

Not the Same Old World

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What kind of world will we have in the wake of four decades of Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union? Capitalist triumphalism has greeted the severe crisis in Soviet socialism and the revolutions in Eastern Europe, and this has its echoes on the left. What is shared, of course, is not the celebration (quite the contrary!), but some of the “realism.” One recent article holds that Capitalism’s triumph is so overwhelming that it brings the world “back to the period of World War I, and in some ways before.” Another concludes, a “counter-revolutionary wave is sweeping through much of the world.” Some believe that Soviet retreats leave U.S. imperialism free to carry out even more aggressive policies in the Third World.

I want to put for discussion a number of questions that suggest a different outlook on the contradictory trends that will shape the post-Cold War world. I also want to conjecture a bit about the Communist crisis, highlighted especially at the ongoing 28th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. While my own answers are tentative, and my mood wavers with every day’s news, I believe this new and unexpected world has a far greater progressive potential than the world of the Cold War era.

The international political landscape is shifting so quickly and unexpectedly that no tendency, left or right, can readily find its bearings. For socialists and leftists of every background the need is nothing less than to restructure our analysis of this complex world and the terms of the struggle to save and change it.

The first area of questions I would suggest has to do with the striking interdependence of the world that emerges from the 20th century. Historically this is a great advance, but the forms it takes include some very depressing features. Most important, the world economy is dominated by imperialist giants. Yet no country can survive indefinitely in isolation. Nations that choose to develop socialist or mixed economies, especially impoverished developing countries, can’t make it without a global strategy and a political struggle for inclusion on more equitable terms, i.e., without rallying the world community to challenge discriminatory structures and policies that enforce conformity through economic strangulation.

Are there any factors that make this more conceivable than it was some years ago when the nonaligned countries called for revamping the interna-

tional economic order? Certainly there could be no such hope during the years when U.S. Cold War strategies dictated the collective posture of politically compliant allies. While the US government remains the most influential world power, and continues to claim for itself the prerogative of intervening in everyone else's affairs, it has to adjust to the emergence of other actors, including rivals, as well as to the end of the Cold War rationale for its military, foreign and domestic policies. It is true that no developing country can now harbor illusions that self-determination and economic viability can be maintained by primary reliance on Soviet assistance and direct confrontation with the United States. But doesn't release from the Cold War vise create more flexibility, more room for alliances and collective action to break out of economic isolation and forestall military interventionism?

How does global interdependence influence prospects for human survival and the role of all forms of popular and class struggle? Socialists cannot close our eyes to the most important fact of this or any other century. There is indeed a crisis of human survival so urgent that our generation and the ones immediately to follow cannot postpone responsibility. Chief elements of the crisis are known: there are the accumulated instruments of war that could destroy the planet in short order; modern industrial society is exhausting the earth and destroying the environment to the point of no return. Integral to the crisis, and the biggest barrier to its solution, is the enormous inequality within and among nations that condemns more humans than ever to starvation, pestilence, racism and oppression. The hope for many years was that world socialism would come along in time to save humanity. Now answers have to be found in this world, a world in which capitalism is far from leaving the scene.

Can there be confidence that anything significant can be done in time? This in turn raises a series of questions about the relation of society's concerns to capitalist interests, and to the potential of "people power." Capitalism is at best schizophrenic about society's concerns. Its nature is to be driven by greed. Nevertheless, capitalist interests are not immutable and in fact are subject to being altered "under compulsion from society," to use Marx's phrase. An aspect of global interdependence is that national struggles and expressions of "people power" increasingly assume an international character. The clearest example came home to us with great joy and inspiration at the Oakland Coliseum last Saturday. The historic advance against apartheid is the grand achievement of the ANC, the Mandelas and all others who gave and give everything to the struggle. The context, however, includes the worldwide surge of concern for democracy and human rights, highlighted by the pressure of sanctions. It also includes the collapse of the Cold War framework that bolstered the outrageous bannings of the ANC, the Communist Party of South Africa and all democratic movements with the blessings of the U.S. government. When Bush greeted Nelson Mandela, it was a recognition that the price for U.S. "engagement" with the apartheid system has become very costly at home and abroad. Whether or not Thatcher deserves Nelson Mandela's designation as an "enemy" of apartheid, the interests of the main capitalist govern-

ments in supporting that system are undergoing some change.

There are other examples from our own history of struggles to change reactionary governmental policies. There are also now added possibilities, enhanced by changing circumstances internationally and more acutely felt domestic problems. But I'll have to leave that to the workshops and tonight's symposium, where the focus will be on what's ahead for the U.S. left.

Like everything else in the early stages of this post-Cold War era, the impact of the universal demand for democracy raises complicated questions. Democratic processes, especially elections, as we know the basis of money and power. Bush's military and economic blackmail undermined the will of the people in Nicaragua's election and Kohl did it to East Germany with economic blandishments, bribery, and aggressive nationalism. Yet there can be no successful struggle for social change that fears democracy, or that underestimates the capacity of "people power" to make democracy work. Nothing better has happened, from a socialist perspective, than the surging movement of masses in many parts of the world for democracy and self-determination.

The political and economic failures of Soviet socialism, its present weakness, are the most negative factor as a new era takes shape. It makes capitalism look attractive to those whom it will exploit, and it leaves millions disillusioned with the very idea of socialism.

We can't know what the outcome of the present turmoil will be. The cause of the continuing crisis, however, is not glasnost and too much democracy, as some have claimed in the current Party Congress. Nor is it the bold initiatives to break down the Cold War and the arms race. Nor is it the historic decision not to intervene to thwart the essentially peaceful popular revolutions in Eastern Europe. These things are enormous contributions to world peace, democracy, and self-determination. Without them there could be no hope for progress toward any kind of democratic socialism.

As for perestroika, the problem is not arriving at the magic formula, the ideal mix for a mixed economy and a regulated socialist market. What develops will depend on compromises that hold together and gain the participation of an angry and rightfully impatient population, especially the working people. It is certainly true that opponents of socialism are very active, but I don't agree that Gorbachev and his co-workers are aiming at capitalism. As for nostalgia among some Communists for restoring their old authority, it seems to me those days are gone forever, simply because the majority of the people don't want it and won't permit it.

In almost every country, old vanguardist party forms and dogmas have reached the end of the road or are close to it. Will socialists and others on the left now interact with mutual respect? – not with a missionary goal of ideological uniformity, but in order to open up minds and energies to each other and to all movements for progressive social change?

Socialism has a lot to learn from the past. The future begins, however, with the recognition that this is not the same old world.

Remaking American Socialism: Building Progressive Unity Within the Left

by Manning Marable

A new political orthodoxy now unites American liberals and conservatives alike: the Cold War is over, the century-long conflict between capitalism and socialism has finally ended, with capitalism triumphant. The death of both Marxism specifically and socialism in general is now widely taken for granted. The proof of this, one African socialist theorist recently observed, is the example of the Berlin Wall. "The fact that pieces of the wall were sold rather than distributed freely," Wamba-dia-Wamba observed, "underlines the reality that Capitalism has won."

The apologists for capitalism now argue that the collapse of the Soviet socialist model was inevitable on economic, political and even moral grounds. They argue that freedom in the political sphere, the unfettered competition between parties in an electoral system governed by laws, is directly dependent on a market-driven economic system, or free enterprise. Such views are now advocated by many of the new political forces in Eastern Europe and the USSR. Last month, an economist elected to the Leningrad city council declared that his country must move quickly "from Marxism-Leninism, through socialism, to Reaganism."

These recent political upheavals have provoked sharp debates throughout the international left. The current debate over perestroika which appears to be developing within the Communist Party of the United States has erupted with much greater intensity in other Marxist-Leninist parties. The majority of the largest bloc within the British Communist Party has effectively disintegrated. Other parties have questioned their political ideology and in some instances have moved to rename themselves, identifying with the concept "democratic socialism."

Within the United States, the collapse of the Soviet socialist model in Eastern Europe, combined with the unexpected defeat of the Sandinistas in the 1990 election in Nicaragua, has created among many an unmistakable climate of self-doubt, disillusionment and even defection from the left. A small number of former leftists are saying that capitalism has been proven correct by historical events, that socialism was an illusion or a fraud. But the

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majority of these leftists have not capitulated to Milton Friedman and Ronald Reagan.

Instead, some are taking refuge in what can be described as pre-Marxian forms of socialism. They say that classical Marxian theories, the labor theory of value and dialectical materialism, are no longer valid. In a manner reminiscent of the Frankfurt School of Marxists of the 1930s, those theorists who search for a humanistic socialism in the face of Stalinism look backward to Hegel and Kant, or to the writings of the immature Marx, and are resuscitating versions of utopian Marxism as "post-Marxism" or "post-modern socialism." Others have moved away from the very identification with the concept of socialism itself. Some argue that this is a tactical necessity, particularly within the United States, which has a political culture that is profoundly individualistic, entrepreneurial, and influenced by antisocialist discourse. Because of McCarthyism and anti-Sovietism, the argument goes, we need to advocate socialist objectives without actually calling ourselves who we really are.

A more sophisticated version of this position is what might be termed "radical democratic" theory, best represented by the work of theorists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. They argue that Marxism neglects many nonclass forms of oppression, that "socialism" as a political terminology does not embrace the complexity of the goals they project for democratic change, and that liberal capitalism can be gradually transformed into a version of economic democracy, or a "postliberal society."

The problem with many of these formulations is that they obscure the fundamental factor which creates and recreates new economic and social contradictions within any capitalist society. That primary factor, which prefigures all others in the first instance, which sets the range of possibilities and outcomes, is the class contradiction. All capitalist market political economies have certain common characteristics: great concentrations of power in the hands of corporate minorities, great stratifications of poverty and wealth, and the utilization of racism, sexism and other factors to segment and divide working people.

Liberalism, by whatever term, seeks to humanize an inherently irrational, wasteful and inhumane social system. Liberalism tries to reduce, but not eradicate, great concentrations of poverty and homelessness. Liberalism attempts to bring representatives of women and people of color into positions of representation, but it does not speak to the transfer of power to oppressed social classes victimized by capitalism. Liberalism wants to interpret the problems of the world, and to create an environment of greater fairness; the point, however, is not to interpret but to change the world. In this "post-modern" period it is no longer popular to relate the truth, but the real name of the game under American capitalism is class struggle. It always has been, and as long as corporate capitalism dominates our economic and social system, it always must be. Our challenge is not to liberalize the existing system, but to radically transform it, building a democratic and humane society.

The dynamic and unprecedented changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe must be understood in relation to the problematic of revolution in the

Correction, page 11

The sentence that begins on line 9 should read: "Democratic processes, especially elections, as we know so well in our country, are routinely subverted on the basis of money and power."