**Some reflections on capitalism, globalisation, the left and the need for concrete alternatives**

*Nos encontramos ante la muerte de una de las mayores*

*estafas ideológicas de los siglos recientes*

(Álvaro García Linera, La Jornada, 28 de diciembre 2016)

*The emergence of rentier capitalism*

To all those who think ‘capitalism’ is the major obstacle to the success of the left and progressive forces, it may come as a surprise: capitalism continues to change and transform itself, to develop into something different from what it was before. And each time the left decides to better analyse what exactly is happening, ‘the enemy’ is taking one step ahead and succeeds in stopping all reflection on alternatives and strategies in order to surpass it.

To-day, this is happening once again. Thirty-five years after the introduction of neoliberalism which defined new rules for the functioning of the world, nearly two years after the IMF (International Monetary Fund) used the concept for the very first time and stated it might have perverse effects, the system is undergoing a metamorphosis and gives rise to political changes to which we are not prepared.

Neoliberalism is an ideology whose theoretical basis was defined by the ‘Mont Pèlerin’ group and it consists mainly in having markets decide on almost everything. In practice it first took the form of the ‘Washington Consensus’ and focused on the liberalisation of markets and free movement of goods, services, capital and people. It implied the deregulation of markets, including labour markets. In put into place a new kind of State, with less binding rules but more protection of property rights, markets and consumer rights. It preaches openness to the world and individual liberties.

In this movement, the capitalist system appropriated almost everything that was possible: from national enterprises to public services, from nature to knowledge. It dismantled existing protection of workers and is now appropriating life itself, through the advances of biotechnology. These changes went along together with a breakthrough of banks and a logic of financialisation. This latest development led to a ‘new’ capitalism that seeks less to produce and progress than to extract rents from everything it undertakes, while imposing austerity to populations all over the world.

Incomes from capital have risen enormously and to-day amount to more than 20 % of GDP in several countries. Have to be added to these incomes from all sorts of activities such as patents, brands, copyright, etc. This is rentier capitalism that put an end to free markets using institutional mechanisms. Multinational companies have captured the state apparatus in order to receive all the subsidies they want, new legislation for the protection of intellectual property, consumers and students have been encouraged to make debts. Later, almost all of the public sector passed into private hands, from health care to education, from social housing to prisons and even security forces, parks streets and squares, parts of the oceans and of the forests, all over the world. To-day, even ‘employers’ are disappearing, in the new ‘collaborative’ economy intermediating enterprises are limiting themselves to put demand in touch with offer.

At every step, capitalism is reaping the profits, without any risk.

*The re-emergence of anti-democratic and anti-modern conservatism*

The consequence of this system has been a very rapid growth of inequalities in favour of 1 % of the population. And inevitably, resistance is growing yet again, all over the world. Repression is the only answer left to the dominant forces if they want to keep their ’achievements´ and their power.

However, resistance to neoliberalism does not only come from popular forces, the victims of the institutionalised theft. It also comes from conservatives who want to put an end to individual liberties and nationalists who see ‘cultural values’ threatened by migrations. Add to this the emergence of radical islam and a very real terrorist threat, and all the ingredients are there for the success of right-wing, neo-conservative populism.

New populist leaders, from the United States to Hungary, Poland, France, Holland and the Philippines, have nothing to do with the individual liberties of neoliberalism, but they do directly threaten the values of democracy and modernity. Their dream is to put an end to globalisation, to human rights, to gender equality, to individual liberties, to the separation of powers and they will repress all resistance. Some will not hesitate to strengthen social rights for nationals, not in an emancipatory way but in order to preserve social stability.

*Confusion on the left*

It is obvious the left has some problems facing this new situation. Since the 1960s, it has integrated – not easily, but still – the values of ecology, gender and anti-racism. The fall of the Berlin Wall was not followed by a deeper analysis of its fundamental values and when the movements of ‘buen vivir’ in Latin America demonstrated that capitalism and Socialism were but two sides of one and the same coin, called modernity, it had no answer.

Social-democracy abandoned itself to neoliberalism with its ´third way’ and is now more and more marginalised, lacking effective answers to the demands of its electoral base.

The radical left tries to re-ermerge, but it remains the victim of a certain sectarianism and past beliefs that do not appeal to young people anymore who want more democracy and participation. It remains imprisoned in its analyses of capitalism and the denunciation of everything that goes wrong and so remains behind in a struggle for credible and realistic alternatives.

The left is also faced with the question of how far it has to distance itself from the new right. The left also criticised globalisation and certain elements of liberal democracy, as it also reclaimed national sovereignty. Let me be clear: I do not want to compare the left to the right, since its fundamental values are totally opposed, but it is not always easy to explain, for instance, that the European left is opposed to the European Union, only partially for different reasons than those of the right.

The left of ‘buen vivir’ which has always critical of modernity, has a similar problem. Of course, the belief in linear progress, the not taking into account of ecology, the separation of nature and culture, all these elements need to be criticised and if possible corrected. But we should hope one does not want to abandon human rights and the separation of powers. One wonders if the rejection of modernity and its assimilation to capitalism, colonialism and even slavery has not been all too easy? When some people openly reject modernity, some clarification is needed. It is not a coincidence that some people in Europe always refused to adhere to the ideology of Mother Nature.

In sum, if the left wants to survive, some fundamental tasks at the level of its ideology will have to be done. What does socialism mean today? Is it enough to redefine it or is it necessary to seek for a new basis and maybe even to search for a new word? How to solve the real contradictions that exist with ecology, for instance at the level of the development of productive forces? How to redefine the class conflict, relevant as it is, but also taking into account the metamorphosis of the proletariat, the emergence of the precariat and the decline of the middle classes? And most of all, how to develop a progressive and emancipatory discourse that speaks to young people, because without them all is lost in advance?

*And the alternatives?*

Knowing the many problems our current world is faced with, it seems to me that there are two possible solutions for organizing resistance and developing convergent strategies.

A first solution could be to focus on human rights. The Universal Declaration on human rights, together with the two international covenants on civil and political rights, on the one hand, and economic, social and cultural rights on the other hand, could be sufficient to solve all the existing problems of today. A British NGO even proposes to focus on the sole article 25 of the UDHR, stating that all have a right to a decent standard of living. And indeed, if we would want to respect and fulfil that right, major economic and social transformations are necessary. It should be possible for social movements who work on labour rights, access to water, on housing, on health care, on children’s rights, on taxes, on democracy, etc, to come together around this major demand while continuing to work on their specific topics. This should also be possible for peace movements, since peace is not possible without social justice. Environmental movements might have some problems, though here again one has to be aware of the fact that a decent standard of living is not possible without a healthy environment: But it is correct to say that environmental rights, except to right to water, is not explicitly mentioned in the treaties on human rights. In fact, a real convergence already exists between environmental movements and the advocates of peasant agriculture.

A second solution could be to focus and converge around the commons. This concept is kind of becoming a buzzword nowadays but it could prove to be extremely useful to express all major demands of the left. The commons are linked to our environment (oceans, forests, water, air…), as well as to public services (health care, collective transport, kindergartens, libraries…), modes of production (labour, money…) and life itself (scientific knowledge, genetics…). These commons belong to the whole of the world population and can in no way be privatised. Which means we should collectively re-appropriate them, focusing also on the complementarity of individual and collective rights. The commons allow for resisting neoliberalism as well as conservatism and privatisations. They could also become a strategic tool with which to promote the convergence of social movements.

*The need to re-politicise the World Social Forum*

To say that the WSF is in crisis is stating the obvious. Its International Council was lost in existential and self-referential debates for at least four years and does not know how to get out of it. Is this the failure of the alter-globalist movement? Of course, the WSF if only one of multiple actors of the alter-globalist movement, but it could have been the place where alternatives get shaped and where, at this precise moment, an answer could have been given to all those, left and right, who wat to put an end to globalisation. Whereas, what we need, is not another version of nationalism, but another form of globalisation, in favour of societies and the environment. Fortunately, at its last meeting in Porto Alegre in January 2017, a new start with new dynamics was possible. If we succeed to preserve and strengthen it, the movement might play an important role for the future.

What should be done?

It seems to me to be urgent, first of all, to stop the rear-guard debates, as if those who want to progress and break the paralysing blockades were only out in order to ‘take power’. These are really discourses of an outdated left that is not capable of having democratic debates. The WSF is more than 15 years old, if it cannot change, it is lost.

Secondly, the WSF should stop to speak in empty slogans. We should admit the WSF is not a ‘process’ (where to?) and it is not ‘facilitating’ the work of social movements. We should re-define what we want.

We should also admit, thirdly, that the so-called horizontalism is not what it pretends to be and that all serious work, needs, urgently, a minimum of organisation, a secretariat, democracy and accountability.

If we really want the WSF to be a process facilitating the work of social movements, we should organise differently. The WSF can continue to be a festival of all kinds of social movements, but next to that, it should be possible to start with some serious work:

* Of agglutination of specific topics and movements (which demands an availability of movements to go beyond the meetings of their own network)
* Of selection for each forum, of two, tnhree or four priority topics on which major conferences can be organised,
* Of preparation of convergence topics and work on them with concerned movements during the forum
* Of organisation of an IC that can be interesting to the leaders of major social movements and intellectuals – academic and non-academic – so as to meet and discuss the global political situation, to reflect on strategies and to prepare the major conferences of the WSF.
* Of contributing to the emergence of a consistent and coherent counter-hegemonic discourse, able to shape concrete alternatives.

*Conclusion*

Our current world is faced with another transformation of capitalism, now heading towards the accumulation of rents. This is a new era full of dangers and risks. The huge inequalities that have been created these past decades are not compatible with any form of democracy and now need the help of conservative forces, always ready to repress and to dismantle the achievements of modernity.

We are not (yet) at the end of neoliberalism, but right-wing neo-conservatism is seriously threatening it.

Faced with this political challenge, the left is powerless as long as it remains imprisoned in an ideology of the past. In order to get out of it, the left will have to tackle the world’s two major challenges: the social divide and the ecological question. This is the protection people need: the protection through rights instead of the protection through closed borders, the police and the military.

The World Social Forum could and should be the tool to prepare for a better future, since we need a movement capable to reflect and to act at the global level. The politics we should promote have to be geared towards another kind of globalisation, respectful of the necessary and inevitable pluralism. If we want this to happen, we must re-politicise and reorganise the forum.

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