

**Forerunners of the Contemporary World: The Paris Commune (1871) and the Revolution of the Taiping
(1851–1864)**

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The Paris Commune, which lasted from March to May 1871, and the Taiping Revolution (I call it a revolution and not a revolt), which lasted from 1851 to 1864, initiated the entry of humanity into the contemporary phase of its history. They put an end to the illusions concerning the progressive nature of capitalism and heralded its autumn.

These were two immensely important revolutions because of their long-term effects. One (the Paris Commune) occurred in a developed capitalist centre, second only, in terms of economic development, to England, while the other (the Taiping Revolution) broke out in a region of the world that had only just been integrated as a dominated periphery into globalized imperialist capitalism.

They were both broken up by armed capital: that of the French reactionaries of Versailles, protected by the Prussians, while that of European imperialism was led by the English General Gordon (who later won fame in Egypt and Sudan). But in the long term these revolutions won out because of their incredible vision, in advance of their period, showing what tomorrow's world could be.

The Paris Commune made clear what socialism could be: a more advanced stage in human civilization. It established an authentic democracy, the only one we have ever known. It was a democracy that not only guaranteed the rights of individuals and freedom of expression and organization. It was a social democracy that abolished the exploitation of labour, replacing the diktat of capital by the free association of workers controlling the means of production. It associated the producer citizen with the consumer citizen and with the political citizen. It founded international universalism and gave all the inhabitants of Paris the same citizen rights to those of "foreign" extraction as those of "French" origin. It started abolishing the oppression of women. Marx was not wrong in describing the Communards as fighters who left for "an attack on the heavens."

The Taiping Revolution overthrew the despotic imperial autocracy of the Qings. It abolished the regime of peasant exploitation by the ruling class through this social mode of production that I call tributary (called "feudal" by the Chinese communists, but this is a semantic problem of secondary importance). At the same time the Taiping Revolution rejected the forms of capitalism that had infiltrated through the chinks in the tributary system: it abolished private trading. With similar vigour it spurned the foreign domination of imperialist capital. And it did so very early on, as it was just at the beginning of imperialist aggression—the Opium War of 1840. This had taken place barely ten years earlier, when it became apparent that China was being reduced to a periphery dominated by the globalization of imperial capitalism. In advance of their time, the Taipings abolished polygamy, concubinage and prostitution.

The Revolution of the Taipings—who were also "the sons of heaven"—created the basis of socialism and the most advanced stage of human civilization by formulating the first revolutionary strategy of the peoples in the peripheries of the capitalism of the imperialist world.

The Taiping Revolution was the ancestor of the "anti-feudal, anti-imperialist popular revolution" (to use the later expression of the Chinese communists). It was the harbinger of the awakening of the peoples of the South (of Asia, Africa and Latin America) that shaped the 20th century. It inspired Mao and it indicated the path to the revolution for all the peoples of the peripheries of the modern world capitalist system, the path that enabled them to commit themselves to the long socialist transition.

The Paris Commune is not just a chapter in the history of France, nor was the Taiping Revolution just part of the history of China. These two revolutions were of universal significance. The Paris Commune gave substance to the "proletarian" internationalism that the First International (International Workers' Association) called for, in order to replace the chauvinistic nationalism, the cosmopolitanism of capital and the communitarian identities of the past. The universalism of the appeal by the Taipings was symbolized by their adoption—considered curious—of the figure of Christ, although alien to Chinese history. How could a human being, defeated by his/her enemies—those in power—be a "God" who was invincible? For the Taipings, this Christ was not the one of the Christianity of submission that the missionaries tried to introduce in China. He was the model example of what the fighter for the liberation of all human beings should be: courageous to the point of death, thus proving that solidarity in struggle constitutes the secret of success.

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The Paris Commune and the Taiping Revolution show that capitalism is only a parenthesis in history, as I have said elsewhere. It is, incidentally, a brief one. Capitalism has only fulfilled the honourable function of creating—in a short period of time—the conditions that require it to be overtaken/abolished to construct a more advanced stage of human civilization. The Paris Commune and the Taiping Revolution thus initiate the new phase of contemporary history—the one that was to develop in the 20th century and will continue into the 21st century. They opened up successive chapters in the springtime of the peoples, at the same time as the autumn of capitalism.

At the Heart of the Challenge: The Imperialist Dimension of Capitalism

The fact that these two revolutions which announced the possible and necessary abolition of capitalism took place at the opposite extremities of the Eurasian continent, in France and in China, does not surprise me.

At the time of the Commune, France was the second capitalist power, after England. But France made up for its economic “belatedness” by being more politically mature. This was because English capitalism had been based on the profits from its external expansion. The colonization of Ireland—the expropriation of its peasants for the benefit of English landlords—which dated back to the 17th century, had had devastating effects on the political maturity of the English working class, although they were the victim of horrific pauperization (as analyzed by Engels). This explains the early rallying to the pro-imperialist ideology of the English working class. The colonization of North America and above all that of India was responsible for this drift off course.

In contrast, the development of capitalism in France had been much more centred on the “internal market” even though the brilliant colony of St. Dominique had a non-negligible role in mercantilist accumulation. The radical nature of the French revolution is thus understandable in comparison with the English revolutions, from Cromwell to the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688. Equally understandable was the complex and ambiguous character of the conflict between the bourgeois and the popular/peasantry, which was at the heart of the precocious breakthrough beyond capitalism (by Babeuf and his followers). The Paris Commune was possible in France, but nowhere else in Europe, either in the most advanced capitalist country (England), or in those that were still behind but on the way (Germany and others).

At the other extreme of the continent, China also possessed some particular characteristics that favoured a precocious political maturity. It had started to overtake the tributary socio-economic mode (here in a solid, “advanced” form) very early on, even before Europe. It was 500 years in advance in its invention of modernity, for it abandoned a religion of individual salvation—Buddhism—in favour of a kind of a-religious laicity before it occurred elsewhere, as well as an audacious development of trading relationships based on the internal market. (I recommend readers to see what I have already written on these issues.) China also resisted the assault of European imperialist capitalism for a long time, in contrast with India and the Ottoman Empire. It was therefore only in 1840 that British cannons forced open the gates of the Celestial Empire. The conjunction of this aggression, together with the previous advances of Chinese capitalism, thus had remarkable accelerating effects: the inequality of access to land (to which the logic of the tributary system opposed resistance as it was declining) increased rapidly and the “betrayal” of the ruling class (the Emperor and the landed aristocracy) soon replaced their earlier efforts at “national” resistance. So it is easy to understand the precociousness of the revolution of the Taipings and its “anti-feudal, anti-imperial” character.

Thus two great revolutions, but two revolutions operating in each of the two complementary fields of globalized imperialist capitalism—at the centre and on the periphery—in the two “weak links” of this global system.

Were Marx and historical Marxism(s) fully up to analyzing globalized capitalism and therefore capable of formulating effective strategies for “changing the world”, that is, abolishing capitalism? Yes and no.

Marx succumbed to the temptation of regarding the world expansion of capitalism as a force that tended to homogenize economic and social conditions, reducing all the workers of the whole world to the same status as wage labourers exploited by capital in the same way, with the same intensity. He thus justified colonization, which would finally end in progress. There are numerous writings of Marx supporting this view and emphasizing the progressive “consequences” of colonization, even if they were involuntary. In other words, this was in spite of its odious practices (denounced by Marx) in India, Algeria, South Africa, Eritrea, like those in the annexation of Texas and California by the “yankees” (“workers,” as opposed to the “lazy” Mexicans). Using this logic Marx condemned the Taipings (whom in fact he knew little about).

And yet Marx, as soon as he considered countries that he knew a lot about, sketched out a completely different vision of capitalist expansion. He saw nothing positive in the colonization of Ireland by England: on the contrary, he vigorously denounced the destructive effects on the English working class itself. As for Russia, which was less foreign to him than China, Marx intuited that it was a “weak link” in the world capitalist chain (to use Lenin’s term) and that an anti-capitalist revolution which opened up the way to an advance of socialism was, therefore, possible. This can be seen in his correspondence with Vera Zasulich. He seemed to believe that an original path to socialist advance could be opened up if a revolution had a strong peasant element, based on the resistance of the peasant communities (organized in the *mir*), if they were able to free themselves from feudal exploitation by the effective abolition of serfdom, although threatened by expropriation for the benefit of new

rich peasants and new landowners (the old “feudalists”).

Lenin, and hence the historic “leninist” Marxism, took a huge step forward. He denounced “imperialism.” It did not matter that, probably out of respect for Marx, he called it the new stage of capitalism that had developed recently. He drew two conclusions from this: that the “revolution” was no longer on the agenda of the “West” and that, on the contrary, it was on the agenda of the “East.” But he did not draw this conclusion immediately—he hesitated. He always hoped, for example, that the revolution that had begun in the “weak link” (Russia) would lead to the revolution of the workers in the developed centres—Germany, first of all. He saw the first great systematic crisis of capitalism (that started in the 1870s and led to the first world war) as also being the “last” crisis of moribund capitalism. But he soon concluded that he was mistaken: that the revolution in Europe (in Germany) had unravelled and the coming revolution(s) would come from the East (in China, in Iran, in the former Ottoman Empire, in the colonies and semi-colonies).

Nevertheless Lenin did not associate his new interpretation of Marxism with a more in-depth study of the role of Russia in the world capitalist system, that of a periphery, or semi-periphery. He saw Russia’s “semi-Asiatic” character as an obstacle more than as an advantage. Nor did Lenin consider that the peasant question was central in the new “revolution” on the agenda. He believed, rightly or wrongly, that the potential of the *mir* had been annihilated by the development of capitalism in Russia (the title of one of his works as a young man). He saw the consequence would be that the Russian revolution, by giving land to the peasants, would make them owners.

Thus Mao was the heir of the Taipings, for he drew all the necessary lessons of this historical episode. Mao formulated the strategy and the objectives of a long transition to socialism that was based on an anti-imperialist and “anti-feudalist” revolution, conducted in the conditions of the peripheral societies of the world system. The definition of these tasks for the “anti-feudal” revolution shows that Mao totally rejected backward-looking illusions of any kind. The revolution of the peoples of the periphery necessarily fitted into the universal socialism perspective.

The Autumn of Capitalism, the Peoples’ Spring

Even though the autumn of capitalism and the spring of the peoples can be seen as the two sides of the same medal, they are in fact distinct.

When the new form of capitalism—that of the monopolies – began to emerge at the end of the 19th century, it initiated the autumn of this system—this parenthesis in history, as I have called it (Amin, S., 2009). Capitalism had “had its day,” after a short period (just in the 19th century) when it still performed progressive functions. In the 19th century, the “creative” dimensions of capitalist accumulation (the extraordinary acceleration of technological progress compared to previous epochs and the emancipation of the individual, even if this was mainly applicable to the privileged, and limited or deformed for the others) outweighed the destructive dimensions of this accumulation. Its destructive effects weighed particularly heavy on the societies of the peripheries that had been integrated through the imperialist expansion that was inseparable from historical capitalism. However, the emergence of monopoly capitalism overturned the situation so that the negative effects outweighed the positive ones.

It was in this framework of the long-term perspective that I analyzed the two long, systematic crises of “senile” capitalism: the first one which started in 1871–73 and lasted until 1945–1955, and the second, which started a hundred years later, as from 1971–73, and which is still in process. In this analysis I emphasized the main means used by capital to overcome its permanent crisis: the construction and the vertiginous growth of a department III (as a complement to the two other departments—the production of production goods and the production of consumption goods—as treated by Marx) and the absorption of the surplus associated with the rent of the monopolies, which was simultaneously imperialist rent. I refer the reader to these writings. (Amin, S., 2011).

Lenin had started to consider this qualitative change in the nature of capitalism. His only fault was to be too optimistic, for he believed that this first systematic crisis of capitalism would be the last one. He had underrated the negative effects and the corrupting influence of the imperialist deployment in the societies at the centre of the system. Mao, drawing the conclusions from an exact tally of these effects, decided on patience. The road to socialism would necessarily be long and full of pitfalls.

History has confirmed my analysis, which I must nevertheless admit as having been based on *ex post* thinking, after the unfolding of the 20th century had exhausted its effects.

The 20th century was indeed the one that saw the beginnings of the “Awakening of the South,” more precisely of the peoples, nations and states of the peripheries of the system, starting with Russia (“semi-periphery”) and expanding to China, Asia, Africa and Latin America. In this sense the 20th century was the first spring of the peoples concerned. I have listed the series of major events which, since early in the century, predicted these springs: the Russian revolutions (1905–1917); Chinese (1911 and following); Mexican (1910–1920); and others. I situated the Bandung period for contemporary Asia and Africa (1955–1980) in this framework. It crowned, but at the same time concluded, this great moment of universal history. In a certain way, this response by the peoples dominated by imperialist expansion pursued the task initiated by the revolution of

the Taipings and its generalization throughout the three continents.

In contrast the Paris Commune had no successors in the developed West. In spite of their brave attempts, the communists of the Third International were unable to build an alternative historical bloc to the bloc aligned with the society dominated by the imperialist monopolies. This is the real drama of the 20th century, not the shortcomings of the awakening of the peripheries, but its absence in the centres. The shortcomings and then the fatal drifts off course, of the nations of the peripheries would probably have been overcome if the peoples of the centres had broken with their pro-imperialist alignment.

The spring of the peoples that took place in the 20th century exhausted their efforts. From one drift to another, they ended by caving in to the right, confronted as they were by the counter-offensive of capital. This collapse took the form of the series of triumphant counter-revolutions of the 1990s. These societies had run out of steam and were in crisis. Any possibilities of moving to the left and being stabilized according to centre-left formulas that would preserve the future were shattered by a combination of three factors: i) a weak popular protest, limited to demands for democracy dissociated from the social question and geo-politics; ii) the reactions of those in power, which were exclusively repressive; and iii) the interventions of the imperialist West. To describe the “revolutions” in the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe in 1989–1991 as the “springtime of the peoples” is thus pure farce. Based on huge illusions about capitalist realities, these movements have produced nothing positive. The peoples concerned have yet to experience their spring—perhaps they will do so in the future.

During the whole of the 20th century and up to the present day, the autumn of capitalism and the springtime of peoples (which has been reduced to the peoples of the peripheries) have been dissociated from one another. The autumn of capitalism has thus constituted the main driving element of the evolution. It has been doing so along increasingly barbarous lines, the only logical response to the need of capital to maintain its domination. First, in the form of imperialist barbarism, reinforced by the activities of the planetary military control of the armed forces of the United States and their subaltern European allies (NATO) for the exclusive benefit of the monopolies of the collective imperialism of the Triad (the USA, Europe, Japan). But also, in response to this, we have seen how the responses of their victims—the peoples of the South—have reverted to nostalgic and backward illusions that, in their turn, descend into barbarism.

This risk—which is the dominant reality of today—remains until progress is made in joining the autumn of capitalism with the springtime of peoples—of all the peoples of the peripheries but also those of the centres. Such advances have yet to prove decisive enough to open up the universalist, socialist perspective. Will the 21st century turn out to be a remake of the 20th century, associating the liberation efforts of the peoples of the South with the maintenance of the pro-imperialist alignment of the peoples of the North? (Amin, S., 2012).

From the Communards' Wall in Paris to the Museum of the Taipings at Nanjing

In the days of my youth I had always participated, each year, in the demonstration in front of the Communards' Wall, organized by the Communist Party. I was always much moved. And, on May 28 2011, with the same emotion I was once again before this same Wall. I was convinced that the Paris Commune expressed, for the first time, in thought and action, the need to leave capitalism behind in order to build a more advanced stage of human civilization. That conviction has not weakened.

My visit to the Museum of the Taipings at Nanjing both moved and edified me, with equal intensity. I realized that these ancestors of Maoism had also thought and acted in the same direction.

What has to be done is to build a bridge between these two shores of a polarized world that has been constructed by capitalism and is imperialist by nature. This is the task of a Fifth International, the crying need of our times.

Notes on contributor (about 80 words)

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