

Capitalism, an obsolete system which has become the enemy of humanity

Unequal Development and the Historical Forms of Capitalism

History since Antiquity has been characterized by unequal development of regions. But it is only in the modern era that polarization has become the immanent by product of the integration of the entire planet into the capitalist system.

Modern (capitalist) polarization has appeared in successive forms during the evolution of the capitalist mode of production:

(i) The mercantilist form (1500-1800) before the industrial revolution which was fashioned by the hegemony of merchant capital in the dominant Atlantic centers, and by the creation of the peripheral zones (the Americas) in function of their total compliance with the logic of accumulation of merchant capital.

(ii) The so called classical model which grew out of the industrial revolution and henceforth defined the basic forms of capitalism. In contrast, the peripheries - progressively all of Asia (except for Japan) and Africa, which were added to Latin America – remained rural, non industrialized, and as a result their participation in the world division of labour place via agriculture and mineral production. This important characteristic of polarization was accompanied by a second equally important one: the crystallization of core industrial systems as national auto centred systems which paralleled the construction of the national bourgeois states. Taken together, these two characteristics account for the dominant lines of the ideology of national liberation which was the response to the challenge of polarization: (i) the goal of industrialization as synonym for liberating progress and as a means of “catching up”; (ii) the goal of constructing nation states inspired by the models of those in the core. This is how modernization ideology was conceived. From the industrial revolution (after 1800) up to the end of the Second World War the world system was characterized by this classical form of polarization.

(iii) The post war period (1945-1990) witnessed the progressive erosion of the above two characteristics. It was a period of industrialization of the peripheries – unequal to be sure. It was the dominant factor in Asia and Latin America – with the national liberation movement doing its best to accelerate the process within the peripheral states having recently regained their political autonomy. This period was simultaneously one of the progressive dismantling of autocentric national production systems and their recomposition as constitutive elements of an integrated world production system. This double erosion was the new manifestation of the deepening of globalization.

(iv) The accumulation of these transformations resulted in the collapse of the equilibria characteristic of the post war world system.

This evolution is not leading to a new world order characterized by new forms of polarization, but to “global disorder”. The chaos which confronts us today comes from a triple failure of

the system: (i) it has not developed new forms of political and social organization going beyond the nation state – a new requirement of the globalized system of production; (ii) it has not developed economic and political relationships capable of reconciling the rise of industrialization in the newly competitive peripheral zones of Asia and Latin America with the pursuit of global growth; (iii) it has not developed a relationship other than an exclusionary one with the African periphery which is not engaged in competitive industrialization. This chaos is visible in all regions of the world and in all facets of the political, social, and ideological crisis. It is at the origin of the difficulties in the construction of Europe and its inability to pursue market integrations and establish parallel integrative political structures. It is the cause of the convulsions in all the peripheries in Eastern Europe, in the old semi industrialized Third World, in the new marginalized fourth world. Far from sustaining the progression of globalization, the current chaos reveals its extreme vulnerability.

(v) The predominance of this chaos should not keep us from thinking about alternative scenarios for a “new world order” even if there are many different possible futures “world orders”. We should call attention to questions which have been glossed over by the triumphalism of inevitable globalization at the same time as its precariousness is revealed.

In my opinion the debate should start with an in depth discussion of the new features in the world system which are produced by the erosion of the previous one. There are two new elements:

(i) The erosion of the autocentred nation state and the subsequent disappearance of the link between the arena of reproduction and accumulation together with the weakening of political and social control which up to now had been defined precisely by the frontiers of this autocentred nation state.

(ii) The erosion of the contrast: industrialized centre/non industrialized peripheral regions, and the emergence of new dimensions of polarization

Competitiveness is a complex product of many economic, political, and social factors. In this unequal fight the centres use what I call their “five monopolies”. These monopolies challenge the totality of social theory. They are:

(i) Technological monopoly: It requires huge expenditures that only a large and wealthy state can envisage. Without the support of the state especially through military spending – something liberal discourse does not mention - most of these monopolies would not last.

(ii) Financial control of world-wide financial markets: These monopolies have an unprecedented efficacy thanks to the liberalization of the rules governing their establishment. Not so long ago the greater part of a nation’s savings could circulate only within the arena – largely national – of the financial institutions. To day these savings are handled centrally by institutions whose operations are worldwide. We are talking of finance capital: capital’s most globalized component..

(iii) Monopolies of access to the planet’s natural resources: The dangers of the reckless exploitation of these resources is now planet-wide. Capitalism, based on short term rationality, cannot overcome these dangers posed by this reckless behaviour, and it therefore reinforces the monopolies of already developed countries. Their concern is simply not to let others be equally irresponsible.

(iv) Media and communication monopolies: They not only lead to uniformity of culture but also open up new means of political manipulation. The expansion of the modern media market is already one of the major components of the erosion of democratic practices in the West itself.

(v) Finally, monopolies of weapons of mass destruction. Held in check by the post war bipolarity, this monopoly is again, as in 1945, the sole domain of the United States. If “proliferation” risks getting out of control it is still the only way of fighting this unacceptable monopoly in the absence of democratic international control.

These five monopolies taken as a whole define the framework within which the law of globalized value operates. The law of value is the condensed expression of all these conditions, hardly the expression of objective “pure” economic rationality. The conditioning of all of these processes annuls the impact of industrialization in the peripheries, devalues their productive work, and overvalues the supposed value added to the activities of the new monopolies from which the centres profit. What results is a new – more unequal than ever before – hierarchy in the distribution of income on a world scale, subordinating the industries of the peripheries and reducing them to subcontracting. This is the new foundation of capitalist/imperialist polarization, presaging its future forms.

Nonetheless the South – at least a number of countries in the South – is no more in a position similar to that which prevailed in 1955, at Bandung conference, when the whole of it was totally deprived of any significant capacity to master the technologies needed for its industrialisation. To day the five monopolies of the North can be routed. The South can master modern technologies and even develop them by its own independent means. The South can control the access to important natural resources and compel the North to adjust to patterns of consumption less wasteful. The South can move out of financial globalisation. It can develop autonomous networks of trade, transfers of capital and technology. It can also develop military capacities to respond to the challenges of menaces from the North.

An Alternative Humanistic Project of Globalization

In contrast to the dominant ideological discourse, I maintain that “globalization via the market” is a reactionary utopia. We must counter it by developing an alternative humanistic project of globalization consistent with a socialist perspective.

Capitalism, like all historical social systems, has fulfilled, in its rising phase, progressive functions (compared with those of the political systems which have preceded it): it has freed the individual from many constraints imposed upon him by earlier systems, it has developed productive forces at an unprecedented scale, it has fused multiple communities into the nations that we know, it has laid the foundations of modern democracy. Yet, all these achievements were marked and limited by its class nature: the “free” individual is in fact nothing more than “a well-off male bourgeois”, while the persistent patriarchy has kept the female half of humanity in subordinate positions; the benefits of democracy are reserved for him; the exploitation of nature has been linked to the logic of a financial calculation dominated always by the short term, giving rise to serious threats to the longer term; the rights of nations have been reserved for those belonging to the dominant centres while those of the dominated and colonized peripheries have been systematically denied. As the successes of its globalized expansion increased, the limitations of capitalism have grown steadily, reaching today tragic dimensions.

Contemporary globalized capitalism no longer offers an adequate framework for the pursuit of the emancipation of human beings, individually and collectively. Capitalism is not only a system based on the exploitation of workers (and especially the working classes), it has become the enemy of humanity.

Modern imperialism has nothing to offer to the large majorities of peoples in Asia, Africa and Latin America (80% of the population of the planet); here, the continuation of its development, beneficial as it may be to the privileged few, under certain conditions, requires in return the massive impoverishment of the others (in particular the peasant societies which make up close to the half of humanity), even considers sometimes for many of them practices which take on the character of genocide. The continuation of the domination of capital over the totality of these peripheries, the peoples of which are as a result in constant potential revolt (the “tempests zone,” which today in the criminal jargon of the masters of the system is called “rogue” states and the nests of terrorists) requires a militarization of globalization. Such a process rules out a genuine democratization associated with social progress as a real possibility for those peoples.

At the global level the accumulation driven by the exclusive logic of profit from capital means the accelerated destruction of the natural bases of the reproduction of life all on the planet; the depletion of non-renewable resources (oil in particular), the irreversible destruction of biodiversity, and the gigantic ecological destructions which, eventually, may even threaten life on the planet. Here, it must be made clear that these destructions result in an increasingly unequal access to the “benefits” which they provide in the short term to the privileged. When President G. W. Bush declares that “the American way of life is not negotiable”, he actually means the exclusion from the prospect of any “catching up” all the peoples of the three continents, in order to save to the imperialist nations only (first the United States, but behind them the Europeans and the Japanese) exclusive access to the squandering of the resources of the whole planet.

The forceful opening of new fields for the expansion of the dominance of the established plutocracies—privatization of public services (education, health) and the productions meeting basic needs (water, electricity, housing, transports) end always in the exacerbation of inequalities and the destruction of the fundamental social rights of the popular classes.

Capitalism has become the enemy of all of humanity. As such, it must be considered as an “obsolete” system. I may even say “senile,” despite the apparent successes of its ongoing expansion. The defense of humanity commands that we move into ways based on fundamental principles other than those which command the globalized capitalist/imperialist accumulation and reproduction.

The necessary radicalization of peoples’ struggles

The aggressions of the globalized oligopolistic capital under the control of the financial plutocracies clash with the growing resistances of the peoples of the entire planet, with ripostes which make counterattacks a real possibility. It must be observed, however, that so far the resistances and the ripostes have been crumbling away. In the opulent countries of central capitalism these resistances are still to be found largely on the ground of defending the gains, daily whittled away by the deployment of liberal politics. In some peripheral societies ripostes crystallize around backward-looking culturalist projects, which, by definition, are

incapable of meeting the challenges of the twenty first century. A majority of movements currently in conflict with the new power of the plutocracies do not question the fundamental principles of capitalism, even though they are at the origin of social tragedies of which their popular audiences are victims. These movements grapple with the consequences of the system, without concerning themselves sufficiently with the mechanisms which initiated them. That is the reason why the struggles have not yet succeeded in shifting the balance of power in favor of the popular classes, even if they might have won here or there some significant victories.

The radicalization of struggles—which I take to mean their sudden awareness of the obsolete character of capitalism—governs their capacity to produce positive alternatives. It is necessary and possible.

Despite the extreme variety of the objective conditions of the insertion of the working classes and their nations into the contemporary capitalist/imperialist system, all the peoples of the world aspire to social progress, to a genuine democratization, and to peace. To be radical today is to bring together not to separate the different dimensions of the challenge, that is:

- (i) Associate democratization in the management of all aspects of political, economic, social, family, business, school, neighborhood and nation life with social progress for all, starting with the most destitute. A genuine democratization is inseparable from social progress. The defense of human rights, the right to work, “equal opportunity” as they say, for men and women everywhere, however legitimate they may be (and they are), are not enough; more must be achieved by involving them in a global project initiating a transition towards socialism. Diversity in vision, though respectable not only for what it is but also because it is enriching, must not be an insurmountable obstacle to the construction of the unity of the working classes and the internationalism of peoples.
- (ii) Respect the independence and sovereignty of states, nations and peoples and build on this basis a polycentric international system. This is the very condition for reducing significantly the conflicts of interest resulting from inequality in capitalist development, for substituting for brutal power struggles the obligation to negotiate, and for eliminating the unending war of the North against the South which characterizes our epoch. This means definitely the construction of “united fronts” – the renewal of that of the Non-aligned and the Tricontinental in particular—around common objectives, the replacement of the existing institutions serving the globalized financial capital—the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, NATO, the European Union such as it is, regional projects such as the Free Trade of the Americas, those concerning the relations between the European Union and the countries of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific— by other globalization management institutions. Some steps forward have been taken in this direction, especially in Latin America with the ALBA project, and, for what it is worth, Mercosur, in Asia with the Shanghai group. But we are still far from having managed to put to flight the existing institutions even if they have already lost their legitimacy in the eyes of

the peoples. Unfortunately, still many militants of the movements in struggle, notably in the opulent countries of the imperialist centre (the “triad” made up of the United States and Canada—Australia should be added—Western and Central Europe, and Japan) reject the idea of the defense of nations—hastily put in the same category as aggressive chauvinism. In my opinion, whether they like it or not, these people go along with globalized imperialist capitalism.

Radicalization, understood as I have identified its constituent elements, is synonymous with the politicization of struggles and the affirmation of the socialist alternative. By politicization is meant the awareness that there is no social movement which can claim an “a-political” character, even if such a movement may seem a legitimate response to the logics of recuperation deployed by the established political forces and notably by the parties as they are, even if the rejection of the self-proclaimed title of “avant-garde” behind which many of these parties, large or minuscule, take refuge, is perfectly legitimate.

For the moment, radicalization requires that priority be given to routing the project of military control of the planet, at the service of plutocratic globalization.