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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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23.08.2021

No Solutions Under Capitalism: Revolution is Required

Liberals and progressives would do well to understand that while class is not everything – far from it, as I shall argue below – there are still no real or lasting solutions to problems that rightly agitate them under capitalism and bourgeois democracy, that is, under the *de facto* material dictatorship of the *capitalist class* and its mode of production. Take the giant American problem of racial inequality and oppression. Does it have a certain real life of its own, one that should not simply be *reduced to class in economistic ways*? Sure. Of course. Go to any major US city and observe how residence and employment and the lack of both are apportioned and spaced by race. Look at the long and continuing legacies of Black chattel slavery and its ugly stepchild Jim Crow: the *de facto* racial apartheid, separate and unequal settlement, schooling, and investment patterns that are endemic across the United States along with racially disparate mass incarceration and felony marking and numerous other and interrelated practices and policies wired to produce savagely disparate outcomes by race. Look at the dogged denial of race and systemic white racism's continuing central relevance in American life on the part of millions of right-wing white Amerikaners, whose politics are shaped at their core by absurd narratives of white victimization and a fear of white demographic encirclement. Race has a terrible space and life of its own in the US. Race matters. It matters a lot.

Still, it is impossible to properly understand race and racism's evolution in the U.S. (and elsewhere) without grasping how it developed in accord with the economic and political imperatives of capital and class rule. Racial othering, the dehumanizing consignment of Black (along with Native American) people to the realm of Nature, beyond the sphere of

human Society and the social contract, permitted the southern US ruling class and the broader American capitalist system to profit and expand on the basis of the ruthless class-race exploitation and torture of Black labor – as chattel slaves, sharecroppers, debt peons, prison laborers, and poorly paid wage-earners. It also fueled working class divisions that undermine the popular solidarity required for mass opposition to the American capitalist class. The great Black scholar W.E.B. DuBois wrote brilliantly about what he called “the psychological wage” of whiteness, whereby ordinary white working people cling to the notion that their skin color confers special power and privileges that compensate for their subordination (wage-enslavement) to capital.

At the same time, it is inconceivable that the nation’s savage inequalities of race, intimately related to and overlapping with its ferocious disparities of class, will ever be properly addressed, much less overcome, under capitalism. The bourgeois system, caught up in a continuous global intra-capitalist struggle for markets, materials, labor supplies, and share of the surplus value and profit pie, does not have a socially responsible surplus at hand to even begin to remotely redress the massive racial disparity created by the genocidal oppression and wealth extraction imposed on Black people since even before the nation was founded. At the same time, the ruling class remains deeply invested in racial divide-and-rule. Like economic/class inequality, racial inequality and oppression will never be overcome under the capitalist mode of production, something that is most particularly evident and true in a deeply racist nation whose original and pivotal accumulation of capital was achieved through Black chattel slavery.

Much the same can be said about gender disparity and oppression. Any remotely and unbiased observer can and should know that gender oppression predates the capitalist system and possesses a perverse, many-sided logic and life of its own under capitalism. Like toxic whiteness and intimately related to it, toxic maleness and opposition to women’s rights is a major force in right-wing neofascist politics. It is also a major factor in daily American life, with girls and women regularly subjected to horrific abuse ranging from verbal harassment and shaming to beatings, rape, and murder. Being female is a major barrier to advancement and equality across the class structure, from animal processing plants in Iowa to CEO appointments and presidential viability atop the corporate sector and the national government. Gender oppression, hardly invented by capitalism, has a life of its own to this day.

Still, it is impossible to understand patriarchy’s modern forms and essence without reference to capitalism. The noxious and dehumanizing Western consignment of

women to the realm of Nature, outside Society and the social contract, provided justification for the consignment of women to the unpaid toil of raising, providing care for, and otherwise sustaining proletarian populations (the natural resource called human labor power) – and for the bidding down of wages to women in the paid workforce. At the same time, the notion of “the women problem” being meaningfully solved under capitalist rule is fantastic. The bourgeois system will not provide and does not possess the resources required to seriously redress and overcome gender oppression. It remains dependent on the cheap and free, wage-suppressing and profits-protecting labor of women both in the paid workplace and in unpaid homes. Patriarchal capitalism provides middle- and working-class males with a “psychological wage” of maleness that offers them a measure of mental and status compensation for their subordination to an emasculating US One Percent that owns more wealth than the nation’s bottom 95 percent. And gender conflict divisions join with racial and ethnic fragmentation in fueling popular social and political divisions that the capitalist class can’t help but love.

Like racial oppression, gender oppression will not be overcome under the capitalist mode of production.

Or take the immigration question. Capitalism hardly invented conflict between “settled” populations and geographically incoming masses from other territories, races, and/or cultures. Obviously overlapping with and intimately related to whiteness and racial division, the immigration issue has a certain perverse logic and political life of its own, linking and overlapping with race and gender divisions to fuel border-obsessed right-wing nationalist neofascistic politics in the U.S. as in Europe and elsewhere. Still, the modern-day immigration issue is intimately bound up with capitalism in multiple and obvious ways, including shifting patterns of global investment, technical displacement, rural enclosure, and environmental ruin. The profits system clearly cannot and will not begin to seriously address and redress the misery it inflicts on migrants. At the same time, capital derives profits from the exploitation of Otherized migrant labor power whose price is pushed down by migrants’ stateless/rightless status. And capital garners political divide-and-rule protection from the direction of “settled” folk working and middle-class rage away from concentrated wealth and power (capital and its political class) and against Otherized immigrant scapegoats. There’s a “psychological wage” of native status that provides a measure of mental and status compensation for untold millions of “native” US-Americans suffering under the yoke of capitalist rule: “Hey, I’m an American, unlike those people, who don’t know our ways or speak our language.’

The immigration problem will not be solved under the capitalist of production.

Most good progressives say they are against war and imperialism. Neither of those terrible problems were invented by capitalism. Read Gibbon and Thucydides. Google up Genghis Kan. Study the Greek, Roman, Aztec, Inca, Holy Roman, and Chinese among other great empires of the long precapitalist past. At the same time, war and empire, the subsidy and advancement of which massively cancel social and environmental protection and uplift within and beyond the US today, are not without lives of their own. “War,” as Chris Hedges ironically titled his first book, “is a force that gives us meaning.” Hedges drew brilliantly on classical literature and his experiences as a war correspondent to show that war seduces whole nations, generating illusory narratives that much of their publics internalize and use to support lethal conflicts. He also related how many who experience war find it invigorating and even addictive.

Soldiers have long killed millions and died *en masse* to defend empires, typically justified with absurd notions of national greatness and exceptionalism. Ruling classes in great powers benefit from what might be called “the psychological wage of Empire” – the sense among their subordinate domestic classes that they are people of elevated status and power because they reside in and fight for a “great” nation with awesome strength on the global stage. There have also long been material wages of Empire for homeland rulers to distribute to restive domestic masses: materials, goods, and even slaves extracted from conquered colonies, regions, and nations have provided imperial rulers economic benefits with which to pacify their subject populations at home. This all predates capitalism.

Still, the reigning Western and global imperialism of the last half millennium has been fundamentally capitalist and the capitalism that has ruled the world during that time is imperialist by origin, nature and definition and in its own specific ways. Marxists from Lenin on have noted how the rich capitalist nations’ plundering of the oppressed periphery of the world capitalist system periphery permit rich state capitalist states to buy off and even “bourgeoisify” certain better off sections (what Lenin called “the labor aristocracy”) of their domestic proletariats. “To a certain degree the workers of the oppressor nations are partners of their own bourgeoisie in plundering the workers (and the mass of the population) of the oppressed nations; politically ... compared with the workers of the oppressed nations, they occupy a privileged position in many spheres of political life; ideologically ... they are taught, at school and in life, disdain and contempt for the workers of the oppressed nations,” Lenin wrote.

Raj Patel and Jason Moore go back to the system's imperial origins in the "long Sixteenth Century" in their important book *A History of the World in seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*. "Capitalism," Patel and Moore write, "*not only has frontiers; it exists only through frontiers*, expanding from one place to the next, transforming sociological relations, producing more and more kinds of goods and services that circulate through an expanding series of exchanges." Capitalism, as Moore showed in his pathbreaking book *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, depends on such expansion in order to replenish its ever-self-endangered rate of profit (a product of the competitive capitalist race to reduce costs through new applications of technology/constant capital) through the search for and appropriation of new supplies of "cheap nature": cheap raw materials, cheap labor power, and cheap energy.

The expansion has always required brutal military force and conquest, empire. It is intimately tied to racial oppression and Othering, to the naturalizing dehumanization of nonwhite people on the wrong side of imperial capitalism's rapacious frontiers. It also by definition Ecocidal, dependent on endless, profit rate-sustaining expansion and the environmentally brutal commodification of "everything under the sun." The task of advancing and protecting of the American Empire (the leading military agent and protector of not just of American capitalism but of global capitalism after World War II) gave rise of the Pentagon System and the military-industrial-complex, a massive corporate subsidy and diversion of public resources from the potential meeting of social and environmental needs to the high-tech corporate sector. American capital is deeply addicted to "cost-plus" "defense" (empire) contracts and the warfare state, which provides an immensely profitable outlet for surplus capital investment and sustains a military empire that possesses the single largest institutional carbon footprint on Earth.

We will not overcome war, empire, and, for that matter, Ecocide under the capitalist mode of production.

Liberals and progressives are concerned about political authoritarianism. They should be, God knows. The menace posed by repressive political tyranny is very real in the US, where one of the two reigning capitalist political organization (the Amerikaner Party of Trump, APoT, formerly known as the Republican Party), has gone full-on white-nationalist and authoritarian – *fascist, in all honesty*. The "Nazified" APoT appears to be well on the way to achieving full control of the national US government in 2025. Unless blocked by a popular rebellion the dollar-drenched Democrats will never encourage, this neofascist restoration and consolidation will come with and through big help from the

many “red states” currently under literally sickening APoT control and no small collateral assistance from the hollow resistance of the dismal Democrats. It will develop with no small ironic assistance from America’s minority-rule-friendly slaveowners’ Constitution, which offers a clear legal path towards a vote-Tally-Banning Trumpasmic State and Orange Caliphate via federalism (which grants white power “red states” under APoT control remarkable power to ban and cancel minority and Democrat vote tallies, US Senate malapportionment and power (which grants absurdly outsized power to cancel voting rights and reform measures to the nation’s most reactionary and white states in the preposterously powerful upper body of Congress), the awesome anti-democratic judicial review power of the US Supreme Court (where a 6-3 right-wing super majority stands absurdly far to the starboard side of the US citizenry), the Electoral College (which vastly overrepresents the nation’s most reactionary states and regions), and the 12th Amendment (which calls for the settlement of a contested presidential election marked by conflicting state-level Elector slates by a House of Representatives election “with each state having one vote.”

With the closing of the interrelated territorial, military, economic, and ecological frontiers US capitalism has long been able to use as a safety valve for temporarily escaping from its internal contradictions of race, class, and gender, we’ve reached the Rosa Luxemburg cliff or moment. It’s “socialism or barbarism,” though nowadays and really since the aftermath of the failed German Revolution that led to the murder of Rosa, we need to name the barbarism as fascism and add “barbarism/fascism if we’re lucky” thanks to the even graver if intimately related menace of ecocide. And we nowadays must put the crucial prefix “eco-” in front of “socialism.”

Still, capitalism has never been about actual democracy. It has advanced only oxymoronic bourgeois democracy. “Bourgeois democracy” is not actual democracy qualified by bourgeois power, as in “take money out of politics,” or “we can achieve socialism through reform and electing decent people.” It is the class rule of capital cloaked by nominally democratic and representative electoral and parliamentary institutions and formal rule of law. As Frederick Engels wrote in his introduction to the 1891 edition of Marx’s *Civil War in France*: “The state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in the monarchy.” Lenin put it well in his 1918 pamphlet *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*: “bourgeois democracy...always remains, and under capitalism is bound to remain, restricted, truncated, false and hypocritical, a paradise for the rich and a snare and deception for the

exploited, for the poor.” Bourgeois democracy is democracy for the bourgeoisie alone. It is cloak for the de facto class dictatorship of imperial capital.[1]

We will not achieve democracy under the capitalist mode of production. It would take an actual popular and socialist revolution, dedicated among other things to the drafting and implementation of a new constitution (the still reigning American one was drafted by and for slaveowners and merchant capitalists for whom democracy was the ultimate nightmare in the time of Louis XVI), to get on the path of popular sovereignty (the last thing the US Founders ever wanted to see).

If an actual radical Leftist prefers miserable bourgeois politicians like Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, and Anthony Blinken to malignant white power pandemo-Nazis like Donald Trump, Mike Pompeo, and Stephen Miller in the imperial executive branch, it has *nothing to do with believing in bourgeois democracy and everything to do with the calculation that chances for building opposition to the whole damn system are better under bourgeois democracy and its nominal rule of law than they are under fascism*. A related calculation tells a serious radical that openly authoritarian rule is the ultimate destination of capitalism, whose rapacious and inherent contradictions always tend towards the final abolition of democratic pretense and constitutional rule of law qualifications and moderations. After concentrated capitalist wealth and the (literally) cancerous spread of capitalist social relations have proletarianized and subjugated most of the species, thoroughly corrupted government and media, badly polluted and cooked the planet, eviscerated key ecological and epidemiological safeguards, it is clear that humanity can no longer survive as long as capital owns and rules the material base and the political superstructure of society. As capital's identity as the dark class rule lynchpin of humanity's failed state of being and existential menace becomes more undeniably evident, the bourgeoisie and its political class must undertake to abandon and dismantle democratic pretense and past popular-democratic victories and align themselves with full on revanchist authoritarian and repressive, genocidal ecofascism. Getting neoliberal bourgeois democratic and nominally rule-of-law electoralist politicians like Joe Biden into office and perhaps passing a few half human reform measures become at best holding actions in the face of authoritarian consolidation. The holding actions are essential, providing transient breathing room in which to try to organize an “actual revolution, nothing less,” to use the thoroughly appropriate language of the Revolutionary Communist Party, to overthrow a system that devolves towards dictatorship and the destruction of livable ecology by its very historical-material nature.

Endnote

1. You don't have to be a Marxist or some other kind of anti-capitalist to understand the capitalism and democracy are not only different from each other but opposed to each other. My old copy of *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary* defines capitalism as "the economic system in which all or most of the means of production and distribution ... are privately owned and operated for profit, originally under fully competitive conditions: it has been generally characterized by a tendency toward concentration of wealth and, [in] its latter phase, by the growth of great corporations, increased government controls, etc." There's nothing—nada, zero, zip—about popular self-rule (democracy) in that definition. And there shouldn't be. "Democracy and capitalism have very different beliefs about the proper distribution of power," liberal economist Lester Thurow noted in the mid-1990s: "One [democracy] believes in a completely equal distribution of political power, 'one man, one vote,' while the other [capitalism] believes that it is the duty of the economically fit to drive the unfit out of business and into extinction. ... To put it in its starkest form, capitalism is perfectly compatible with slavery. Democracy is not." Thurow might have added that capitalism is perfectly compatible with fascism, racism, nativism, sexism, militarism, and imperialism among other authoritarian and anti-democratic forces and formations. More than being merely compatible with slavery, moreover, U.S.-American capitalism arose largely on the basis of the Black cotton slave system in the nation's pre-Civil War South. This is demonstrated at length in historian Edward Baptist's prize-winning study *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. "We must make our choice," onetime Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis is reputed to have said or written: "We may have democracy in this country, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we cannot have both." This statement (whoever made it) was perhaps unintentionally anti-capitalist. Consistent with Webster's(above), the historically astute French economist Thomas Piketty has shown that capitalism has always been inexorably pulled toward the concentration of wealth into ever fewer hands.

Paul Street's new book is *The Hollow Resistance: Obama, Trump, and Politics of Appeasement*.

CounterPunch 20.08.2021