

The Democratic Fraud and the Universalist Alternative

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1. The Democratic Fraud Challenges Us to Invent Tomorrow's Democracy

Universal suffrage is a recent conquest, beginning with workers' struggles in a few European countries (England, France, Holland, and Belgium) and then progressively extending throughout the world. Today, everywhere on the planet, it goes without saying that the demand for delegating supreme power to an honestly elected, multiparty assembly defines the democratic aspiration and guarantees its realization—or so it is claimed.

Marx himself put great hopes on such universal suffrage as a possible "peaceful path to socialism." Yet, I have noted that on this score Marx's expectations were refuted by history (cf. *Marx et la démocratie*).

I think that the reason for the failure of electoral democracy to produce real change is not hard to find: all hitherto existing societies have been based on a dual system of exploitation of labor (in various forms) and of concentration of the state's powers on behalf of the ruling class. This fundamental reality results in a relative "depoliticization/disacculturation" of very large segments of society. And this result, broadly designed and implemented to fulfill the systemic function expected of it, is simultaneously the condition for reproduction of the system without changes other than those it can control and absorb—the condition of its stability. What is called the "grass roots," so to speak, signifies a country in deep slumber. Elections by universal suffrage under these conditions are guaranteed to produce a sure victory for conservatism, albeit sometimes a "reformist" conservatism.

This is why never in history has there been real change resulting from this mode of governance based on "consensus" (i.e. the absence of change). All changes tending toward real social transformation, even radical reforms, have resulted from struggles waged by what, in electoral terms, may appear to be "minorities." Without the initiative of such minorities, the motive force of society, no change is possible. Such struggles, engaged in by such "minorities," always end up—when the alternatives proposed are clearly and correctly defined—by carrying along (previously silent) majorities and may by universal suffrage receive ratification, which arrives after—never before—victory.

In our contemporary world "consensus" (its boundaries defined by universal suffrage) is more conservative than ever. In the centers of the world-system the consensus is pro-imperialist. Not in the sense that it implies hatred or contempt for the other peoples who are its victims, but in the everyday sense that the permanence of the flow of imperialist rent is accepted because that is the condition for overall social reproduction, the guarantor of its "opulence" in contrast to the poverty of the others. In the peripheries, the responses of

peoples to the challenge (pauperization resulting from the process of capitalist/imperialist accumulation) is still muddled, in the sense that they are fated always to carry with them a dose of retrograde illusions of a return to a better past.

In these conditions, recourse to “elections” is always conceived by the dominant powers as the best possible way to rein in the movement, to end the possibility that the struggles become radicalized. In 1968 some said that “elections are for assholes,” and that view was not unconfirmed by the facts. An elected assembly, right away—as today in Tunisia and Egypt—serves only to put an end to “disorder,” to “restore stability.” To change everything so that nothing changes.

So should we give up on elections? Not at all. But how to bring together new, rich, inventive forms of democratization through which elections can be used in a way other than is conceived by the conservative forces? Such is the challenge.

The Democratic Farce’s Stage Scenery

This stage scenery was invented by the Founding Fathers of the United States, with the very clearly expressed intention of keeping electoral democracy from becoming an instrument that could be used by the people to call in question the social order based on private property (and slavery!).

With that in mind, their Constitution was based on (indirect) election of a president (a sort of “elective monarch”) holding in his hands some essential powers. Presidential election campaigns under these conditions naturally gravitate to “bipartisanship,” which tends progressively to become what it now is: the expression of a “single party.” Of course, ever since the end of the nineteenth century this has represented the interest of monopoly capital, addressing itself to “clienteles” that view themselves as having differing interests.

The democratic fraud then displays itself as offering “alternatives” (in this case, the Democrats and the Republicans) that cannot ever rise to the level required by a real alternative (offering the possibility of new, radically different, options). But without the presence of real alternative perspectives democracy is nonexistent. The farce is based on “consensus”(!) ideology, which excludes by definition serious conflicts between interests and between visions of the future. The invention of “party primaries” inviting the whole electorate (whether its components are said to be leftist or rightist!) to express its choices of candidates for the two false adversaries accentuates still further that deviation so annihilating for the meaning of elections.

Jean Monnet, a true anti-democrat is honored today in Brussels, where his intentions to copy the U.S. model were fully understood, as the founder of the “new European democracy.” Monnet deployed all his efforts, which were scrupulously implemented in the European Union, to deprive elected assemblies of their powers and transfer them to “committees of technocrats.”

To be sure, the democratic fraud works without big problems in the opulent societies of the imperialist triad (the United States, Western Europe, and Japan) precisely because it is underwritten by the imperialist rent (see my book *The Law of Worldwide Value*). But its persuasive authority is also bolstered by the consensus “individualist” ideology; by the respect for “rights” (themselves acquired by struggles, as we are never told), and by the institution of an independent judiciary (even though that of the United States is partially

based—as in most of the “sovereign” states—on elected judges who have to finance their election campaigns by appealing to the ruling class and its opinion-makers); and by the complex structure of the pyramidal institutions charged with guaranteeing rights.

Historically, continental Europe has not long experienced the calm waters of the democratic farce. In the nineteenth century (and even up to 1945) struggles for democracy, both those inspired by the capitalist and middle-class bourgeoisies and those expressing the working masses, ran up against resistance from the anciens régimes. Hence their chaotic pattern of advances and retreats. Marx thought that such resistance was an obstacle fortunately unknown in the United States. He was wrong, and underestimated the extent to which, in a “pure” capitalist system (like that of the United States in comparison to Europe) the “overdetermination” of political processes, that is to say the automatic conformity of changes in the ideological and political superstructure to those required for management of society by the capitalist monopolies, would inevitably lead to what conventional sociologists call “totalitarianism.” This is a term that applies even more to the capitalist imperialist world than anywhere else. (I here refer back to what I have written elsewhere about “overdetermination” and the openings which it makes available.)

In nineteenth century Europe (and also, though to a lesser degree, in the United States) the historical coalitions put together to ensure the power of capital were, by the force of circumstance—the diversity of classes and of sub-classes—complex and changeable. Accordingly, electoral combats could sometimes appear to be really democratic. But over time, as the diversity of capitalist coalitions gave way to the domination of monopoly capital, those appearances dwindled away. The Liberal Virus (as one of my books is titled) did the rest: Europe aligned itself more and more on the U.S. model.

Conflicts among the major capitalist powers helped cement the components of the historical coalitions, bringing about, by way of nationalism, the domination of capital. It even happened—Germany and Italy being particularly exemplary—that “national consensus” was made to replace the democratic program of the bourgeois revolution.

This deformation of democracy is now virtually complete. The Communist parties of the Third International tried in their way to oppose it, even though their “alternative” (modeled on the USSR) remained of questionable attractiveness. Having failed to build lasting alternative coalitions, they ended up capitulating—submitting to the system of democratic electoral farce. So doing, the part of the radical left consisting of their heirs (in Europe, the “United Left” grouping in the Strasbourg parliament) gave up any perspective of real “electoral victory.” It is happy to survive on the second-class seats allotted to “minorities” (at most 5-10% of the “voting population”). Transformed into coteries of elected representatives whose sole concern—taking the place of “strategy”—is to hang on to these wretched places in the system, this radical left gives up on really being anything of the sort. That this plays into the hands of neofascist demagogues is, in these conditions, unsurprising.

A discourse styling itself “postmodernist,” which quite simply refuses to recognize the scope of the democratic farce’s destructive effects, incorporates submission to it. What matter elections, they say, what counts is elsewhere: in “civil society” (a muddled concept to which I shall return) where individuals are what the liberal virus claims them—falsely—to be, the active subjects of history. Antonio Negri’s “philosophy,” which I have criticized elsewhere, is an expression of this desertion.

But the democratic farce, unchallenged in the opulent societies of the imperialist triad, does not work in the system's peripheries. There, in the storm zone, the established order does not enjoy any legitimacy sufficient to stabilize society. Does the possibility of a real alternative then reveal itself in the watermark of the paper on which the "Southern awakenings" that characterized the twentieth century (and which go on making their way in the twenty-first century) are written by history?

Theories and Practices of the Vanguard and of the Enlightened Despotisms

The current storm is not synonymous with revolution, but is only the potential carrier of revolutionary advances.

Not simple are the responses of the peripheral peoples, whether inspired by radical socialist ideals—at first, anyway (Russia, China, Vietnam, and Cuba)—or by national liberation and social progress (in Latin America, in Asia and Africa during the Bandung period). They bring, to varying degrees, components with a universalist and progressive outlook together with others of a deeply retrogressive nature. To unravel the conflicting and/or complementary interferences among these tendencies will help us to formulate—further on in this text—some possible forms of genuine democratic advances.

The historical Marxisms of the Third International (Russian Marxism-Leninism and Chinese Maoism) deliberately and completely rejected any retrograde outlook. They chose to look toward the future, in what was in the full sense of the term a universalist emancipating spirit. This option was undoubtedly made easier, in Russia, by a long preparatory period in which the (bourgeois) "Westernizers" vanquished the "Slavophile" and "Eurasian" allies of the autocracy; in China, by the Taiping Uprising (I here refer you to my work: *The Paris Commune and the Taiping Revolution*).

At the same time, those historical Marxisms committed themselves to a certain conceptualization of the role of "vanguards" in social transformation. They gave an institutionalized form to that option, symbolized as "The Party." It cannot be said that this option was ineffective. Quite to the contrary, it was certainly at the origin of the victory of those revolutions. The hypothesis that the minority vanguard would win support from the immense majority proved to be well founded. But it is equally true that later history showed the limits of such effectiveness. For it is certain that maintenance of centralized power in the hands of these "vanguards" was far from uninvolved in the subsequent derailment of the "socialist" systems that they claimed to have established.

Did "enlightened despotism" constitute the theory and practice of those historical Marxisms? One can say so only on condition of specifying what were and—progressively—became the aims of those "enlightened despotisms." In any case, they were resolutely opposed to *völkisch* nostalgia. Their behavior in regard to religion—which they viewed as nothing but obscurantism—testifies to that. I have expressed myself elsewhere ("*L'internationale de l'obscurantisme*") about the qualifications which need be appended to that judgment.

The vanguard concept was also broadly adopted elsewhere beyond those (Chinese and Russian) revolutionary societies. It was the basis for the Communist parties of the whole world as they existed between 1920 and 1980. It found its place in the contemporary national/populist third-world regimes.

Moreover, this vanguard concept gave decisive importance to theory and ideology, implying in turn putting similar importance on the role of (revolutionary) “intellectuals” or, rather, of the intelligentsia. “Intelligentsia” is not synonymous with the educated middle classes, still less with the managers, bureaucrats, technocrats, or professoriate (in Anglo-Saxon jargon, the “elites”). It refers to a social group that emerges as such in some societies under specific conditions and becomes then an active, sometimes decisive, agent. Outside Russia and China, analogous formations could be recognized in France, in Italy, and perhaps in other countries—but certainly not in Great Britain, the United States, nor generally in northern Europe.

In France, during most of the twentieth century, the intelligentsia held a major place in the country’s history, as, for that matter, is recognized by the best historians. This was, perhaps, an indirect effect of the Paris Commune during which the ideal of building a more advanced stage of civilization beyond capitalism found expression as nowhere else (see my article on the Commune).

In Italy the post-fascist Communist Party had an analogous function. As Luciana Castellana lucidly analyzes it, the Communists—a vanguard strongly supported by the working class but always an electoral minority—were actually the sole makers of Italian democracy. They exercised “in opposition”—at the time—a real power in society much greater than when associated with “government” subsequently! Their actual suicide, inexplicable otherwise than as result of the mediocrity of their post-Berlinguer leadership, buried with them both the Italian State and Italian democracy.

This intelligentsia phenomenon never existed in the United States nor in Protestant Northern Europe. What is called there “the elite”—the terminology is significant—scarcely comprises anyone but lackeys (including “reforming” ones) of the system. The empiricist/pragmatist philosophy, holding the entire stage as far as social thought is concerned, has certainly reinforced the conservative effects of the Protestant Reformation—whose critique I stated in Eurocentrism. Rudolf Rocker, the German anarchist, is one of the few European thinkers to have expressed a judgment close to mine; but since Weber (and despite Marx) it has been fashionable to unthinkingly celebrate the Reformation as a progressive advance.

In the peripheral societies in general, beyond the flagrant cases of Russia and China, and for the same reasons, the initiatives taken by “vanguards,” often intelligentsia-like, profited from the adhesion and support of broad popular majorities. The most frequent form of those political crystallizations whose interventions were decisive for the “Southern Awakening” was that of populism. A theory and practice scoffed at by the (Anglo-Saxon style, i.e., pro-system) “elites,” but defended and accordingly rehabilitated by Ernesto Laclau with solid arguments that I will very largely make my own.

Of course, there are as many “populisms” as there are historical experiences that can be called such. Populisms are often linked to “charismatic” figures whose “thought” is accepted, undiscussed, as authoritative. The real social and national advances linked to them under some specific conditions have led me to term them “national/populist” regimes. But it must be understood that those advances were never based on ordinary “bourgeois” democratic practices—still less on the inception of practices going still further, like those possible ones which I will outline further on in this text. Such was the case in Atatürk’s Turkey, probably the initiator of this model in the Middle East, and later in Nasser’s Egypt, the Baathist (Iraqi and Syrian) regimes in their initial stages, and Algeria under the FLN.

During the 1940s and 1950s, under different conditions, similar experiments were undertaken in Latin America. This “formula,” because it answers to real needs and possibilities, is far from having lost its chance of renewal. So I gladly use the term “national/populist” for certain ongoing experiments in Latin America without neglecting to point out that on the level of democratization they have incontestably entered on advances unknown to those earlier “national/populisms.”

I have put forward analyses dealing with the reasons for the success of advances realized in this domain by several Middle-Eastern countries (Afghanistan, South Yemen, Sudan, and Iraq) which appeared more promising than others, and also the causes of their tragic failures.

Whatever the case, one must be on guard against generalizations and simplifications like those of most Western commentators, who look only at the “democracy question” as boiled down to the formula that I have described as the democratic farce. In the peripheral countries the farce sometimes appears as a fantastic burlesque. Without being “democrats” some leaders, charismatic or not, of national/populist regimes have been progressive “big reformers.” Nasser was exemplary of these. But others have scarcely been anything but incoherent clowns (Kaddafi) or ordinary “unenlightened” despots (quite uncharismatic, to boot) like Ben Ali, Mubarak, and many others. For that matter, those dictators initiated no national/populist experiments. All they did was to organize the pillage of their countries by mafias personally associated with them. Thus, like Suharto and Marcos, they were simply executive agents of the imperialist powers which, moreover, hailed them and supported their powers to the very end.

The Ideology of Cultural Nostalgia, Enemy of Democracy

The specific limits of each and of all national/populist experiments worthy of the name “populist” originate in the objective conditions characterizing the societies comprising the periphery of today’s capitalist/imperialist world—conditions obviously diverse. But beyond that diversity some major converging factors shed some light on the reasons for those experiments’ successes and then for their retrogressions.

That aspirations for a “Return to the Past” persist is not the result of thoroughgoing “backwardness” (as in the usual discourse on this subject) among the peoples involved. Their persistence gives a correct measure of the challenge to be confronted. All the peoples and nations of the peripheries were not only subject to fierce economic exploitation by imperialist capital: they were, by the same token, equally subjected to cultural aggression. With the greatest contempt the dignity of their cultures, their languages, their customs, and their histories were negated. There is nothing surprising in these victims of external or internal colonialism (notably the Indian populations of the Americas) naturally linking their political and social liberation to the restoration of their national dignity.

But in turn, these legitimate aspirations are a temptation to look exclusively toward the past in hope of there finding the solution to today’s and tomorrow’s problems. So there is a real risk of seeing the movements of awakening and liberation among these peoples getting stuck in tragic blind alleys as soon as they mistake retrogressive nostalgia for their sought-for highroad of renewal.

The history of contemporary Egypt illustrates perfectly the transformation from a necessary complementarity between a universalist vision open to the future, yet linked to the

restoration of past dignity, into a conflict between two options formulated in absolute terms: either “Westernize!” (in the common usage of that term, implying denial of the past) or else (uncritically) “Back To The Past!”

The Viceroy Mohamed Ali (1804–1849) and, until the 1870s, the Khedives, chose a modernization that would be open to the adoption of formulas reflecting European models. It cannot be said that this choice was one of “Westernization” on the cheap. The heads of the Egyptian state gave the highest importance to modern industrialization of the country as against merely adopting the European model of consumer markets. They committed themselves to assimilation of European models, linking it with renewal of their national culture to whose evolution in a secular direction it would contribute. Their attempts to support linguistic renovation bear witness to that. Of course, their European model was that of capitalism and no doubt they had no accurate conception of the imperialist nature of European capitalism. But they should bear no reproach for that. When Khedive Ismail proclaimed his aim “to make Egypt into a European country,” he was fifty years ahead of Atatürk. He saw “Europeanization” as part of national rebirth, not as a renunciation of it.

The inadequacies of that epoch’s cultural Nahda (its inability to grasp the meaning of the European Renaissance), and the retrograde nostalgia embodied in its main concepts—on which I have expressed myself elsewhere—are no mystery.

Indeed, it is precisely this retrograde outlook which was to take hold over the national-renewal movement at the end of the nineteenth century. I have put forward an explanation for this: with the defeat of the “modernist” project that had held the scene from 1800 to 1870 Egypt was plunged into regression. But the ideology that tried to counter that decline took shape in this retrogressive period and was marked by all the birth defects implicit in that fact. Moustapha Kamel and Mohamed Farid, the founders of the new National Party (Al hisb al watani), chose back-to-the-past as the focal point of their combat—as their “Ottomanist” (seeking the support of Istanbul against the English) illusions, as well as others, reveal.

History was to prove the futility of that option. The popular and national revolution of 1919–1920 was not led by the Nationalist Party but by its “modernist” rival, the Wafd. Taha Hussein even adopted the slogan of Khedive Ismail—“Europeanize Egypt”—and to that end supported the formation of a new university to marginalize Al Azhar.

The retrograde tendency, legacy of the Nationalist Party, then slipped into insignificance. Its leader, Ahmad Hussein, was in the 1930s merely the head of a minuscule, pro-fascist, party. But this tendency was to undergo a strong revival among the group of “Free Officers” that overthrew the monarchy in 1952.

The ambiguity of the Nasserist project resulted from this regression in the debate over the nature of the challenge to be confronted. Nasser tried to link a certain industrialization-based modernization, once again not on the cheap, with support to retrograde cultural illusions. It mattered little that the Nasserists thought of their project as being within a socialist (obviously beyond a nineteenth century ken) perspective. Their attraction to völkisch cultural illusion was always there. This was demonstrated by their choices concerning the “modernization of Al Azhar,” of which I did a critique.

Currently, the conflict between the “modernist, universalist” visions of some and the “integrally medievalistic” visions of others holds center-stage in Egypt. The former are

henceforward advocated mainly by the radical left (in Egypt the communist tradition, powerful in the immediate years after Second World War) and getting a broad audience among the enlightened middle classes, the labor unions, and, even more so, by the new generations. The back-to-the-past vision has slipped even further to the right with the Muslim Brotherhood, and has adopted its stance from the most archaic conception of Islam, the Wahhabism promoted by the Saudis.

It is not very difficult to contrast the evolution that shut Egypt into its blind alley to the path chosen by China since the Taiping revolution, taken up and deepened by Maoism: that the construction of the future starts with radical critique of the past. “Emergence” into the modern world—and, accordingly, deploying effective responses to its challenges including entrance onto the path of democratization, guidelines for which I will put forward further on in this text—has as its precondition the refusal to allow retrograde cultural nostalgia to obscure the central focus of renewal.

So it is not by chance that China finds itself at the vanguard of today’s “emerging” countries. Nor is it by chance that in the Middle East it is Turkey, not Egypt, that is pedaling in the race. Turkey, even that of the “Islamist” AKP, profits from Kemalism’s earlier breakaway. But there is a decisive difference between China and Turkey; China’s “modernist” option is supposed to reflect a “socialist” perspective (and China is in a hegemonic conflict with the United States, that is to say, with the collective imperialism of the Triad) conveying a chance for progress. While the “modernity” option of today’s Turkey, in which no escape from the logic of contemporary globalization is envisaged, has no future. It seems successful, but only provisionally so.

In all the countries of the broader South (the peripheries) the combination of modernist and retrogressive tendencies, obviously in very diverse forms, is to be found. The confusion resulting from this association finds one of its most striking displays in the profusion of inept discourses about supposed “democratic forms in past societies,” uncritically praised to the skies. Thus independent India sings praises to the panchayat, Muslims to the shura, and Africans to the “Speaking Tree,” as though these outlived social forms had anything to do with the challenges of the modern world. Is India really the biggest (in number of voters) democracy in the world? Well, this electoral democracy is and will remain a farce until radical criticism of the caste system (a very real legacy of its past) has been carried through to the end: the abolition of the castes themselves. Shura remains the vehicle for implementation of Sharia (Islamic canonical law), interpreted in that word’s most reactionary sense—the enemy of democracy.

The Latin American peoples are today confronted with the same problem. It is easy, once one realizes the nature of Iberian internal colonialism, to understand the legitimacy of the “indigenist” demands. Still, some of those “indigenist” discourses are very uncritical of the Indian pasts at issue. But others are indeed critical and propose concepts linking in a radically progressive way the requirements of universalism to the potential to be found in the evolution of their historical legacy. In this regard, the current Bolivian discussions are probably able to make a rich contribution. François Houtart (El concepto de Sumak Kawsay) has made an enlightening critical analysis of the indigenist discourse in question. All ambiguity vanishes in the light of this remarkable study, which reviews what, as it seems to me, is probably the totality of discourse on this subject.

The contribution—a negative one—of retrograde cultural illusion in relation to the construction of the modern world, such as it is, cannot be attributed primarily to the peoples

of the periphery. In Europe, outside its northwestern quadrant, the bourgeoisies were too weak to carry out revolutions like those of England and France. The “national” goal, especially in Germany and Italy and, later, elsewhere in the eastern and southern parts of the continent, functioned as means of popular mobilization while screening off the nature of such nationalism as a compromise, half bourgeois/half ancien régime. The retrograde cultural illusions in these cases were not so much “religious” as “ethnic,” and were based on an ethnocentric definition of the nation (Germany) or on a mythologized reading of Roman history (Italy). Fascism and Nazism—there is the disaster that illustrates the arch-reactionary, surely anti-democratic, nature of völkisch cultural nostalgia in its “national” forms.

2. The Universalist Alternative: Full and Authentic Democratization and the Socialist Perspective

I am going to speak here of democratization, not of democracy. The latter, reduced as it is to formulas imposed by the dominant powers, is a farce, as I have said (in “The Democratic Fraud Challenges Us to Invent Tomorrow’s Democracy”—see above). The electoral farce produces an impotent pseudo-parliament and a government responsible only to the IMF and the WTO, the instruments of the imperialist triad’s monopolies. The democratic farce is then capped off with a “human-rightsish” discourse on the right to protest—on condition that protest never gets close to mounting a real challenge to the supreme power of the monopolies. Beyond that line it is to be labeled “terrorism” and criminalized.

Democratization, in contrast, considered as full and complete—that is, democratization involving all aspects of social life including, of course, economic management—can only be an unending and unbounded process, the result of popular struggles and popular inventiveness. Democratization has no meaning, no reality, unless it mobilizes those inventive powers in the perspective of building a more advanced stage of human civilization. Thus, it can never be clothed in a rigid, formulaic, ready-to-wear outfit. Nevertheless, it is no less necessary to trace out the governing lines of movement for its general direction and the definition of the strategic objectives for its possible stages.

The fight for democratization is a combat. It therefore requires mobilization, organization, strategic vision, tactical sense, choice of actions, and politicization of struggles. Undoubtedly these forms of activity cannot be decreed in advance starting from sanctified dogma. But the need to identify them is unavoidable. For it really is a matter of driving back the established systems of power with the perspective of replacing them with a different system of powers. Undoubtedly any sanctified formula of the revolution which would completely and at once substitute the power of the people for the capitalist order is to be abandoned. Revolutionary advances are possible, on the basis of the development of real, new, people’s powers that would drive back those power centers that continue to protect the principles underlying and reproducing social inequality. Besides which, Marx never expounded any theory of “the great day of revolution and definitive solutions”; to the contrary, he always insisted that revolution is a long transition marked by a conflict between powers—the former ones in decline and the new powers on the rise.

To give up on the question of power is to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Only someone of extreme naïvete could ever believe that society can be transformed without destroying, albeit progressively, the established system of power. As long as the established powers remain what they are, social change, far from dispossessing them, leaves them able to co-opt it, to take it over, to make it reinforce, rather than weaken, capitalist power. The

sad fate of environmentalism, made into a new field for the expansion of capital, bears witness. To dodge the question of power is to place social movements in a situation in which they cannot go on the offensive because they are forced to remain on the defensive in resistance to the attacks of the power-holders who, as such, retain the initiative. Nothing astonishing, then, in Antonio Negri, the “prophet” of that modish anti-power litany, fleeing back from Marx to St. Francis of Assisi, his original starting point. Nor anything surprising in that his theses should be played up by the New York Times.

I will here put forward several major strategic objectives for the theoretical and political discussion about social and political struggles (inseparable one from the other), which must perpetually confront the practical problems of those struggles, of their successes and failures.

First of all, to reinforce the powers of workers in their workplaces, in their daily struggles against capital. That, it is said, is what they have trade-unions for. Indeed, but only if the unions are real instrumentalities for struggle—which they scarcely ever are any more, especially the “big unions” that are supposedly powerful because they group together large majorities among their target groups of workers. Such seeming strength derived from numbers is really their weakness, because those unions believe themselves bound to make only “consensus” demands that are extremely modest.

What reason is there to be astonished that the working classes of Germany and Great Britain (called “strong union” countries) have accepted the drastic downward adjustments imposed by capital over the course of the last thirty years whereas the “French unions,” grouping as members only minorities of the class and thus supposedly “weak,” have better (or less badly) resisted such adjustments? This reality simply reminds us that organizations of activists, by definition minoritarian (since it is impossible that the class as a whole should be made up of activists), are more able than “mass” (and thus made up largely of non-activists) unions to lead majorities into struggle.

Another possible field of struggle to establish new forms of power is that of local government. I certainly want to avoid hasty generalizations in this area—either by affirming that decentralization is always a gain for democracy or, on the other hand, that centralization is needed to “change the power-structure.” Decentralization may well be co-opted by “local notables,” often no less reactionary than the agents of the central power. But it can also, as a result of the strategic actions of progressive forces in struggle and of local conditions—sometimes favorable, sometimes unfavorable—fill out or substitute for general advances in the creation of new popular power structures.

The Paris Commune understood this and so projected a federation of Communes. The communards knew that on this question they were carrying forward the tradition of the Mountain (Jacobins) of Year One (1793). For the latter, contrary to what is unreflectingly said (how often do we hear that the Jacobin “centralists” completed the work of the Monarchy!), were federalists (is the Fête de la Fédération to be forgotten?). “Centralization” was the later work of the Thermidorian Reaction, capped off by Bonaparte.

But “decentralization” is still a dubious term if it is counterposed as an absolute to another absolute, that of “centralization.” The challenge confronting the struggle for democratization is to link the two concepts to each other.

The problem of multiple—local and central—power centers is of crucial importance for those

countries that, for various historical reasons, exist as heterogeneous agglomerations. In the Andean countries, and more generally in “Latin America”—which ought to be termed Indo/Afro/Latin America—the construction of specific power structures (“specific” here denoting that they are endowed with areas of genuine autonomy) is the necessary condition for the rebirth of the Indian nations, without which social emancipation has scarcely any meaning.

Feminism and environmentalism are likewise fields of conflict between social forces whose perspective is that of overall social emancipation and the conservative or reformist power centers consecrated to the perpetuation of the conditions for perpetual reproduction of the capitalist system. It is certainly out of place to treat them as “specialized” struggles, because the apparently specialized demands that they put forward are inseparable from overall social transformation. However, not all movements that consider themselves feminist or environmentalist see matters that way.

Coherent linkage of struggles in the diverse fields mentioned here—as well as others—requires constructing institutionalized forms of their interdependence. It is a matter, again, of displaying creative imagination. There is no need to wait for permission from the actual laws to start setting up institutionalized systems (informal, maybe “illegal”), by permanent and de facto compulsory employer/employee negotiation, for example, to impose equality between men and women, or to subject all important public or private investment decisions to thorough environmental review.

Real advances in the directions here advocated would create a duality of powers—like that which Marx envisioned for the long socialist transition to the higher stage of human civilization, communism. They would allow elections by universal suffrage to go in a direction quite different from that offered by democracy-as-farce. But in this case, as in others, truly meaningful elections can take place only after victory, not before.

The propositions put forward here—and many other possible ones—have no place in the dominant discourse about “civil society.” Rather, they run counter to that discourse which—rather like “postmodernist” ravings à la Negri—is the direct heir of the U.S. “consensus” ideological tradition. A discourse promoted, uncritically repeated, by tens of thousands of NGOs and by their requisite representatives at all the Social Forums. We’re dealing with an ideology that accepts the existing regime (i.e. monopoly capitalism) in all its essentials. It thus has a useful role to play on behalf of capitalist power. It keeps its gears provided with oil. It pretends to “change the world” while promoting a sort of “opposition” with no power to change anything.

Three Conclusions

1.) The virus of liberalism still has devastating effects. It has resulted in an “ideological adjustment” perfectly fitted to promoting the expansion of capitalism, an expansion becoming ever more barbaric. It has persuaded big majorities, even among the younger generation, that they have to content themselves with “living in the present moment,” to grasp whatever is immediately at hand, to forget the past, and to pay no heed to the future—on the pretext that utopian imaginings might produce monsters. It has convinced them that the established system allows “the flourishing of the individual” (which it really does not). Pretentious, supposedly novel, academic formulations—“postmodernism,” “postcolonialism,” “cultural studies,” Negri-like animadversions—confer patents of legitimacy to capitulation of the critical spirit and the inventive imagination.

The disarray stemming from such interiorized submission is certainly among the causes of the “religious revival.” By that I refer to the recrudescence of conservative and reactionary interpretations, religious and quasi-religious, ritualistic and “communitarian.” As I have written, the One God (monotheism) remarries with alacrity the One Mammon (moneytheism). Of course I exclude from this judgment those interpretations of religion that deploy their sense of spirituality to justify taking sides with all social forces struggling for emancipation. But the former are dominant, the latter a minority and often marginalized. Other, no less reactionary, ideological formulas make up in the same way for the void left by the liberal virus. Of this, “nationalisms” and ethnic or quasi-ethnic communalisms are splendid examples.

2.) Diversity is, most fortunately, one of the world’s finest realities. But its thoughtless praise entails dangerous confusions. For my part, I have suggested making conspicuous the heritage-diversities which are what they are, and can only be distinguished as positive for the project of emancipation after being critically examined. I want to avoid confusing such diversity of heritage with the diversity of formulations that look toward invention of the future and toward emancipation. For in that regard there is as much diversity both of analyses, with their underlying cultural and ideological bases, and of proposals for strategic lines of struggle.

The First International counted Marx, Bakunin, and followers of Proudhon within its ranks. A fifth international will likewise have to choose diversity as its trump suit. I envisage that it cannot “exclude”: it must be a regroupment of the various schools of Marxists (including even marked “dogmatists”); of authentic radical reformers who nevertheless prefer to concentrate on goals that are possible in the short term, rather than on distant perspectives; of liberation theologians; of thinkers and activists promoting national renewal within the perspective of universal emancipation; and of feminists and environmentalists who likewise are committed to that perspective. To become clearly conscious of the imperialist nature of the established system is the fundamental condition without which there is no possibility of such a regroupment of activists really working together for a single cause. A fifth international cannot but be clearly anti-imperialist. It cannot content itself with remaining at the level of “humanitarian” interventions like those that the dominant powers offer in place of solidarity and support to the liberation struggles of the periphery’s peoples, nations, and states. And even beyond such regroupment, broad alliances will have to be sought with all democratic forces and movements struggling against democracy-farce’s betrayals.

3.) If I insist on the anti-imperialist dimension of the combat to be waged, it is because that is the condition without which no convergence is possible between the struggles within the North and those within the South of the planet. I have already said that the weakness—and that is the least one can say—of Northern anti-imperialist consciousness was the main reason for the limited nature of the advances that the periphery’s peoples have hitherto been able to realize, and then of their retrogression.

The construction of a perspective of convergent struggles runs up against difficulties whose mortal peril to it must not be underestimated.

In the North it runs up against the still broad adherence to the consensus ideology that legitimizes the democratic farce and is made acceptable thanks to the corrupting effects of the imperialist rent. Nevertheless, the ongoing offensive of monopoly capital against the Northern workers themselves might well help them to become conscious that the imperialist

monopolies are indeed their common enemy.

Will the unfolding movements toward organized and politicized reconstruction go so far as to understand and teach that the capitalist monopolies are to be expropriated, nationalized in order to be socialized? Until that breaking point has been reached the ultimate power of the capitalist/imperialist monopolies will remain untouched. Any defeats that the South might inflict on those monopolies, reducing the amounts siphoned from them in imperialist rent, can only increase the chances of Northern peoples getting out of their rut.

But in the South it still runs up against conflicting expressions of an envisioned future: universalist or backward-looking? Until that conflict has been decided in favor of the former, whatever the Southern peoples might gain in their liberation struggles will remain fragile, limited, and vulnerable.

Only serious advances North and South in the directions here indicated will make it possible for the progressive historic bloc to be born.

List of suggested additional readings

1. Hassan Riad, *L’Egypte nassérienne* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1964).
2. Samir Amin, *La nation arabe* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1976).
3. —, *A Life Looking Forward, Memoirs of an Independent Marxist* (London: Zed Books, 2006).
4. —, *L’éveil du Sud* (Paris: Le temps des cerises, 2008). The reader will find there my interpretations of the achievements of the viceroy Muhammad Ali (1805-1848) and of the Khedives who succeeded him, especially Ismail (1867-1879); of the Wafd (1920-1952); of the positions taken by Egyptian communists in regard to Nasserism; and of the deviation represented by the Nahda from Afghani to Rachid Reda.
5. Gilbert Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2009).
6. The best analysis of the components of political Islam (Rachid Reda, the Muslim Brotherhood, the modern Salafists).

Concerning the relationship between the North/South conflict and the opposition between the beginning of a socialist transition and the strategic organization of capitalism, see:

1. Samir Amin, *La crise, sortir de la crise du capitalisme ou sortir du capitalisme en crise?* (Paris: Le Temps des Cerises, 2009).
2. —, [The Law of Worldwide Value](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011).
3. —, [The World We Wish to See](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).
4. —, “[The Trajectory of Historical Capitalism and Marxism’s Tricontinental Vocation](#),” *Monthly Review*, 62, no. 9 (February 2011).
5. Gilbert Achcar, *Le choc des barbaries*. Bruxelles (Paris: Complexe, 2011).

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