

HISTORICAL CAPITALISM – ACCUMULATION BY DISPOSSESSION

Dominant bourgeois thought has replaced the historical reality of capitalism by an imaginary construction based on the principle, claimed to be eternal, of the rational and egoistic behaviour of the individual. ‘Rational’ society – produced by the competition required by this principle – is thus seen as having arrived at the ‘end of history’. Conventional economics, which is the fundamental base of this thinking, therefore substitutes the generalised ‘market’ for the reality of capitalism (and the ‘capitalist market’).

Marxist thought has been built up based on quite another vision, that of the permanent transformation of the fundamental structures of societies, which is always historical.

In this framework – that of historical materialism – capitalism is historical, has had a beginning and will have an end. Accepting this principle, the nature of this historical capitalism should be the object of continual reflection, which is not always the case in the ranks of the ‘historical Marxisms’ (that is, Marxism as interpreted by those who claim it). Certainly one can accept the very general idea that capitalism constitutes a ‘necessary’ stage, preparing conditions for socialism – a more advanced stage of human civilization. But this idea is too general and insufficient precisely because it reduces ‘capitalism – necessary stage’ to really existing historical capitalism.

I shall sum up my reflections on this question in the following points that will be developed in the following pages:

Accumulation through dispossession is a permanent feature in the history of capitalism.

- Historical capitalism is, therefore, imperialist by nature at all stages of its development, in the sense that it polarises by the inherent effect of the laws that govern it.

- From this it follows that this capitalism cannot become the ‘unavoidable’ stage for the peoples of the peripheries of the historical capitalism system, that is necessary to create, here as elsewhere (in the centres of the system), the conditions for overtaking it by ‘socialism’. ‘Development and under-development’ are the two inseparable sides of the historical capitalism coin.

- This historical capitalism is itself inseparable from the conquest of the world by the Europeans. It is inseparable from the Eurocentric ideology which is, by definition, a non-universal form of civilization.

- Other forms of response to the need for ‘accelerated accumulation’ (compared with the rhythms of the accumulation of the ancient epochs of civilization), a necessary premise for the socialism of the future, would have been ‘possible’. This can be discussed. But these forms, perhaps visible in an embryonic way elsewhere than in the Europe of the transition to capitalism (in China, among others), have not been implemented as they have been crushed by the European conquest.

- Thus there is no alternative for human civilisation other than to engage in a construction of socialism, this in turn being based on the strategic concepts that must command the objective results produced by the globalised and polarising expansion of ‘western’ capitalism/imperialism.

Accumulation by dispossession is a permanent feature in the history of really existing capitalism

The vulgar ideology of conventional economics and the cultural and social ‘thinking’ that goes with it claims that accumulation is financed by the ‘virtuous’ savings of the ‘rich’ (the wealthy owners), like the nations. History hardly confirms this invention of the Anglo-American puritans. It is, on the

contrary, an accumulation largely financed by the dispossession of some (the majority) for the profit of others (the minority). Marx rigorously analysed these processes which he described as primitive accumulation, such as the dispossession of the English peasants (the Enclosures), that of the Irish peasants (for the benefit of the conquering English 'landlords') and that of the American colonisation being eloquent examples. In reality, this primitive accumulation was not exclusively taking place in bygone and outdated capitalism. It continues still today.

It is possible to measure the importance of the accumulation through dispossession – an expression that I prefer to that of primitive accumulation. The measure that I am proposing here, is based on the consequences of this dispossession – and can be expressed in demographic terms and in terms of the apparent value of the social product that accompanies it.

The population of the world tripled between 1500 (450-550 million inhabitants) and 1900 (1,600 million), then by 3.75 during the 20th century (now over 6,000 million). But the proportion of the Europeans (those of Europe and of their conquered territories in America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand) increased from 18 per cent (at most) in 1500 to 37 per cent in 1900, to fall gradually during the 20th century. The first four centuries (1500 to 1900) correspond to the conquest of the world by the Europeans, the 20th century – which continues through to the 21st century – to the 'awakening of the South', the renaissance of the conquered peoples.

The conquest of the world by the Europeans constitutes a colossal dispossession of the Indians of America, who lost their land and natural resources to the colonists. The Indians were almost totally exterminated (a genocide of the Indians of North America) or reduced, by the effects of this dispossession and their over-exploitation by the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors, to a tenth of their former population. The slave trade that followed represented a plunder of a large part of Africa that set back the progress of the continent by half a millennium. Such phenomena are visible in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Algeria, and still more in Australia and New Zealand. This accumulation by dispossession characterises the state of Israel, which is a colonisation still in progress. No less visible are the consequences of colonial exploitation among the peasantry subjected by British India, the Dutch Indies, the Philippines and of Africa, as evinced by the famines (the famous one of Bengal, those of contemporary Africa). The method was inaugurated by the English in Ireland, whose population – formerly the same as that of England – still today only represents one tenth of that of the English, caused largely by the organised famine denounced by Marx.

Dispossession not only affected the peasant populations, which were the great majority of peoples in the past. It also destroyed capacities for industrial production (artisanat and manufacturing) of regions that once and for a long time had been more prosperous than Europe itself: China and India, among others (the developments described by Amiya Kumar Bagchi, in his last work, *Perilous Passage*, provide indisputable proof of this).

It is important here to understand that this destruction was not produced by the 'laws of the market', European industry – claimed to be more 'effective' – having taken the place of non-competitive production. The ideological discourse does not discuss the political and military violence utilised to achieve it. They are not the 'canons' of English industry, but the cannons of the gunboat period. These won out in spite of the superiority – and not inferiority – of the Chinese and Indian industries. Industrialisation, which was prohibited by the colonial administration, did the rest and 'developed the under-development' of Asia and Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries. The colonial atrocities and the extreme exploitation of workers were the natural means and results of accumulation through dispossession.

From 1500 to 1800, the material production of the European centres progressed at a rate that was hardly greater than that of its demographic growth (but this was strong in relative terms for that era). These rhythms accelerated during the 19th century, with the deepening – and not the attenuation - of the exploitation of the peoples overseas, which is why I speak of the permanent accumulation by dispossession and not 'primitive' (i.e. 'first', 'preceding') accumulation. This does not exclude that

the contribution of accumulation financed by technological progress during the 19th and 20th centuries – the successive industrial revolutions – then took on an importance that it never had during the three mercantilist centuries that preceded it. Finally, therefore, from 1500 to 1900, the apparent production of the new centres of the capitalist/ imperialist world system (western and central Europe, the United States and, a late arrival, Japan) increased by 7 to 7.5 times, in contrast with those of the peripheries which barely doubled. The gap widened as had never been possible in the history of all humanity. During the course of the 20th century, it widened still further, bringing the apparent per capita income to a level of 15 to 20 times greater than that of the peripheries as a whole.

The accumulation by dispossession of centuries of mercantilism largely financed the luxuries and standard of living of the governing classes of the period (the ‘Ancien Régime’), without benefiting the popular classes whose standard of living often worsened as they were themselves victims of the accumulation by the dispossession of large swathes of the peasantry. But, above all, it had financed an extraordinary reinforcement of the powers of the modern State, of its administration and its military power. This can be seen by the wars of the Revolution and of the Empire that marked the junction between the preceding mercantilist epoch and that of the subsequent industrialisation period. This accumulation is therefore at the origin of the two major transformations that had taken place by the 19th century: the first industrial revolution and the easy colonial conquest.

The popular classes did not benefit from the colonial prosperity at first, in fact until late in the 19th century. This was obvious in the tragic scenes of the destitution of workers in England, as described by Engels. But they had an escape route, the massive emigration that accelerated in the 19th and 20th centuries – to the point that the population of European origin became greater than that of the regions to which they emigrated. Is it possible to imagine two or three billion Asians and Africans having that advantage today?

The 19th century represented the apogee of this system of capitalist/imperialist globalisation. In fact, from this point on the expansion of capitalism and ‘westernisation’ in the brutal sense of the term made it impossible to distinguish between the economic dimension of the conquest and its cultural dimension, Eurocentrism.

The various forms of external and internal colonialisms, to which I refer here (for more details see *From Capitalism to Civilization*, p. 108 *et seq.*) constituted the framework of accumulation by dispossession and gave substance to imperialist rent, the effects of which have been decisive in shaping the rich societies of the contemporary imperialist centre.

Capitalism: a parenthesis in history

The development of historical capitalism is based on the private appropriation of agrarian land, the submission of agricultural production to the requirements of the ‘market’ and, on this basis, the continuing and accelerating expulsion of the peasant population for the benefit of a small number of capitalist farmers, who were no longer peasants and who ended up by forming an insignificant percentage of the population (from 5 to 10 per cent). They are, however, capable of producing enough to feed (well) all their country’s population, and even export much of the surplus production. This path, started by England in the 18th century (with the Enclosures) and gradually extended to the rest of Europe in the 19th century, constituted the essence of the historical path of capitalist development.

It seemed very effective. But whether it is effective or not (I shall return to this question in Chapter 5), can it be imitated today in the peripheries of the system?

This capitalist path was only possible because the Europeans had at their disposal the great safety-valve of immigration to the Americas, which we mentioned earlier. But this solution simply does not exist for the peoples of the periphery today. Moreover, modern industrialisation cannot absorb more than a small minority of the rural populations concerned because, compared with the industries of the

19th century, it now integrates technological progress – the condition of its efficiency – which economises the labour that it employs. The capitalist path cannot produce anything else than the ‘slum planet’ (which is visible in the contemporary capitalist Third World), producing and reproducing indefinitely cheap labour. This is in fact the reason why this path is politically unfeasible. In Europe, North America and Japan, the capitalist path – involving emigration outlets and the profits from imperialism – certainly created, rather belatedly, the conditions for a social compromise between capital and labour (particularly apparent in the period following the Second World War, with the welfare State, although this had already existed in less explicit forms since the end of the 19th century). The conditions of a compromise based on this model do not exist for the peripheries of today. The capitalist path in China and Vietnam, for example, cannot create a broad popular alliance, integrating the worker class and the peasantry. It can only find its social basis in the new middle classes that have become the exclusive beneficiaries of this development. The ‘social-democratic’ way is now therefore excluded. The inevitable alternative is one of a ‘peasant’ development model, to which we shall return in Chapter 5.

The question of natural resources constitutes a second decisive issue in the conflict of civilization that opposes capitalism to socialism in the future. The exploitation of the non-renewable resources of the South for the exclusive profit of the consumption wastage of the North is also a form of accumulation by dispossession. The exchange of these resources against renewable goods and services jeopardises the future of the peoples of the South, who are being sacrificed on the altar of the super-profits of the imperialist oligopolies.

The destructive dimension of capitalism, at least for the peoples of the peripheries, makes it impossible to believe that this system can be sustainable and ‘imitated’ by those who seem to be ‘backward’. Its place in the history of humanity is that of a parenthesis that creates the conditions for overtaking it. If this does not happen capitalism can only lead to barbarism, the end of all human civilization.

The course of really existing capitalism is composed of a long period of maturing, lasting over several centuries, leading to a short moment of apogee (19th century), followed by a probably long decline, starting in the 20th century, which could initiate a long transition to globalised socialism.

Capitalism is not the result of a brutal, almost magical apparition, chosen by the London/Amsterdam/Paris triangle to be established in the short period of the Reform/Renaissance of the 16th century. Three centuries earlier, it had experienced its first formulation in the Italian cities. The first formulas were brilliant but limited in space and thus crushed by the surrounding ‘feudal’ European world. This is why, having been set back by successive defeats, these first experiences collapsed. It is also possible to discuss various antecedents to these, in the commercial towns along the Silk Route of China and India to the Arab and Persian Islamic Middle East (see my comments on the Chinese path described in Chapter 2). Later, in 1492, with the conquest of the Americas by the Spanish and the Portuguese, began the creation of the mercantile/slavery/capitalist system. But the monarchies of Madrid and Lisbon, for various reasons which we shall not go into here, were unable to give a definitive form to mercantilism which, instead, the English, Dutch and French were to invent. This third wave of social, economic, political and cultural transformations, which was to produce the transition to capitalism in its historical form that we know (the Ancien Régime) would have been unthinkable without the two preceding waves. Why should it not be the same for socialism: a long process, lasting centuries, for the invention of a more advanced stage of human civilisation.

The apogee of the system did not last long: hardly one century separated the industrial and French revolutions from 1917. This was the century when these two revolutions were accomplished, taking over Europe and its North American offspring – as well as the challenges to them, from the Commune of Paris in 1871 to the 1917 revolution – and achieving the conquest of the world, which seemed resigned to its fate.

Could this historical capitalism continue to develop, allowing the peripheries of the system to ‘overcome their backwardness’ to become ‘developed’ capitalist societies like those in the dominant centres? If this were possible, if the laws of the system allowed it, then the ‘catching up’ by and through capitalism would have had an objective unavoidable strength, a necessary precondition to an ulterior socialism. But this vision, obvious and dominant as it seemed, was simply false. Historical capitalism is – and continues to be – polarising by nature, rendering ‘catching up’ impossible.

Historical capitalism must be overtaken and this cannot be done unless the societies in the peripheries (the great majority of humanity) set to work out systematic strategies of delinking from the global system and reconstructing themselves on an autonomous basis, thus creating the conditions for an alternative globalisation, engaged on the long road to world socialism. I will not take up this analysis here, as it can be read in my *Obsolescent Capitalism* (Annex IV). Pursuing the capitalist path to development thus represents, for the peoples of the periphery, a tragic impasse. This is because the ‘developed’ capitalism of some – the dominant minority centres (20 per cent of the world population) – requires the ‘under-development’ of the others (80 per cent of the world population). The impasse can thus be seen in all dimensions of social, economic and political life. And it manifests itself most strikingly in the agrarian question.

The 20th century: the first wave of socialist revolutions and the awakening of the ‘South’

Thus the apogee of the system lasted only a short while: hardly a century. The 20th century experienced the first wave of the great revolutions conducted in the name of socialism (Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba) and the radicalization of the liberation struggles of Asia, Africa and Latin America (the peripheries of the imperialist/ capitalist system) whose ambitions were expressed in the ‘Bandung project’ (1955-1981).

This coincidence was not by chance. The globalisation of capitalism/imperialism had imposed the greatest tragedy in human history on the peoples of the peripheries concerned, showing up the destructive character of capital accumulation. The law of pauperisation formulated by Marx at the level of the system was still more violent than the father of socialist thought had imagined. This page of history has been turned over for good. The peoples of the periphery will no longer accept the destiny that capitalism reserves for them. This change of fundamental attitudes is irreversible. It means that capitalism has entered into its decline. This does not exclude various illusions: those of reforms capable of giving capitalism a human face (which it has never had for the majority of peoples), those of a possible ‘catching up’ in the system, which is cherished by the governing classes in the ‘emerging’ countries, exhilarated by momentary success, those of nostalgic retreat (para-religious or para-ethnic) into which many of the ‘excluded’ peoples have sunk at the moment. These illusions continue as we are still in the trough of the wave. The wave of the revolutions of the 20th century is spent and that of the new radicalism of the 21st century has not yet affirmed itself. And in an interregnum, ‘a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’, as Gramsci wrote. The awakening of the peoples of the periphery has made itself felt since the 20th century, not only because of their demographic catching up, but also by their express desire to reconstruct their State and their society, delinked from the imperialism of the four preceding centuries.

I therefore proposed looking at the 20th century as one of the first wave of struggles for the emancipation of the workers and of peoples (*The World We Wish to See*, Chapter 1), of which I mention here only the main theses.

Bandung and the first globalization of the struggles (1955-1981)

The governments and peoples of Asia and Africa proclaimed at Bandung, in 1955, their desire to reconstruct the world system on a basis of recognizing the rights of nations that had up until then been dominated. This ‘right to development’ was the foundation of globalisation at that time, implemented

in a multipolar negotiated framework imposed on an imperialism that was forced to adjust to these new requirements.

The industrialisation progress that started during the Bandung era was not the result of imperialist logic but it was imposed by the victories of the peoples of the South. Undoubtedly, this progress cherished the illusion of 'catching up' which seemed on the way to becoming a reality, while imperialism, forced to adjust to the demands of the development of the peripheries, recomposed itself around new forms of domination. The old contrast of imperialist countries/dominated countries, which was synonymous with the contrast of the industrialised countries/non-industrialised countries, gradually gave way to a new contrast based on the centralisation of the advantages associated with the 'five new monopolies of the imperialist centres' (control over new technologies, natural resources, the global financial system, communications and weapons of mass destruction).

The long decline of capitalism and the long transition to world socialism

Is the long decline of capitalism the same as the long positive transition to socialism? If it is to be so, it is necessary that the 21st century prolongs the 20th century and radicalises the objectives of social transformation. This is completely possible but the conditions must be spelt out. Otherwise the long decline of capitalism will turn into the continual degradation of human civilization. I shall refer here to what I wrote on this subject more than 25 years ago: 'Revolution or decadence?' (*Class and Nation*).

The decline was not a continuous, linear process. There were moments of revival, of the counter-offensive of capital, like the counter-offensive of the governing classes of the Ancien Régime on the eve of the French Revolution.

The present time is of that kind. The 20th century was a first chapter in the long apprenticeship of the people in going beyond capitalism and inventing new socialist forms of living, to borrow the expression of Dominico Losurdo (*Fuir l'Histoire*, Delga, 2007). Like him, I do not analyse its development in terms of 'failure' (of socialism, of national independence) as reactionary propaganda, which has the wind in its sails today, tries to make out. On the contrary it is the very successes and not the failures of this first wave of socialist and national popular experiences which are at the origin of the problems of the contemporary world. I have analysed the projects of this first wave in terms of three families of social and political advances: the Welfare State in the imperialist West (the historical compromise between capital and labour of the period), the really existing socialisms (Soviet and Maoist), and the national popular systems of the Bandung era. The analysis is made in terms of their complementarity and conflictuality at the world level (a different perspective from that of the 'cold war' and the bipolarity proposed today by the defenders of the 'capitalism-End of History' school, as I stress the multipolar character of globalisation in the 20th century). The social contradictions of each of these systems, the tentative nature of these first advances, explain their loss of impetus and finally their defeat, and not their failure (Samir Amin, *Obsolescent Capitalism*, pp. 7-21).

It is thus this inertia that created favourable conditions for the current capital counter-offensive: the new 'perilous passage' of the liberations of the 20th century to those of the 21st century. It is therefore important now to tackle the nature of this 'trough' moment that separates the two centuries and to identify the new challenges that confront the peoples of the world.

The counter-offensive of capitalism in decline

The contrast of centres with the peripheries is no longer similar to that of industrialised countries and non-industrialised countries. The polarisation of centres/peripheries, which gave the expansion of world capitalism its imperialist character, continues and even increases through the 'five new monopolies' that the imperialist centres enjoy (as previously explained). In these conditions, the pursuit of accelerated development by the emerging peripheries, implemented with unquestioned

success (in China, particularly, but also in other countries of the South) has not got rid of imperialist domination. It has led to a new contrast between the centres and the peripheries, not to its overtaking.

Imperialism is no longer written in the plural as in the earlier phases of its development: it is a 'collective imperialism' of the Triad (United States, Europe, Japan). In this sense, the common interests shared by the oligopolies based in the Triad are greater than the conflicts of ('mercantile') interests that could oppose them to each other. This collective character of imperialism is expressed through the management of a world system by the common instruments of the Triad: at the economic level, by the World Trade Organization (the colonial ministry of the Triad), the International Monetary Fund (the colonial collective monetary agency), the World Bank (the propaganda ministry), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (constituted to prevent Europe from extricating itself from liberalism); at the political level, by the G7/G8, the armed forces of the United States and their subordinate instrument, NATO (the marginalization/ domestication of the United Nations completing the picture). The US hegemonic project, implemented through a programme of the military control of the planet (involving, among other things, the abrogation of international law and the law that Washington has conferred upon itself to conduct the 'preventive wars' of its choice) is articulated through collective imperialism and makes it possible for the American leader to over-compensate for its economic deficiencies.

In counterpoint: the aims and means of a strategy of constructing convergence in diversity

The peoples of the three continents (Asia, Africa and Latin America) are confronted today with the expansion of the imperialist system called globalised neoliberalism, which is nothing less than the construction of *apartheid* at the world level. The new imperial order will be challenged. By whom? And what will result from this challenge?

Here I shall just outline the main proposals that I have developed elsewhere (*From Capitalism to Civilization*, p. 127 *et seq.*).

There is no doubt that the image of the dominant reality makes it difficult to imagine an immediate challenge to this order. The governing classes of the countries of the South, defeated as they are, have largely accepted to play their role of subordinate comprador classes while the peoples, confused and caught up in the daily struggle for survival, often seem to accept their lot or even, worse still, to harbour new illusions that their own governing classes hold out before them.

The governing classes of certain countries of the South have obviously chosen a strategy that is neither that of a passive submission to the dominant forces in the world system, nor of declared opposition to them: a strategy of active interventions upon which they base their hopes to accelerate the development of their country. China, through the solidity of its national construction given to it by its revolution and Maoism, by its option to conserve control of its currency and capital movements, by its refusal to question the collective ownership of the land (the main revolutionary conquest of the peasants), is better equipped than the others to make this choice and to achieve incontestably brilliant results.

Can this experience continue? And what are its limits? After analysing the contradictions inherent in this option I have concluded that the idea of a national capitalism capable of imposing itself on equal terms with the main powers of the world system is based largely on illusions. The objective conditions inherited from history do not make it possible to implement a social compromise between capital, labour and peasantry that guarantees the stability of the system. In time it has to drift to the right (and then be confronted by the growing social movements of the popular classes) or evolve towards the left by building 'market socialism' as a stage along the long transition to socialism. The problems of Vietnam are similar. The apparently analogous choices made by the governing classes of the other so-called 'emerging' countries are still more fragile. Neither Brazil nor India – because they have not had a radical revolution like China – are capable of opposing a similar strong resistance to the double pressures of imperialism and the reactionary local classes.

And yet the societies of the South – at least some of them – are today equipped with the means enabling them to completely rid themselves of the ‘monopolies’ of the imperialist centres. These societies are capable of developing by themselves without falling into dependency. They have the potential of a technological mastery that would enable them to use it for themselves. They can constrain the North, recover the use of their natural resources and force the North to adjust to a consumption pattern that is less scandalous. They can extricate themselves from financial globalisation. Already they are questioning the monopoly of weapons of mass destruction that the United States wants to reserve for itself. They can develop South-South trade – of goods, services, capital, technologies – which was unthinkable in 1955, when none of these countries possessed industries and the mastery of technology. More than ever before, the possibility of delinking is on the agenda.

Will these societies do it? And who will undertake it? The existing governing bourgeois classes? I very much doubt it. The popular classes in power? Probably, it will first be national/popular transitional regimes.

For a socialist renewal of the 21st century: the capitalism/ socialism conflict and the North/South conflict are inseparable

The North/South (centres/peripheries) conflict is a major issue in the whole history of capitalist development. It is the reason why the struggle of the peoples of the South for their liberation – which in general is becoming victorious – is based on a questioning of capitalism. This is inevitable. The capitalism/socialism conflicts and those of the North/South are inseparable. Socialism is inconceivable without the universalism that involves the equality of peoples. Here again I refer the reader to the proposals that I developed in *From Capitalism to Civilization*.

As capitalism is a world system and not just the juxtaposing of national capitalist systems, political and social struggles, if they are to be effective, must be conducted simultaneously in the national arena (which remains decisive because the conflicts, alliances and social and political compromises are to be worked out there) and at the world level. This viewpoint, which is obvious to me, seems to have been that of Marx and the historical Marxisms (“Workers of the world, unite!”) and, in its enriched Maoist version, “Proletarians of all countries, oppressed peoples, unite!”

It is impossible to foresee the trajectory that will be traced by the unequal advances of the struggles in the South and in the North. My feeling is that at this moment the South is going through a crisis, but that it is a crisis of growth, in the sense that the pursuit of the liberation objectives of its peoples is irreversible. The peoples of the North would do well to take their measure, all the more so if they maintain this perspective and associate it with the construction of socialism. There was a moment of solidarity of this kind at the time of Bandung: young Europeans proclaimed their solidarity with the Third World. It was doubtlessly naïve, but how much better than their current turning in on themselves!

Without going back to the analyses of actually existing world capitalism that I have developed elsewhere, I will just recall their conclusions. In my opinion, humanity cannot engage seriously in the construction of a socialist alternative to capitalism unless things change in the developed West. That does not mean at all that the peoples of the periphery have to wait for this change and, until it happens, content themselves by ‘adapting’ to the possibilities offered by capitalist globalisation. On the contrary, it is more probable that, to the extent that things begin to change in the peripheries that the Western societies, forced into it, could be led, in their turn, to evolve as required for the progress of humanity as a whole. If this does not happen, the worst is most probable: barbarism and the suicide of human civilisation. Of course I envisage the desirable and possible changes in both the centres and in the peripheries of the global system in the framework of what I have called ‘the long transition’.

In the peripheries of globalised capitalism – by definition the ‘storm zones’ in the imperialist system – a form of revolution certainly remains on the agenda. But its aim is by nature ambiguous and vague: national liberation from imperialism (and the maintenance of much, or even of the essential of the social relationships that belong to capitalist modernity) – or will it be more than that? Whether it is the radical revolutions of China, Vietnam and Cuba or those which were not radical elsewhere in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the challenge remains: ‘catching up’ and/or ‘doing something else’. This challenge is in turn linked to another task generally considered of equal priority: to defend the Soviet Union which is being encircled. The Soviet Union and later China find themselves confronted by the strategies of systematic isolation used by dominant capitalism and the Western powers. One can therefore understand why, revolution not being on the immediate agenda elsewhere, the priority is generally given to saving the post-revolutionary states.

The Soviet Union and China have experienced the vicissitudes of the great revolutions and have also had to confront the consequences of the unequal expansion of world capitalism. Both these factors gradually sacrificed the original communist objectives to the immediate requirements of economic catching up. This shift, abandoning the aim of social ownership by which the communism of Marx defined itself, substituted State management. This was accompanied by the decline of popular democracy, which was crushed by a brutal (and sometimes bloody) dictatorship of the post-revolutionary power and it accelerated the evolution towards the restoration of capitalism. In both experiences priority was given to the ‘defence of the post-revolutionary State’ and internal means were used for this purpose, as well as external strategies giving priority to such defence. The communist parties were thus invited to fall in line with this option, not only as concerns the global strategic direction but also in their tactical day-to-day adjustments. This inevitably caused a rapid weakening of critical thinking among the revolutionaries whose abstract discourse on the ‘revolution’ (always ‘imminent’) was far removed from an analysis of the real contradictions of society and this was supported by maintaining almost military forms of organisation against all odds.

The avant-gardes who refused to align themselves, and sometimes dared to face the reality of post-revolutionary societies, nevertheless did not renounce the original Leninist hypothesis (the ‘imminent revolution’), without taking into account that this was clearly refuted by the facts. Thus there was Trotskyism and the parties of the Fourth International. Then there were a good number of organizations of activist revolutionaries, inspired by Maoism or by Guevarism. Examples of this are numerous, from the Philippines to India (the Naxalites), from the Arab world (with the nationalist/communist Arabs – les *qawmiyin* – and those emulating them in South Yemen) to Latin America (Guevarism).

The great national liberation movements in Asia and in Africa, in open conflict with the imperialist order, came up against, as did those who conducted revolution in the name of socialism, the conflicting needs of ‘catching up’ (‘national construction’) and the transformation of social relationships in favour of the popular classes. On this latter concern, the ‘post-revolutionary regimes (or simply re-conquered post-independence regimes) were certainly less radical than the communist powers, which is why I would describe these regimes, in Asia and Africa, as ‘national/popular’. They were also sometimes inspired by forms of organisation (single party, non-democratic dictatorship, State management of the economy) that had been developed during the experiences of ‘really existing socialism’. They usually diluted their efficiency by their vague ideological choices and the compromise with the past that they accepted.

It is in these conditions that these regimes, like the critical avant-garde (historical communism in the countries concerned) were, in turn, invited to support the Soviet Union (and, more rarely, China) and benefit from its support. This constitution of this common front against the imperialist aggression of the United States and their European and Japanese partners was certainly beneficial for the peoples of Asia and Africa. It opened up a margin of autonomy both for the initiatives of the governing classes of the countries concerned and for the actions of their popular classes. This is proved by what happened following the Soviet collapse.

The plutocratic oligarchies and the end of bourgeois civilisation

The logic of accumulation is that of the growing concentration and centralisation of capital. Contemporary capitalism is a capitalism dominated by a plutocratic oligarchy that is unprecedented in history, to which I have already drawn attention (*From Capitalism to Civilization*, Chapter 4 and *The World We Wish to See, the Plutocracy: New Ruling Class of Obsolescent Capitalism*, p. 47 *et seq.*).

The wheeler-dealers, the new dominant class in the peripheries

The centre/periphery contrast is not new: it accompanied the globalised capitalist expansion from the beginning, five hundred years ago. Thus the local governing classes in the countries of peripheral capitalism, whether they were independent countries or even colonies, have always been subordinated governing classes, but nevertheless allied by the profits they obtained by being inserted into globalised capitalism.

These classes, most of them coming from those that previously dominated their societies before submitting to capitalism/imperialism, are very diverse. Their change, because of this integration/submission, is also considerable: former political mentors becoming large landowners, old aristocracies becoming leaders of the modernised State, etc. The re-conquest of independence often involved replacing these old subordinated classes (collaborators) by new governing classes – bureaucracies, State bourgeoisies, etc. They had greater legitimacy in the eyes of their peoples (at the beginning) because of their association with the national liberation movements.

But here again, in the peripheries dominated by old imperialism (the forms preceding 1950) or by the new imperialism (that of the Bandung period until about 1980), the local governing classes benefited from a relative visible stability. Successive generations of aristocrats and new bourgeois for a long time, then the new generation coming from the political forces that directed national liberation, shared value systems, moral and national. The men (and more rarely the women) who represented them, enjoyed various degrees of legitimacy.

The upheavals brought about by the capitalism of the oligopolies in the new collective imperialist centre (United States, Europe, Japan) have completely eradicated the power of all these old governing classes of the peripheries, replacing them by a new class that I call 'wheeler-dealers'. This term has in fact spontaneously circulated in many countries of the South. A wheeler-dealer is a 'businessman', not a creative entrepreneur. He obtains his wealth from his relationships with existing power and the foreign masters of the system, whether it is representatives of the imperialist countries (CIA, in particular) or the oligopolies. He operates as a very well-paid intermediary, who benefits from a veritable political rent from which he draws the wealth that he accumulates. The wheeler-dealer does not belong to any system of moral or national values whatsoever. He is a caricature of his alter ego in the dominant centres, for he knows nothing else but 'success', money, the covetousness that lies behind his alleged praise for the individual. There, again, mafia-like and criminal behaviour is never very far away.

It is true that phenomena of this kind are not completely new. The very nature of imperialist domination and the subordination of the local governing classes to them used to encourage the emergence of this kind of man in power. But, what is surely new, is that this kind of person is now dominating the whole scene of politics and wealth. They are the 'friends', the only friends of the dominant plutocracy at the world level. Their vulnerability lies in the fact that they have no legitimacy whatsoever in the eyes of their peoples, neither the legitimacy conferred by 'tradition' nor that given by participation in national liberation.

Senile capitalism and the end of bourgeois civilization

The characters of the new dominant classes described here are not coincidental, they correspond strictly to the requirements of contemporary capitalism and its functioning.

Bourgeois civilisation – like all civilisation – is not only reduced to the logic of the reproduction of the economic system. It integrates ideology and morality: praise for individual initiative, of course, but also honesty and respect for the law, if not solidarity with people, at least at the national level. This ensured a certain stability in social reproduction as a whole and it pervaded the world of the political representatives at its service.

This system of values is in the process of disappearing – making way for a system which has no values. There are many clear signs of this transformation: a criminal US President, buffoons at the head of European states, insignificant autocrats in a number of countries in the South, who are not ‘enlightened despots’ but just despots, ambitious obscurantists (the Talibans, the Christian and other ‘sects’, the pro-slavery Buddhists). They are all admirers of the ‘American model’ without any reservation. Lack of culture and vulgarity are characteristics of a growing majority of this world of those who ‘dominate’.

A dramatic evolution of this kind proclaims the end of a civilization. It reproduces what we have already seen in the decadent epochs of history. A ‘new world’ is being born. But not the (better) one which many of the naïve social movements are calling for. They do of course see the extent of the destruction but they do not understand the reasons. A world that is much worse than that of the bourgeois civilization is being imposed.

For all these reasons, I consider that the contemporary capitalism of the oligopolies must be now described as senile, whatever its apparent immediate success, because it is a success that is sinking into a new barbarism. (I refer here to the concluding chapter, “Revolution or decadence, thoughts on the transition from one mode of production to another” in my book *Class and Nation*, written almost 30 years ago.)

The fragility of capitalist globalisation

Capitalism can be defined as the reversal of the relationship of dominance between the political body and the economic one. This reversal goes along with the new market alienation and the obscuring of social production, with the levying of the surplus that accompanies it (Marx).

This invention has produced positive effects which in my view are indisputable, therefore irreversible. These are, among others: i) liberation of the spirit of economic enterprise and overwhelming acceleration, through the rapid development of the productive forces; ii) the combination of conditions enabling the emergence of social sciences (including economics) the formulations of which have been freed from morality and replaced by the search for objective causalities; iii) the emergence of modernity, formulated in terms of the emancipation of the human species, capable of making its own history and, with that, bringing together the conditions for modern democracy.

Capitalism is the first system which could become genuinely global. The reason is that the power that it enabled to develop, far beyond that of the most advanced societies of the past, put its conquest of the entire planet on the agenda. This power, which was already visible in the centuries of the mercantilist transition (1500 – 1800)

asserted itself as limitless as from the industrial revolution. Contrary to the naïve vision of economists, capitalist globalisation involved the political (and military) intervention of the new imperial powers. It was through these unequal political relationships that ‘markets’ were opened up and conquered, while the economic structures of the periphery, now dominated, ‘adapted’ to the requirements of this form of expansion. The new polarisation, to an extent unprecedented in the history of mankind, was established by political means and not, in any way by the victorious competition of the industries of the dominant centres. As a consequence, the countries of the

periphery could re-conquer their political independence without it putting an automatic end to their dominated status.

Polarisation is inherent in historical capitalism. Capitalism and imperialism are inseparable. Imperialist by nature, the world expansion of this historical system has shown that it was neither acceptable nor accepted by the majority of humanity – its victims – and that therefore it is considerably more fragile than believed by the economists, among others. The development of the crisis under way will certainly show this.

The status of a dominated country has never been accepted by the peoples concerned, apart from the new comprador classes that benefit from capitalist/imperialist globalization. During the 20th century, this refusal turned into revolutions conducted under the flag of socialism or national liberation struggles, both victorious, which forced the imperialist powers to adjust to these unprecedented changes.

The counter-offensive of capitalism/imperialism, which has been at work for some thirty years, has been made possible by the exhaustion of the alternative forms produced by the historic socialisms and nationalisms of the 20th century. This counter-offensive wraps itself up in the flag of ‘globalisation’. But, in fact, it cannot attain its aims without undertaking a new permanent war of re-conquest. The project of contemporary globalisation is inseparable from the permanent military engagement of the dominant powers, the new Triad of collective imperialism.

Extrication from capitalist globalisation (what I call delinking) is a first condition for extrication from peripheral capitalism status (in vulgar terms, getting out of ‘under-development’ or of ‘poverty’). Extrication from capitalist/imperialist globalisation and extrication from capitalism cannot be dissociated. This equation creates problems and it is therefore crucial to know how it has, or has not been taken into account.

The dominant thinking, which is essentially Eurocentric, is impervious to the arguments developed here. For these thinkers, there is no alternative to the ‘Western model’. It has to be – and can be – imitated by others. That capitalism/imperialism has rendered impossible this development by imitation is beyond their capacity to understand.

Marxist thought is not Eurocentric by nature. Marx inaugurated the only way of modern thinking that was capable of ridding itself of the prejudices and the straitjacket of Eurocentrism. But the schools of historical Marxism were victims of its limitations. The drift from Marx took the form of the alignment of the European worker and socialist movement with a linear vision of history, which was not that of Marx himself. In this perspective, the ‘socialist revolution’ could only occur when the countries had become fully capitalist, as in the developed industrial world. Everywhere else the obligatory passage of a capitalist development through a ‘bourgeois revolution’ was declared unavoidable. Historical Marxism to a large extent ignored the consequences of the inherent polarisation of historical globalised capitalism and hence the real nature of the challenge.

Polarisation delayed the necessary ripening of the socialist consciousness in the centre whose peoples received benefits from the dominant position of their nations. In the peripheries it prevented the construction of new national capitalisms like those of the dominant centres, and hence it closed off the way to the bourgeois revolution. This created a double challenge to the alternative of the popular revolution: that of accelerating the development of the productive forces and simultaneously building social relationships that break with capitalism. It therefore has perspectives and strategies of the transition from world capitalism to world socialism that are different from those imagined by the historical socialisms and Marxisms. It has created new and unforeseen conditions for constructing the internationalism of the peoples.

Is lucidity possible in the transformative activities of societies?

The modernity of the Enlightenment, by declaring 'man' the author of his history, inaugurated a new chapter of history involving the possibility of lucidity.

Lucidity and alienation are the two opposite poles of the same dialectical contradiction. Lucidity is defined by the knowledge of need, and the power, based on this knowledge, to act freely and transform reality. Lucidity involves the emergence of a social science that makes it possible to know these objective necessities. In contrast, alienation is defined by the submission of human beings to forces seen as being exterior – supernatural – even if they are in fact the result of the human thinking and action that shape social reality.

Lucidity, which is absent in all pre-modern societies, European and others, thus realises that the passing from one stage of social evolution to another is not conceived and implemented by a social force that develops such a project (which one might describe as revolutionary), but it imposes by itself, through chaotic evolutions and is, therefore, associated with what one could describe as moments of decadence (from the old regime in decline). The passing of the slave society of the Roman Empire to the feudalism of the Middle Ages is a good example of this mode of transformation in which lucidity is lacking. Lack of lucidity is not the same as lack of intelligence. Our ancestors were no less intelligent than us: they were only less equipped to control the necessary transformation – even when this control was only relative. Actors use tactics of intelligent actions. But they do not know where their choices will lead them, they do not pose the question of the results they will really be producing.

With modernity and the emergence of lucidity, the ways of transforming society underwent a Copernican revolution. The sages of the Enlightenment formulated, for the first time, a holistic and coherent project of transformation. This was to establish capitalism on the rubble of the Ancien Régime, a new society based on Reason, itself a condition of Emancipation. The project, which described what essentially became the bourgeois ideology, was, in turn, based on the separation of the regulations proposed for managing economic life (to be ordered on the principle of the new private ownership and the freedom of enterprise and to draw up contracts)) and that of the model for managing political life (ordered by what was gradually to become democracy: respect for the diversity of opinions, removing the sacred from power, the formulation of the rights of man and of the citizen). The two sides of the project were legitimate in terms of Reason.

The lucid project of the capitalist modernity to be constructed was defined by itself as establishing a transhistoric and definitive Reason – the End of History, following non-reasonable pre-history. Auguste Comte, in his time, had a definitive vision which encapsulated the essential ideology of bourgeois modernity. But the victims of the new system of triumphant capitalism – the working classes – saw their project of transforming reality in a completely different perspective, that of overtaking capitalism and building socialism. By so doing they showed the relative character of bourgeois lucidity. From the idealistic formulations of utopian socialisms up to the one initiated by Marx – historical materialism – there is clearly visible progress in recognizing the need to found the transformation project on it.

Associating the democratization of society in all the dimensions of its economic and political management, associating therefore this to social and human progress, definitively rejects the dissociation in the bourgeois formula of the Enlightenment, unmasks the market alienation that is peculiar to this formulation, and so gives to the Reason/Emancipation association a new meaning, representing the advances in the communism project that was initiated by Marx. That this perspective, which in turn consigned capitalism to pre-history, had sometimes imagined the communist future as the authentic end of history is another story.

The fact remains that lucidity, however relative it may be, made it possible to invent the revolutionary path as a way of transforming society, replacing the decadence of the Ancien Régime and the crystallization of the new through, controlled chaos.

The revolutionary path was indeed the one that capitalism imposed, first in its early revolutions in the Netherlands and in England, then partly through the independence war of the English colonies of North America and finally, and above all, in the French Revolution. In its turn, the revolutionary path was imposed as a lucid way of transformation, as it proposed to open the way to socialist/communist construction. The 'revolution' in question has often been seen as the great moment that makes it possible, once and for all, to give a rational/emancipatory response to the contradictions of a reality that had outrun its course (the Ancien Régime for the bourgeois revolutionaries, capitalism for the worker and socialist movements). One could compare the scope of these imaginary visions and replace, for the concept of 'the revolution' (in the singular), that of 'revolutionary advances' (in the plural) which take on different forms according to the conjunctures, but are always driven by an expression of objectives and means that aspire to lucidity.

At the present time we are being invited urgently to abandon what is described as the 'illusion of lucidity'. No doubt the reason is that the first wave of implementing projects for socialist construction wore out its capacities to successfully transform the societies concerned. Lucidity, which is always relative (sometimes the headiness of early success tends to make people forget this) is even brought into question as a very principle. However, the reasons for the collapse of the first wave of socialist projects should – with the benefit of hindsight – be very clear: historical Marxism, which inspired these projects, had under-estimated – which is the least one can say – the polarising character of historical globalised capitalism. The second wave – to be created in the future – must draw the necessary lessons. The history of the formation of capitalism itself shows how it was a succession of waves that made it possible for the final victory to emerge: the Mediterranean wave of the Italian towns, which aborted, preceded by three centuries the wave of Atlantic mercantilism which prepared the success of the definitive form of European capitalism/imperialism and ensured its conquest of the world.

To renounce the principle of the will for lucidity means not opening up new avenues for the future, but closing them by a return to the obscurantism of the pre-modern epochs. This obscurantism is at the forefront of the scene at the present moment, in the trough between the collapse of the first wave of socialist advances and the emergence of the second wave, which is necessary and possible. This obscurantism takes on different forms, 'hard' and 'soft'. The hard versions take the form of a return to the apocalyptic hope, whose extreme and caricatural expression is found in the discourses of the 'sects', but its ravages are no less visible when it comes disguised behind the masks of so-called religious or ethnic fundamentalisms.

It is not a case of returning to the 'spirituality' denied by the gross materialism of the consumerism of capitalist modernity but, in a more commonplace sense, it is the expression of peoples' powerlessness confronted by the challenges of ageing capitalism. The 'soft' version contents itself with renouncing the idea of a coherent global project which, necessarily poses the question of power, replacing it by the wonderful belief that 'individuals' can change the world just by the miracle of their own behaviour. From the so-called autonomist movements to the philosophies – à la Negri – of the 'bobos' (the bourgeois bohemians, typical of individuals of the upper middle classes who lean to the left as long as their own privileges are maintained) of our time, this 'soft' mode of obscurantist renunciation of lucidity, by thus obliterating the reality of existing power (oligopolies, military interventions, etc.), is now fashionable because its discourse is trumpeted by the media.

There is always a need for lucidity, even if it is, as always, relative. Abandoning it is like withdrawing into obscurantism and it can only lead to the horror of an uncontrolled transition towards 'another world' which is still more barbaric than that of our senile globalised capitalism.

Lucidity involves supporting universalism which is different from really existing globalisation. The religious universalisms of ancient times (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and others), which accompanied the formation of tributary empires, should be considered as quite distinct from the necessary universalism, both modern (Man makes his own history) and socialist (the progress of humanity must be based on cooperation and solidarity, and not on competition).

The renunciation of lucidity opens the way to the possibility of returning to the model of transformation through chaos and decadence. Senile capitalism can, in this way, inaugurate a new era of immense massacres, with the means available today. Nearly a century ago Rosa Luxemburg described the alternative: “socialism or barbarism”. Today one could say: capitalism or civilisation? Decadence and criminal chaos or lucidity and the renaissance of the socialist project?

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