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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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by LOUIS PROYECT
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21st Century Socialism



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Fifty years ago, Peter Camejo ran for Senator from Massachusetts against Ted Kennedy. He didn't win but did manage to recruit many young people to socialism through a stump speech filled with jokes. One of them had to do with life under socialism. There would be such an abundance of goods that money would no longer be necessary. He'd say something like this: "You go to a grocery store and there is filet mignon. Nothing would prevent you from sticking a dozen under your jacket and sneaking out. But instead of

being arrested for shoplifting, you'd be referred to a psychotherapist for doing something so crazy. All you can eat is one, right?"

Today, it would be difficult to make such a speech since we are far too aware of the costs to the planet from cattle ranching. Most socialists are speaking about the need to prevent the Amazon rainforest from being leveled to the ground. Do we accelerate global warming to supply beef to fast-food restaurants? If Peter were alive today, he'd be among the loudest voices against Bolsonaro.

In his 1970 campaign, Peter was trying to popularize the ideas found in Leon Trotsky's 1934 article "If American Goes Communist." Trotsky's words sound somewhat crass as if he were making a sales pitch to men in the admittedly backward but wealthy country: "The average man doesn't like systems or generalities either. It is the task of your communist statesmen to make the system deliver the concrete goods that the average man desires: his food, cigars, amusements, his freedom to choose his own neckties, his own house and his own automobile. It will be easy to give him these comforts in Soviet America."

Since Trotskyists were not in power anywhere, they were under no obligation to cope with the brutal realities of economic development like the Sandinistas put up during the 1980s. They were content to criticize them from afar, their stock in trade.

They explained the Soviet failure to match American productivity in the 1950s and 60s as a function of bureaucratic rule. If the USSR returned to its democratic roots, the workers would forge ahead and produce all the food, cigars and amusements that Stalinism could not. But history played a trick on the Trotskyists. Instead of a socialist utopia, the Russians ended up with a capitalist dystopia under Yeltsin. While Russia recovered from Jeffrey Sachs's shock therapy, it still staggers along economically because of oil market vicissitudes and imperialist sanctions. Discontent, however, hardly produces anything resembling a Trotskyist new wave. Instead, opposition to Putin remains within time-dishonored liberal economic parameters.

In debates over whether socialism was feasible or not, Trotskyism had little to offer except formulaic assurances that workers democracy would set things right. The big debates happened elsewhere and were over whether a planned economy, democratic or undemocratic, could work as efficiently as the capitalist marketplace. Friedrich von Hayek and Ludwig von Mises wrote numerous books and articles arguing that planning

in and of itself necessarily leads to an irrational and inefficient allocation of resources. Following in their path, Milton Friedman and Alan Greenspan reinforced libertarian orthodoxy. It was only the 2008 financial crisis that shook the confidence of the Republican Party establishment with Greenspan confessing: “Those of us who have looked to the self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholders’ equity, myself included, are in a state of shocked disbelief.”

Jeffrey Sachs had a similar epiphany after seeing how his version of market-driven economics failed to produce miracles in Bolivia, Poland or Russia. Now writing articles defending Bernie Sanders against charges that he is a “radical,” Sachs sounds like he has imbibed Trotskyist literature: “The ruling class—dominated by billionaires like Donald Trump and the vested interests that prop him up—have played the same name-calling game for decades.”

Despite the fiery rhetoric targeting billionaires, neither Sanders nor Sachs has given up on the capitalist system. Like Hayek, they regard markets as a *sine qua non* for rational economic behavior. When Elizabeth Warren described the difference between her and Sanders as “He’s a socialist, and I believe in markets,” she was inaccurate. They are both marketeers. You’ll never hear Sanders making a pitch for public ownership of the means of production and a planned economy. Briefly put, he is for Norway, not Cuba. He is too smart to sound like Peter Camejo’s 1970 stump speech since that will shut the doors to MSNBC and lucrative book contracts.

Almost everybody has a good word for markets today. NYU sociology professor Vivek Chibber, who Bhaskar Sunkara regards as a major influence, sounds positively Hayekian in an article he wrote for Jacobin’s special issue on the Russian Revolution:

“What is more challenging is the issue of economic planning. We have to start with the observation that the expectation of a centrally planned economy simply replacing the market has no empirical foundation. We can want planning to work, but we have no evidence that it can. Every attempt to put it in place for more than short durations has met with failure.”

Sam Gindin, who is far more revolutionary-minded than Chibber, also conceded the need for markets to Jacobin readers:

The power of capitalism, Hayek claimed, is that it brings such otherwise internalized, hidden knowledge to the surface while socialism, no matter how much it hopes to plan,

cannot effectively access or develop the knowledge on which successful planning would rest.

For all its inherent ideological and class biases, this critique can't be ignored. Hayek cannot be countered by arguing that capitalists themselves plan. Aside from the fact that the scale of organizing a total society in a nonmarket way is of a different order of magnitude than addressing a single, even vast, corporation, internal corporate calculations under capitalism have an advantage that centralized socialist planning would not have: they have external market prices and market-driven standards by which to measure themselves.

Much of this is reminiscent of the arguments I heard for Market Socialism 30 years ago when I discovered Internet mailing lists (this was prior to the Web, blogs and social media.) Throughout the 1980s, economists in the Soviet bloc blamed the lack of market mechanisms for all their problems. Alec Nove, a Scottish economist, identified with their grievances and called for a mixture of planning and markets. In his 1983 "The Economics of Feasible Socialism Revisited," Nove hoped to debunk Lenin's claim in "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?" that "Capitalism has simplified the work of accounting and control, has reduced it to a comparatively simple system of bookkeeping, that any literate person can do."

Striking the same note as Sam Gindin, Nove maintains that Lenin was naïve:

A large factory, for instance, making cars or chemical machinery, is an assembly plant of parts and components which can be made in literally thousands of different factories, each of which, in turn, may depend on supplies of materials, fuel and machines, made by hundreds or more other production units. Introduce the further dimension of time (things need to be provided punctually and in sequence), add the importance of provision for repair, maintenance, replacement, investment in future productive capacity, the training and deployment of the labor force, its needs for housing, amenities, hairdressers, dry-cleaners, fuel, furniture... 'Simple', indeed!

Markets, however, are not just about figuring out which drill-press to buy when you are investing a new factory that makes furniture. Nor, it is about figuring out how much to charge for a rocking chair that comes off the assembly line. It is about the price of labor. When a market can't bear the price of a unionized worker in an American plant, capital will take wings and fly to places where labor is more affordable.

We are now well into the 21st century. Should we continue to see economic efficiency as a litmus test for a healthy socialist system? Why should we see like a state, as anarchist scholar James C. Scott put it? For Scott, men with few apparent similarities all adhered to a “high modernist” vision. High modernism’s goal was to expand production in agriculture and industry as the best way to meet human needs. For him, this included both Robert McNamara and Leon Trotsky. Such men believed that scientific knowledge was key to governing and producing according to a plan. That, at least, was Scott’s conclusion even though it is hard to see any kind of science or planning at work when McNamara was Secretary of Defense and bombing the hell out of Vietnam. A Hells Angel on methamphetamine would have likely made the same decisions based on the Cold War psychoses that made such a war possible.

The underlying but unstated assumption for the “high modernists” is that the nation-state must achieve economic growth on its own, like pulling itself up by its bootstraps. As long as capitalism has existed, politicians and political theorists shared this understanding. The 17th-century treaties of Westphalia established the bootstrap basis for nation-state economic development in Europe. Afterward, gunboats went forth and imposed this model on the rest of the world at the point of a bayonet. The model was well-suited to dividing and conquering Africa and the Middle East.

In the pre-modern world made up primarily of city-states funded by tributes extracted from peasants, there was little market-driven competition as we know it today. The Ottoman Empire was typical. It became “the sick man of Europe” because it failed to adopt the labor-saving machinery that capitalism was producing in the West. Like the USSR in the 20th century, it collapsed because it failed to compete in global markets. As long as the nation-state exists and as long as money is the basis for commodity exchange, a country like Cuba or the former Soviet Union has to play by the rules of global capitalism. Unless you can export commodities at a cheaper price than a competing nation-state, your economy will suffer, and the citizenry will grow restive.

A recent N.Y. Times article reminded me how restive Americans can become when the economy loses its competitive edge in the global marketplace. Titled “In Crucial Pennsylvania, Democrats Worry a Fracking Ban Could Sink Them,” it cited the state’s lieutenant-general John Fetterman, who proudly called his state “the Saudi Arabia of natural gas.” Fracking was not only critical to the state’s economy, but to the “union way of life.” He worried that Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren’s call for an immediate end to fracking would destroy hundreds of thousands of jobs. If given a choice between

Donald Trump and environmental health, Pennsylvania's workers would choose Trump even if it meant a higher cancer rate. The article quotes Jeff Nobers, executive director of the Builders Guild of Western Pennsylvania: "At the end of the day, if I don't have a job, if I don't have health care, if I can't take care of my family, it doesn't matter if we have global peace and gun control and everything else."

In Australia, climate change has already led to disastrous consequences. Will the death of billions of animals convince voters to follow a different path than Pennsylvanians? Perhaps not. Keep in mind that coal is Australia's second-largest export behind iron ore. In 2016-17, it exported 202 million tons of thermal coal and 177 million tons of metallurgical coal with a combined value of \$54 billion. The coal industry provided around 47,000 direct jobs and a further 120,000 indirect jobs across Australia.

In countries not endowed by plentiful reserves of oil, gas and coal, manufacturing provides the most reliable path to economic progress. Indeed, fossil fuels are subject to the chaotic speculation of global markets and that economists identify as the "resource curse" that keeps Venezuela dependent. (Of course, imperialist sanctions on both Venezuela and Iran are just as much to blame.) With China looming as a major competitor to the USA as the 21st century lurches forward, competitive pressures will likely force both countries to forsake environmental regulations and impose labor discipline to compete on the world market. Other nations will follow suit, as long as the profit motive remains sacrosanct.

In 1961, a musical titled "Stop the World—I Want to Get Off" opened first in England and then on Broadway. There are few revivals nowadays, but the title lives on as an apt description of how some people feel about late capitalism, especially when I read through the N.Y. Times in the morning. Unlike Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk, I have neither the means nor the motivation to go live on Mars.

The 20th century was all about the competition between capitalism and socialism. Which system could best help prepare a nation-state for success in the next century? It was like trying to figure out whether a Harvard or a Yale degree would land you a better job. It turns out that both systems appear to be incapable of resolving the global contradictions that neither Hayek nor Trotsky anticipated. We know that capitalism doesn't work except for the capitalist class. Why would I say the same thing about socialism? The answer: as long as we understand socialism to be co-equal with the nation-state, it will never succeed.

The Bolivarian revolution in Latin America faced insurmountable odds. While some on the left find it easy to fault Hugo Chavez or Evo Morales for not carrying out a genuine socialist revolution, they forget that classical Marxism ruled out building socialism in a single country. In 1847, Frederick Engels wrote a short work titled “The Principles of Communism” that took the form of a catechism. He posed questions that would be of interest to socialist-minded workers and then provided the answers. One of them was, “Will it be possible for this revolution to take place in one country alone?” He replied:

No. By creating the world market, big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth, and especially the civilized peoples, into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others.

Further, it has co-ordinated the social development of the civilized countries to such an extent that, in all of them, bourgeoisie and proletariat have become the decisive classes, and the struggle between them the great struggle of the day. It follows that the communist revolution will not merely be a national phenomenon but must take place simultaneously in all civilized countries – that is to say, at least in England, America, France, and Germany.

If that was true in 1847, it is a hundred times truer today. Electronic communications, the spread of capitalist property relations to every corner of the world, jet travel, multinational corporations, interlocking financial institutions, television and radio, and global trade agreements such as the WTO compel the socialist movement to adjust to new realities. The ruling classes have dozens of institutions that help sharpen their struggles against the working class. The World Economic Forum is just one of them. Meanwhile, workers try to solve their most pressing problems within national borders. We are not even where we were in the early 2000s when the World Social Forum met regularly in places like Porto Alegre in Brazil.

Engels counted on England, America, France, and Germany as the liberated territory that could help transform the rest of the world. The 20th century left pinned its hopes on Russia for most of the 20th century. More recently, clusters of nations in the global south have stepped into the breach. In my over half-century of Marxist advocacy and activism, I have seen the terrain shift. First, it was in Indochina, where Eisenhower warned about a “domino effect.” It turned out that he had little to worry about since the surrounding nations had little support from China, despite Mao’s phony revolutionism. Next, it shifted

to Central America, where this time Soviet Russia pulled the plug. Nicaragua might have been the shining example that would have inspired other revolutions, but perestroika meant that it became a pawn the Kremlin was ready to sacrifice. The last and most promising development was the Bolivarian revolution that had the potential of transforming Latin America from top to bottom. Once again, this regional bloc of radical governments failed to meet expectations. Perhaps, the best explanation for their failure was to remain within the nation-state context. They might have taken their namesake Simon Bolivar's advice to heart: "In the unity of our nations rests the glorious future of our peoples."

If and when a new revolutionary bloc of nations emerges, its most urgent task will be to begin implementing a planned economy across borderlines. Whether planning is second-best to Hayekian markets is immaterial. The most pressing need is to share resources, technical expertise, and environmental preservation within the liberated territory as a demonstration that socialism can work. In a small way, Cuba's ability to withstand the human costs of hurricanes, to feed and educate its people, and provide medical care on the island as well as around the world is more important than its ability to compete with other sugar-producing nations.

One understands why there is so little interest in thinking globally or regionally in advanced capitalist countries. In the USA, you get the most virulent form of nationalism because it is an empire. Does this have a disorienting effect on the left? While the Green New Deal contains many positive features, it is a program for the USA and not the planet.

Even if Bernie Sanders was elected President and joined by a majority of "democratic socialists" in Congress, the Green New Deal remains woefully national in scope. Poorer countries are now supplying fossil fuels that provide energy to wealthier ones. They will also be the source of the minerals that batteries require to store the energy windmills, solar panels, etc., generate. Lithium-ion batteries for electric vehicles will require up to 43% of the cobalt and 50% of the lithium produced globally. Those minerals are plentiful in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, where militias fight over mines as spoils of a brutal civil war. The Africans endure child labor, human rights violations, land grabs, and environmental pollution while Western corporations are busy making profits off of "Green" technology. If the marketplace governs the relations between nations rather than an overarching planned economy, can we expect the people living in the Congo to ever enjoy the living standards of Americans or even the right to live in peace?

In 1965, Che Guevara went to the Congo to fight for its liberation. He went where a fighter/doctor was needed. He joined Fidel Castro on the Granma in 1958 and then went to Bolivia in 1967. Argentine by nationality, he always saw himself as an internationalist. In a 1964 speech to the UN, Che denounced the imperialist exploitation of the Congo:

I would like to refer specifically to the painful case of the Congo, unique in the history of the modern world, which shows how, with absolute impunity, with the most insolent cynicism, the rights of peoples can be flouted. The direct reason for all this is the enormous wealth of the Congo, which the imperialist countries want to keep under their control. In the speech he made during his first visit to the United Nations, compañero Fidel Castro observed that the whole problem of coexistence among peoples boils down to the wrongful appropriation of other peoples' wealth. He made the following statement: "End the philosophy of plunder and the philosophy of war will be ended as well."

Not content with words, he took action a year later to confront the imperialists on the battlefield. As we understand today, Che's guerrilla warfare in both the Congo and Bolivia lacked the preparation carried out by the July 26th Movement in Cuba. His motivations were exemplary even if he failed to understand the importance of a mass movement to back up the armed struggle. With millions of people waking up to the dead-end of capitalism across the planet, we need to begin building a worldwide movement that can finally fulfill Che Guevara's dream.

With all due respect to Leon Trotsky, our horizons should soar above consumer goods like food, cigars, neckties, and automobiles. Perhaps the obsession with markets today is a reflection of the consumer society we live in, with its fetishism of commodities. Bombarded by commercials for such goods continuously on television, leftists might end up fretting that socialism will never match capitalism's ability to come up with a better smartphone or more elegant sunglasses.

Shouldn't we be looking for other satisfactions? Like leisure time, or being able to watch a TV show without having pharmaceutical commercials six times an hour? Best of all, wouldn't we prefer to live in a world where rivers and lakes are pristine? To not have to worry about nuclear war and epidemics capable of killing millions of people?

Finally, wouldn't humanity prefer to have a different relationship to work? For the average person, the time spent at work is only meaningful for the wage it produces. Karl Marx had it right in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844: "...the worker

feels himself only when he is not working; when he is working, he does not feel himself. He is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working.”

In his 1965 “Socialism and Man in Cuba”, Che Guevara expanded on Karl Marx’s brief comment:

A person begins to become free from thinking of the annoying fact that one needs to work to satisfy one’s animal needs. Individuals start to see themselves reflected in their work and to understand their full stature as human beings through the object created, through the work accomplished. Work no longer entails surrendering a part of one’s being in the form of labor power sold, which no longer belongs to the individual, but becomes an expression of oneself, a contribution to the common life in which one is reflected, the fulfillment of one’s social duty.

These words are the beating heart of socialism. It is not a social system only designed to produce goods more efficiently than capitalism. It seeks to elevate humanity one step closer to the gods. Under the best of conditions, our planet will only be able to sustain human life for another billion years or so. With that in mind, we should begin the process of making the best of those years. After seeing what capitalism has done for the past 500 years or so, the socialist alternative makes perfect sense.

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