

# SOCIALISM AS A GLOBAL ALTERNATIVE: A VIEW FROM THE SOUTH

Pablo González Casanova

I would like to discuss the crisis of socialism and of the socialist countries of the Third World and to think about socialism as a global alternative from the perspective of that part of the world.

When one analyses the process of 'reconversion' of the 'socialist-oriented' countries / socialist-type countries / countries of 'socialist orientation' of the Third World, it is clearly noticeable that the central aims of development are changing in the vast majority of those countries. The crisis of real socialism\* in the USSR and the countries of Eastern Europe has had a serious effect on their projects for growth with social justice and commercial or financial sovereignty, and we must remind ourselves that some of these projects have provided the bases for an income distribution and a social stratification and development that are relatively more equitable than can be guaranteed by most Third World governments.

The restoration of dependent capitalism on the neoliberal model is very far-reaching, and its sources are not only external. It openly changes the central goal of a 'future egalitarian society' and indeed the very goal of 'liberation', while development plans and the market itself remain in the control of the monopolies, which are yet again the direct beneficiaries of accumulation. Furthermore, social relations of production and ownership

are reconstituted in accordance with a new type of neo-colonial authority or supranational state, represented by – among others – the International Monetary Fund. This is not an uncommon phenomenon. While Cuba's external debt is equivalent to only 20 per cent of the national product, in Angola it is 55 per cent, in Mozambique 63 per cent, in Tanzania 67 per cent, and in Vietnam, although there are no comparable statistics, the debt is as high as US\$5,500 bn. Something similar is the case in the other sixteen countries which are known as 'socialist-oriented', in most of which – just as in those of the CMEA – external indebtedness has obliged them to apply 'adjustment policies' forced on them by letters of intention and agreements with the IMF.

Although they differ in the degree to which they resist or accept these policies, under direct pressure from the IMF and the World Bank or from the bureaucracies and 'bourgeoisies' associated with them, the socialist-oriented countries of the Third World have in recent years applied policies which in every case seem to imply renewed dependency and a resurgence of peripheral neoliberal capitalism. Whereas in formerly populist states this kind of policy involves abandoning projects of 'independent national development', surrendering the processes of accumulation to the transnational or associated bourgeoisie, in the socialist-oriented countries it also involves abandoning in practice the project of socialist accumulation and to a *change in the dominant class or bloc*, formerly based in the working people as the spearhead on the way to socialism. The new

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\* This refers to socialism as practised in USSR and Eastern Europe and which has now collapsed. See also the essay by Schaff.

bloc is formed by the association of many functionaries who previously called themselves Marxist-Leninists with private local and transnational bourgeoisies.

While state socialism, as Worsley has noted, 'aims to raise living standards as its primary objective' (Worsley, 1980), *adjustment policies* make payment of external debt servicing a tactical aim, and the restoration of capitalism and dependency the strategic objective. Structural change is observable in the reorientation of all economic resources towards the accumulation of private associated and transnational capital and with the *transformation of labour into a cheap commodity* for the private owners of the means of production.

If not all the countries described as 'socialist-oriented' are yet at the end of this dramatic process, *all* those which are negotiating with the IMF are subjected to and accept, willingly or unwillingly, the notorious pressures to adopt neoliberal policies by means of which those classic characters, the 'foreigner' and the 'capitalist', regain essential control of the economy. To take an example: in Mozambique denationalisation has been occurring since 1979; in 1984 the Mozambican state ended its monopoly over foreign trade in favour of private companies; 1986 saw the liberalisation of legislation on foreign investment. Meanwhile the population has been subject to a harsh programme involving currency devaluation of up to 420 per cent, new indirect taxes, price rises of 200 to 400 per cent, and finally a reduction in the state's social expenditure. Similar policies can be seen in the other countries with popular or socialist governments, from Nicaragua – even before the Sandinistas' electoral defeat – to Vietnam. All these countries seem destined to lose the economic and social war, despite having won on the field of battle. 'We're very good generals of the people', said Comandante Tomás Borge with some surprise, 'and very bad economists.'

In Vietnam, adjustment is leading to the creation of private businesses, to the extension of private enterprise in agriculture, to a 'free market' controlled by monopolies, to the removal of subsidies from consumer goods, to the 'slimming down' of the public sector, to 'very liberal' legislation on foreign investment. Only Cuba has embarked on an 'austerity policy' which has not changed, and is showing no sign of changing, the class mark of its accumulation and is not transforming labour into a commodity subject or subject to capital's laws of supply and demand. Perhaps that is the most unforgivable aspect of its rebelliousness against an empire that considers it part of its zone of manifest influence.

For many of these countries, indebtedness and the adjustment policies to which it leads mean not only the loss or the impending loss of the socialist project, but also that of the project of liberation or national sovereignty confronted with the great powers.

The policy of restoring capitalism in the most developed 'socialist' countries affects all projects of liberation; it threatens both the nationalist and populist projects defined in the past and those which are still tending to strengthen their coalitions with working-class and popular movements. In the short term, the contradictions of authoritarian socialism and its growing crisis have weakened those states and movements in the Third World which received support from the USSR and other countries which have now passed into capitalism or are still reeling economically, technologically, politically and intellectually. Many Third World states and popular movements – and not just the socialist ones – feel more and more helpless, and they are in every case confronting their fate in a way they had not predicted. The neoliberal offensive exploits and encourages the different contradictions in which they are trapped.

Among these contradictions are the same ones as 'developed socialism' is facing: the absence of a democratic organisation that can control authoritarianism and bureaucratic corruption without sacrificing the discipline necessary to struggle against the old expropriated classes and imperialism; or the enormous deficiencies in the productive apparatus, another victim of authoritarianism and corruption, which thwart every 'plan' (should anything worthy of the name arise) and any kind of social and economic development for the majority. Expressions of this painful situation can also be seen in authoritarian ideas that pay lip-service to doctrinaire 'Marxism-Leninism' and which adapt themselves to 'realistic policies' of locally varying stripes either in mixtures or by leaping from the most abstract 'doctrine' to the most extravagant 'reality' without the slightest epistemological or moral scruples.

Contradictions occurring in the central socialist states appear in the peripheral ones at the level of much reduced economic and social development. The masses in these countries, unlike those in Poland or Czechoslovakia, do not entertain any hope of taking their place beside capitalism's most advanced countries, but they do share the same fascination for the consumer society that is notable in Eastern Europe and Russia, and have natural desires to express new ideas, interests and sentiments in forms which often conflict with objective economic and political conditions or with their leaders and their style of government.

Even in Cuba, where systems of popular participation in government are becoming increasingly open, especially at the base, and where official language represents the general interest to a high degree, demands are arising which are hard for the leadership to accept, either because they are risky in the conditions of siege and harassment under which the island lives (remember that Cuba has been forced to replace its tractors by oxen and its cars by bicycles), or because they call for a

political pluralism and changes in political appointments which are not easy to introduce while pressure from the United States is growing and the solidarity of the USSR has disappeared. Such demands can also be hard to accept because they demand a level of information, a language, a freedom of critique and opinion which could easily be achieved but which government circles cannot find a way of broadening without weakening their own position – although, I think, by not broadening them they also weaken their position. It is certain that, as Susan Jonas has written, ‘The future of Cuba will depend to a great extent on the skill with which the Cuban government and Cuban society can respond to internal pressure for change’ (Jonas, 1990); and it is certain that both government and people are aware of this need. But for that very reason, and because Cuba is not altering the class content of either its leadership or of labour, the United States’s most virulent offensive in the world is directed against Cuba, which makes it even harder for it to make the democratic changes, in the spirit of José Martí, that are necessary. It is fervently to be hoped that it will be able to make them, for their achievement would be a victory for humanity.

In other countries, from Angola to Vietnam, the contradictions in the underdeveloped socialist states are much sharper. In these countries we cannot discount the possibility of an agreement to restore neocolonialism, the costs of which would undoubtedly be very high, and which would set back still further the struggle for democratic socialism.

In any case, the situation of the so-called socialist countries, and the situation of the socialist project in the Third World and the whole world, appears to call for a triple struggle at a global level:

- 1 Defence of and solidarity with those Third World countries, from Cuba to Vietnam, which still have socialist projects and struggle for them in the face of imperialism and its restoration; but keeping in mind that in the end it will be the people of each country who determine the nature and the timing of their own democratic revolution.
- 2 Support for grassroots movements and organisations in Russia or the CIS, Eastern Europe and the ‘socialist-oriented’ countries, which are struggling for democratic socialism and against the restoration of capitalism and of big private monopolies.
- 3 The *essential* struggle against the exploitation of workers and for democracy, against the exploitation and domination of nations and for democracy: a struggle which joins the struggle against an order which accentuates inequalities and irrationalities in its use of surplus wealth, which creates and exaggerates economic and social polarisation and which

promotes the ‘exclusion’ of populations seen as ‘irrelevant’ or dysfunctional in terms of the system.

These three struggles together appear to comprise a coherent strategy for defending today’s socialism, as a form of power, and of promoting socialist democracy, as a form of politics. All three contain an essential challenge and imply a historical act of creation: not to postpone democracy for fear of destabilisation, and not to lose the socialist project for the sake of the democratic project.

The game is not over. In the countries of the Third World, the deep poverty and terror entailed by the restoration of neoliberalism quickly shatter the illusions of the masses, where they had any; for them it is *impossible* to attain a better future while their rulers are subjugated to imperial powers. The neoliberal restoration means an immediate return to exploitation and domination by peripheral or colonial capitalism, made newly operational again for today’s conditions. The politics of repression tend to prevail over those of negotiation, and the latter before long end up as exacerbated exploitation of the vast majority of workers. The phenomenon becomes visible in overt and covert military interventions, both homegrown and foreign, and in an increase in *taxation*, external debt and unequal terms of trade involving the surrender of enterprises and natural riches. So, while the successes of the liberal counter-revolution are rapidly revealing their contradictions in Eastern Europe, in the Third World the restoration of capitalism and colonialism, in today’s transnational form, are preying on peoples and workers just as the old colonialism did. This creates the urgent need for a new struggle for liberation, democracy and socialism, as struggles against exploitation of the vast majority of manual and intellectual workers, who, on their reinsertion as a commodity, receive for equal work and productivity a lower price than before and lower than their counterparts in the central socialist countries.

At all events, the international situation is uncertain, and perhaps in the immediate future will become even more favourable to the liberal counter-revolution. But we cannot discount the possibility that future struggles may produce a new movement for socialism, a global movement in which militants coming from social democracy, from Leninism and from revolutionary nationalism will join forces with the emerging social movements which give the struggle for democracy and socialism an original language and ideas enriched by the hard experience referred to by Frei Betto: ‘While capitalism privatised property and socialised dreams, socialism as it really exists socialised property and privatised dreams.’

A great intellectual renewal seems imminent. To the culture of class contradictions and the renewed analysis

of the contradictions that apply to capitalism today will be added a new culture, that of *the contradictions of real socialism itself*. Salient among these contradictions are those which belong to the politics of ideals, which shrink to a politics merely of clienteles, or of groups, or of a micropolitics in which the ideal is lived daily as a reality and both are experienced as problems to study and solve. Also, it seems to me, the new project will put forward a special development of dialectical analysis without having to legitimate it with the thinking of leaders and classical authors; that is, a historical and empirical analysis of socialism as an alternative politics of contradiction which transcends its previous limits with generations who have new experiences and new hopes.

In any case, viewed from the most diverse geographical and ideological positions, the socialist project today appears multidimensional and global. Either the struggle for socialism is seen as a struggle for democracy and also for liberation, or the concept of that struggle is very poor. And this struggle for socialism, liberation and democracy must be studied beyond the limits of classic Eurocentrism or of Third-World parochialism, as a project of really worldwide scope; and that means making an effort to understand it from the viewpoint of the South and to reject any implicit idea of a *colonial democracy* or a *socialism with colonies*, that is, to reject the kind of ideas that are often not explicitly rejected in social democratic, socialist and communist thinking.

The legacy of the nineteenth century is that we now

know that a world struggle for socialism is not possible without also struggling against colonialism and imperialism. The principal legacy of the experiences of the twentieth century is that the struggle for socialism is not possible unless it is worldwide and is also a struggle for democracy.

Today, all over the planet, the priority of the new history is the struggle for democracy and, starting from that struggle, the struggle for liberation and socialism. Together, those three struggles constitute – like respect for the self-determination of peoples – the only alternative for the survival of the world.

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