

Establishment of the new world system: 1945-1957

As we can now see, the first decade after the war established the system that would come into its own in the 1960s before lurching into crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. In Re-reading the Postwar Period I have already discussed how we experienced that formative moment at the time, and how it appears to me today with the benefit of hindsight. This frame of reference is important, because my own options were governed by it, but all I can do here is repeat the bare outline, adding a little more detail in connection with regions directly affected by the movements in which I was personally involved.

The success of US strategy in Europe and Japan was rapid and total, thanks to the unconditional support it received from the whole bourgeoisie and all social-democratic parties in these countries. It was a hegemonic strategy which, from the outset, emphasized the constitution of an anti-Soviet military bloc; the key dates are those associated with the introduction of the Marshall Plan (1947), NATO (1949) and the Treaty of San Francisco (1951).

Faced with this deployment, the USSR remained in an isolated and defensive position until the middle of the 1950s, forced to enter into a new arms race to challenge the US monopoly in the military field. At Yalta, Moscow had obtained the right to form a buffer zone in Eastern Europe, but no more, and the establishment of pro-Soviet regimes there came up against various difficulties that it never really overcame. Only after the death of Stalin (1953) and the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU (1956) did the USSR launch a new strategy to break out of its isolation and forge an alliance with the third world. The Bandung Conference of 1955 was the first herald of this. In any case, although the Soviet Union started catching up with the West at the military level (the first sputnik went into orbit in 1957), the Hungarian uprising in 1956 demonstrated how weak the system remained.

The true obstacle to US hegemonist strategy came from the national liberation movement in Asia and Africa, which, from 1945 on, was determined to achieve the independence of non-European nations from the colonial yoke. Up to this day, imperialism has never found the terms of a social and political compromise that could allow a system of rule to stabilize in its favour in the countries of the capitalist periphery. I interpret this failure as proof that such a compromise is objectively impossible, that the polarization resulting from capitalist expansion creates an objective situation in the periphery that is potentially revolutionary and always explosive and unstable.

In the fifteen years after the end of the war, the structure of the world political system underwent radical transformation. For the first time in history, the system of sovereign states was extended to the whole planet, as a result of struggles mobilizing all the peoples of Asia and Africa. Imperialism never made a single concession in this direction without their having to fight for it. The formation of the international system that marks our age did not follow from something that capitalism wished, required or even planned, but on the contrary from struggles that contradicted the

logic of world capitalist expansion, so that the latter was forced to adjust – successfully, it is true, at least in the short term – to the process of transformation. Now, the hegemon of the post-war system – the United States – was in a better position than the waning colonial powers to carry out this adjustment, and sometimes even appeared to favour the way things were going. But, although this appearance to some extent corresponded to reality, as far as concessions to the weakest national liberation movements and de facto acceptance of the neocolonial compromise were concerned, the United States placed itself at the head of the imperialist coalition in order to combat radical movements, whether they were led by Communist Parties (China, Vietnam, Cuba, etc.) or intransigent nationalists supported by a popular movement (Nasserism, Arab and African socialism).

In this perspective, the great flow tide of national liberation (1945–75) that preceded the ebb tide may be said to have scored considerable achievements for the whole of Asia and Africa, and, through a kind of solidarity effect, Latin America. The most striking advances were in China, where national liberation merged with the struggle for socialism. Reading Mao Zedong's *New Democracy* in 1952, soon after its publication, I took the basic position that ours was no longer the epoch of bourgeois revolutions (which were now impossible because the local bourgeoisies had thrown in their lot with the project of imperialist expansion) but the epoch of socialist revolution. On the periphery of the capitalist system, socialist revolution was developing by stages in an uninterrupted strategy: the democratic, anti-imperialist revolution of national liberation, led by the proletariat and its (Communist) party, in close alliance with the peasantry, would neutralize the national bourgeoisie and isolate the enemy feudal-comprador bloc, creating the conditions for a rapid transition to the stage of socialist construction.

In Vietnam and Korea this strategy ran up against imperialist military aggression. Both the first Vietnam war (1945–54) and the second (up to 1975), as well as the Korean war (1950–53), were proof of the collective resolve of the imperialists to oppose this movement.

These earlier experiences were therefore the yardstick for the success of the national liberation movement, since it seemed evident that any liberation which did not go that far would not have completed its route. We thought that the objective conditions for this already existed in Asia and Africa, beginning with Egypt.

Like all young Egyptians at that time, I was excited by the radicalism of the popular anti-imperialist and social movement, which reached its peak on 21 February 1946. The communist movement – which, despite its youth, had gained the respect of everyone in Egypt whose patriotic and social feelings had been roused – was the only force that dared to oppose a monarchy detested by politicized layers among the working classes and the radicalized petty bourgeoisie. It therefore seemed to have the capability to lead a Chinese-style or Vietnamese-style united front. Repression continued: in fact, modern Egypt had known no genuinely democratic period, so great was the fear of communism among the exploiting classes and the imperialist masters. But this did not prevent the red flag from flying over the Nile valley, as we put it, and indeed, in those days, a genuine bourgeois democracy would undoubtedly have

allowed the communists to win large sections of the masses and perhaps even the elections. Neither the bourgeoisie nor the Western powers could accept such a risk.

The creation of Israel and the first Palestine war (1948) gave some respite to local reactionary forces, but the very defeat of 1948 ensured the downfall of the monarchy, the central political pillar of imperialist and reactionary domination. From 1950, the electoral victory of the Wafd (which had been compelled to denounce the unequal treaty of 1936), together with the beginning of guerrilla operations in the occupied Canal Zone, signalled that an anti-feudal, anti-comprador revolution was a real possibility. The Cairo fire of February 1952, the dismissal of the Wafd government and a period of acute governmental instability finally led to the coup d'état by the Free Officers (July 1952), which simultaneously aroused hopes of social advance and cut the ground from under the feet of the progressive forces bearing the country's future.

Nevertheless, having fuelled hopes of Western support and made every concession to obtain it, Nasserism came to understand that nothing could be expected from the United States, whose main objective, since the Tripartite Declaration of 1950 (USA, Britain and France), had been to control the whole region through regimes subservient to it, relying in particular on its two military extensions (Israel and Turkey) and forcing the Arabs to accept military pacts that took over where the British and French protectorates had left off. When Nasser rejected Washington's proposal of a Baghdad pact in 1954, he became the target of an offensive drive to topple him. It was at this same moment, in 1955, that the Bandung front took shape and the USSR broke out of its isolation by offering support to third world national liberation movements. The supply of Czech weapons to Egypt prompted the final decision to overthrow Nasser (October 1956), which France and Britain had been proposing in response to his support for the Algerian FLN and the nationalization of the Suez Canal in July. This last colonial adventure was jointly mounted by London conservatives and Paris socialists, who had forgotten that they could take action only if it suited American plans, and only under American instructions. But the defeat of the expedition opened a whole new chapter for national liberation in Egypt, very different from the conditions of the previous decade. The bourgeoisie, in Egypt as elsewhere, seemed to regain control and leadership of the liberation movement – contrary to the theory that had held sway since 1945.

The Mashreq, the eastern half of the Arab world, was preparing to challenge the fragile equilibrium that had been built in the interwar period. We had not failed to notice the founding of the Baath Party, which would preside over the region's destinies from the late 1950s; we doubted the sincerity of its anti-imperialist positions and found disturbing its somewhat fascist style. Since the events of 1945 in Algeria and 1952 in Tunisia, we had known that the days of colonial rule in the Maghreb were numbered. But who would lead the liberation? Would the Moroccan monarchy and the Tunisian bourgeoisie, to which France had handed over power in 1956 following the outbreak of war in Algeria (on 1 November 1954), be capable of imposing their neocolonial order? Would the powerful people's movement, represented by the Algerian FLN, overcome the anti-communism of its leaders, all too

easily fuelled by the slavish adherence of local CPs to the ambiguous attitude of the French Communist Party?

In Iran the strength of the Tudeh Party filled us with optimism: the chauvinism that the Shah was able to exploit over the Soviet withdrawal from Azerbaijan and Kurdistan (in 1945) proved to be short-lived, and from 1951 to 1953 the events surrounding Mossadegh's nationalization of oil pointed ahead to the great battles of the future. However, Mossadegh's eventual defeat cleared the way for a quarter of a century of the Shah's bloody dictatorship. In 1954, Iran joined Turkey alongside the United States in the battle to subordinate the region to American pactomania.

Since 1950, the liberation struggles in Asia and Africa had been occupying the centre of the global arena. In our view, since the USSR and China – isolated and on the defensive – were able to give us only moral support, we would have to rely on our own forces. The liberation wars and guerrilla campaigns in Southeast Asia seemed to us to have the same potential as the victorious battles in China and Vietnam. So, when reactionary or moderate nationalist forces gained the upper hand in the early 1950s, we thought that we were witnessing a temporary reverse, not the beginning of a new era in which the conflict between imperialism and third world countries would present a very different configuration.

This is why we also considered the partition and the consolidation of Congress rule in India to be major imperialist victories that had brutally halted the development of a Chinese-style war of liberation. The diplomatic rapprochement between Nehru's India and China, and the signing of the treaty on Tibet in 1954, seemed good in themselves but in no way modified our judgement of the Congress Party. The next year, beginning with Bandung, things began to look rather different.

Until the late 1950s, I shared the Soviet-inspired 'Marxist-Leninist' view of the nature of socialism and its construction in the USSR. I did not yet realize that my incipient analysis of capitalist polarization made it necessary to rethink the challenge of actual capitalist expansion in terms other than the contrast between bourgeois revolution and socialist revolution in the periphery, which were the terms of Marxism-Leninism and even classical Marxism. Some of us were certainly not duped by the rosy propagandistic vision of the Soviet system and its growing perfection: our travels in the 'socialist' countries had revealed to us the lack of democracy, and we had read enough to be aware of the violence of the repression. Yet two other realities, which are not always taken sufficiently into account, seemed to us more important than the 'imperfections' of the Soviet system.

The first of these was the hatred and hostility that the Western powers displayed towards the Soviet Union – one need only think of McCarthy-ism or, thirty years later, the 'evil empire' rhetoric of Reagan and Bush – which made us think that its system posed a real danger to capitalism. Moreover, we correctly saw that the Soviet regime was on the defensive, and I never believed for a moment that any Western politician who was not a complete idiot could take seriously the idea that Stalin intended to invade Western Europe. Our position of solidarity with the Soviet Union did not require total belief in its system. But we were used to thinking that, since

1492, the Western powers had never intervened anywhere in the world to defend a defensible cause, and that without exception their interventions had always been harmful to our peoples. We therefore understood, almost spontaneously, that capitalist imperialism could never accept the refusal of any country to bow to its dictates, and that it was just such a refusal which the West held against the USSR.

The second reality was our critical judgement of bourgeois democracy, much more critical than that of many Western progressives. We could see every day how democracy was systematically denied to our peoples, and how Western diplomacy invoked it only when that tactically served its interests. Nothing has changed in this respect. Nevertheless, our argument was not valid at a psychological level, for socialism – or even any popular advance towards socialism – must by definition be more democratic than any bourgeois democracy. We bent the stick too far in the other direction. When it was a question of our own countries, we passed a severe judgement on the democratic deficit of the populist nationalist regimes. We were right to do this, but we should have seen that the argument also applied to the USSR.

With regard to the ‘general crisis of capitalism’, to use the Soviet concept of the time, our view was very optimistic. We thought that objective conditions throughout the third world were essentially the same as in China, and that the radical development of national liberation in the direction of socialist revolution was the order of the day. The emergence of a new national-bourgeois thrust, beginning with Bandung, subsequently proved that our analysis had been too simplistic. It should be borne in mind, however, that we did not think that socialist revolution was on the agenda elsewhere than in the periphery of the system.

(from *Memories* pages 47-53)