromises with the past.

These were the conditions under which the regimes in place, as well as the critical vanguards (historical Communism), were asked to support the Soviet Union (or, more rarely, China) and invited to enjoy its support. The constitution of this common front against the imperialist aggression of the United States and its European and Japanese partners was certainly beneficial to the peoples of Asia and Africa; it created a degree of autonomy both for the initiatives of their ruling classes and for the activity of popular classes. The proof of this is what happened subsequently, after the Soviet collapse. Even before it, those ruling classes which opted for ‘the West’ on the illusory grounds that this would be favourable to them obtained nothing in the end. In Sadat’s Egypt, the main case in point, the calculation was that a friendly United States, holding nearly all the cards on the Palestinian issue, could turn the situation round in favour of the Arab and Palestinian cause! Indeed, their capitulation encouraged the deployment of the strategic offensives of imperialism and, in the case of Israel, strengthened the Washington–Tel Aviv axis.

This is not to say that Moscow did not impose dubious conditions on political forces that were ranged alongside the popular classes in countries allied to it – and, in particular, on the local Communist parties. One might have thought that, within the anti-imperialist front, these parties would preserve all their autonomy of movement – a recognition of the conflicting interests and social projects among the partners involved in the front. For the ruling classes were ultimately pursuing a capitalist (though also ‘national’) project, whereas the satisfaction of popular class interests required going beyond a perspective whose narrow limits had already been demonstrated in history. But the fact is that the Soviet state fed the illusions that the national capitalist project carried within it, and thereby undermined the autonomous expression of the popular classes. The invention of a theory of the ‘non-capitalist road’ expressed this choice.

There can be no doubt that during the Bandung era (1955–1975) it was difficult to draw a distinction between the interests of governments and the interests of their peoples. The regimes had only recently emerged out of huge national liberation movements (which had routed imperialism in its old ‘colonial’ or ‘semi-colonial’ forms), or sometimes out of genuine revolutions associated with those movements, as in China, Vietnam and Cuba. They were still ‘close’ to their peoples, and enjoyed great legitimacy.