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The South and the Depression; Africa in the globalisation in crisis

1. The North-South conflict in the globalisation in crisis

Global capitalism does not call into question the opposition centre/periphery; on the contrary it accentuates its conflict.

Contemporary capitalism has reached an extreme stage of centralisation of capital ownership: three to five thousand groups, nearly all located in the countries of the Triad (United States, Europe, Japan) control, for the first time in history, all the systems of production, distribution and consumption at the scales of the nations of the Centre and, indirectly, that of the global system. These generalised monopolies centralise for their benefit an increased imperialist rent. The latter comes from multiple sources that are visible (the low wages paid in the export industries of the peripheries) or hidden behind their control of the globalised financial market, overprotection of industrial patents, their quasi-exclusive access to the natural resources of the whole planet, and lastly, the globalisation of the powerful political means at the disposal of Western powers, strengthened by their quasi monopoly over weapons of mass destruction. Thereby, the contradiction centre/periphery, far from being alleviated by the deepening of globalisation, is accentuated.

Yet, to all appearances, the so-called emerging countries (China, India, Brazil and others) have benefited from the globalisation of the 1990s and 2000s that enabled them to accelerate their growth pace. It is those appearances that made us say – hastily – that the conflict centre/periphery is for them almost extinct (“they are catching up” in and through capitalist globalisation).

The question is to know why it has been so and whether the pursuit of this evolution is sustainable. Capitalism has entered into a long structural crisis as from the 1970s: growth rates in the countries of the Triad fell down to half their levels of the “Glorious Thirty” (1945-1975) and have never got back to those levels since then. The capital reacted to this crisis with centralisation and financierisation, which are indissociable: the flight into finance has been the sole mean for oligopolies to find a market for their increasing surpluses. Liberal globalisation crowned it all. The success of this response has created the conditions for a marked blooming from 1990 to 2008 (which I qualified as “*Belle Epoque*”). The emerging countries’ strategies of growth acceleration through prioritisation of their exports fell within that era which ensured their immediate success.

The pursuit of this globalised capitalist option is unsustainable for many reasons. The main one is that this way will not make it possible to absorb the gigantic mass of peasantries (nearly half humanity still, located for almost all in the three continents: Asia, Africa and Latin America) in a development of modern industries and services. The historic capitalist way based on private ownership of the agrarian soil and its reduction to the status of merchandise was possible only for Europe, thanks to the massive emigration permitted by the conquest of the Americas (the “Europeans” accounted for 18% of the world population in 1500; in 1900, Europeans from Europe and migrants outside of Europe represented 36%). The people for Asia and Africa, who have no such opportunity, cannot follow the same development path. In other words, while historic capitalism did solve the agrarian issue for Europe, it remains unable to do so in the peripheries.

Those among the countries in the South who would persist in this way and accept to “adjust” on a day-to-day basis to conditions that would be increasingly severe with the deepening of the crisis, will find themselves not to have built a “national capitalism” capable of dealing on equal terms with the collective imperialism of the Triad, but in the situation of countries ravaged by a lumpen capitalism, for all that vulnerable and thereby dominated. Imperialist powers only see in these countries “emerging markets” whose development will necessarily fall within this deplorable perspective. But the countries concerned see themselves as “emerging nations”. The difference is significant.

The nations in the South, therefore, are to loose their illusions relating to the “accelerated development in and through globalisation”. The increasing difficulties of adjustment already promote the fights of the victims – peasants for land, workmen for better wages, peoples for the conquest of democratic rights. In order to meet the challenge, the powers will have to refocus their development on the domestic market (an initiative taken by China as from 2002). This new self-centred development path – unavoidable – will remain certainly difficult. It must associate complementary but also conflicting means: the recourse to the “market” (which, in the modern world, is always a “capitalist” market) and to social planning (as little bureaucratic as possible, paving the way, as much as possible, to the active intervention of popular classes).

The conflict between the collective imperialism of the Triad and the nations of the South is to intensify around issues relating to access to world services, technologies, and the globalised financial market. Imperialism is aware that the monopolies that ensure its rent are fragile and the countries in the South can annihilate their power; that’s why its sole response consists in the deployment of the project of military control of the Planet by the armed forces of the United States and their subordinated allies in NATO.

Will the conflict centre/periphery mobilise all the Southern countries? This was the case in the Bandung era, despite the huge differences between the Southern countries of the time, not less marked than today. But this possibility is not certain. The emerging countries – the real periphery of contemporary capitalism – could nurture the illusion that they can, like the imperialist countries, even if it is in acute competition with them, benefit from the plundering of the resources of the devastated peripheries (a reality that was repeated in history) which are thereby particularly powerless.

What will the world be “after the depression”? Impossible to tell. Let us not forget that the first long depression which started in the 1870s, and to which the capital of that time had responded also with monopolisation, (colonial) globalisation and financierisation, has led – after the short bloom of the first “*Belle Epoque*” (1894-1914), to 1914-1945, *i. e.*, World War I, the Russian revolution, the 1929 crisis, Nazism, World War II, the Chinese Revolution. It is those “events” – not easily qualified as minor – that shaped the “post crisis” world, that is, the combination during the Glorious Thirty of social-democracy in the West, the really existing socialisms in the East, and the popular nationalisms of the Bandung era (1955-1980) in the South. The second crisis will call for transformations of equal scope (even if they will be “different”). The conflict centre/periphery and the conflict capitalism/perspectives that requires going beyond that one are indissociable.

(I here refer to my paper: Exiting the crisis of capitalism or exiting capitalism in crisis)

2. Africa, a particularly vulnerable region in globalisation in crisis

Africa had been plunged in the dark night of colonisation, a brutal form of globalisation imposed by the capitalism of the monopolies in response to its first great depression in the late XIXth Century, taking over from the slave trade, itself at the root of its historical regression. The national liberation movements, which finally succeeded in imposing the independence of the continent's states, then conceived a big project of African Renaissance: an ambitious project as was required, associating an accelerated development, both agricultural and industrial, to the universalisation of education and to constructions of regional integrations falling within a pan-African perspective.

The historical blocks built by the National Liberation Movements imposed this perspective equal to the challenge. And the radical intelligentsia, in conceptualising and implementing this project, had been able to respond to the requirements of the challenge, think with audacity and think by itself. During the 1960s and 1970s, Africa has thereby made giant progress, to the extent that the new image of the continent made forget the image of desolation inherited from colonisation.

But this social progress was gradually bogged down under the combined effect of the internal contradictions whose emergence it developed, and the hostility of imperialism. The peasantries have been gradually marginalised in the historical blocks in power, to the benefit of the ruling classes – and sometimes new middle classes – whose desire is to become the absolute masters of local power, thereby having to make the degenerate forms of the State fulfil the functions of a comprador State.

Two major constraints to the first achievements of independent Africa are at the origin of this drift. The first one has to do with the insignificance of the results in the unavoidable industrialisation, stemming from the illusions that foreign capital was able to help resolve the issue of its financing. The second one relates to the cultural stagnation of African nations which remained prisoners of the exclusive use of the colonisation's foreign languages.

These failures have created the conditions that enabled imperialism to resume the offensive in view of the recolonisation of Africa during the 1980s/90s, through the structural adjustment programmes, privatisation, the destruction of States, their submission to the diktats of “aid donor clubs”, accompanied by the insipid discourses in fashion on “poverty”, “good governance” and civil society.

The tragedy is that African intellectuals on the whole were duped by these discourses which presented the big project of African Renaissance as a “grandiloquent, nationalist and unrealistic” drift. Of course, one forgets to say that the countries that became “emerging” are precisely those that progressed in industrialisation in double time.

Africa today is then bound to no longer have ambition beyond its adjustment on a day-to-day basis to the requirements of the pursuit of the expansion of the capitalism of oligopolies; a way which we said could only lead to absolute disaster. In this perspective, Africa only exists for her natural resources it offers to plunder: the resources of its subsoil (hydrocarbons, gold, diamonds and even more important, rare minerals), her lands now offered to the expansion of agribusiness for new export productions (agrofuels and other).

Our project is to gather together a critical mass of intellectuals capable, beyond the analysis of the disastrous politics underway, of outlining an authentic renaissance of thinking that is audacious, independent and up to the challenge.