

# **The South: What are the alternatives? The conclusions of the Algiers symposium\***

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The symposium organized in Algiers from 25 to 30 September 2013 gave rise to a rich debate revolving around a central theme: the 'sovereign project', understood as the necessity for the peoples and nations of today's world to reorganize their political choices in a way that would allow them to distance themselves from the globalization unilaterally imposed by the monopolies of the historic centres of imperialism, to elevate themselves to the ranks of those who play an active part in shaping the world, and to initiate new forms of development that are just and sustainable.

The symposium provided an opportunity to make a general survey of the many facets of the overall challenge posed by the construction of a 'sovereign project': defining economic policies that would put an end to the processes of pauperisation and dispossession characteristic of the workings of capitalism, guaranteeing as a result the sharing of the benefits of development to benefit the working classes; defining the ways in which political power could be used to open the way for real and progressive democratisation of societies; defining the measures that would guarantee respect for the sovereignty of peoples and nations, and opening the way for a polycentric globalization that would be negotiated and not unilaterally imposed by the most powerful for their profit alone.

The debate showed that the 'sovereign projects' of the so-called emerging countries, besides their diverse wording and actual implementation and efficiency, all fall far short of the demands of social development that reaches beyond the boundaries set by the fundamental tenets of capitalism, which in turn are based on forms of development of productive forces destructive to humans and to nature.

## **A New Phase in the Expansion of Capitalism?**

A quick look at the immediate reality suggests that we are entering a new phase in the expansion of capitalism on a world scale: we are seeing high growth rates in emerging countries in particular, in contrast to almost flat rates in the historical centres (United States, Europe and Japan). This expansion of capitalism is therefore manifested by a gradual transfer of its centre of gravity from old Europe and the United States to Asia and Latin America. Historians will view this as a return to normalcy; in 1800, on the eve of the Industrial Revolution, China and India represented a proportion of the world GDP about equivalent to their population. These countries only lost their top ranking on the world scene recently, during the 19th century; the North-South gap is recent but has become phenomenal.

The theory of the expansion of capitalism is correct on one fundamental point: indeed, the paths and the means used by all up to now only reproduce the methods of the historical capitalist system of production that created the developed countries and made them what

they are today, for better or worse. Reproducing [this system] in full, no matter the political context, democratic or not, no matter whether the social context accepts the most devastating effects of pauperisation or greatly mitigates them by means of social policies; in other words [reproducing] an expansion that develops not only productive forces but at the same time forces that destroy nature, reduces the citizen to the status of television spectator and consumer, thereby annihilating any authentic expression of individual freedom.

And yet this model of destructive development is not challenged, either in the centre or in the periphery countries. And it was not challenged during the 20th century in the peripheries that to varying degrees shed the yoke of imperialism and even of capitalism, i.e. in the historical socialisms of the Soviet Union, China, and other countries.

Nevertheless, in the context of this harsh general assessment there are several variations whose impact cannot be ignored. One cannot say that the achievements of China or Ecuador are not different to those of Colombia or Pakistan! So there are variations... depending on whether these attempts, these advances, are motivated by the will to build a sovereign project or, on the contrary, simply submit to the dominant global demands that impose a model of capitalist subcontracting (what I call “lumpen development”).

Between the ideal sovereign project, which does not exist, and subcontracting pure and simple, which is the case of the majority of countries in Africa and the Arab world today, there is often an association of elements of sovereign projects with political strategies of adjustment to subcontracting in an imperialist context. One cannot disregard these nuances. The challenge is not the same for peoples that are the victims of unregulated “lumpen development” as for others that benefit from a global development of their society. These are important differences that guarantee more legitimacy and stability in some cases, much less or none in others.

The argument that is still being put forward today to justify the dominant choices regarding coherent sovereign projects is that there are no other ways of developing productive forces: it is only possible to catch up by copying. This is the easy way and perhaps the historically inevitable way, up to a point. This argument is both true and false: in order to catch up one must copy to a certain degree, even if one knows – and one doesn't always know it – that this option has negative aspects to it.

During the Russian and then the Chinese revolutions, much more than in our region during the Nasserist experiment or Boumediene's Algeria, there was at least the beginning of an awareness that led the revolutionary parties to believe that they had to catch up and at the same time do something different, i.e. build socialist relations of production. But gradually the sole objective of catching up became dominant and “doing something different” was forgotten. This is serious, and I think that if the terms “socialism” and “communism” have lost the appeal they had for the world's working classes 50 years ago, it is precisely because circumstances have made it imperative to give absolute priority to catching up.

### **So what is our Project?**

The project to which we wish to contribute is that of a creative utopia. It is good to know what one wants, all things considered, even if history shows us that the future never turns out exactly as one expected. Successive generations will bring unforeseeable innovation. One could, if one so wished, give that future, that vision a name: one could call it “value-based development,” in other words development based on a body of moral, ethical and

social values that integrate democracy, liberty and equality, solidarity, etc. To my mind, this is called “communism,” as envisaged by Marx.

This means many things and, among others, that socialism will be ecological or it will not be at all, according to Elmar Altwater. It means that we must integrate all the requirements of respect for the environment into our critique of the organization of production and the consumer destination of that production. In the same way, socialism will be democratic or it will not be at all. It must go beyond the historical experiments of State socialism. State socialism, or State national populism, has gradually lost a good deal of its credibility in the eyes of the working classes. It retained its legitimacy as long as it was able to deliver results in terms of improving the people’s living conditions. It finally lost it when, having reached its historical limits, it ran out of steam. This was true of Nasser’s Egypt, Boumediene’s Algeria, Modibo’s Mali, Nyerere’s Tanzania, Nkrumah’s Ghana. But also of the State socialism of the USSR or of the Maoist period in China.

State socialism was then brutally thrown over in favour of the establishment of private capitalism: it was the strategic objective of shock therapies and structural adjustment. The shock therapy implemented by Yeltsin and Gorbachov in Russia was denounced by many intellectuals as remarkably stupid. In fact, it was an intelligent strategy to open the way for private capitalism. In other countries, in Asia, in Africa and in the Arab world, the same ruling classes that had been the architects of real sovereign projects, in spite of their limitations, converted to private capitalism in order to remain in power. In other cases, State socialism was transformed into State capitalism. I am referring to those countries that refused to conform fully to the formulas of neo-liberalism, privatisation, etc.: China, Vietnam, Cuba. In any case we are confronted with the same challenge: the concept and practice of development of productive forces in State socialism and State capitalism are not fundamentally different to those of private capitalism. But in political and social terms the challenge is different because the strategic objective of imperialism is to destroy any aspiration of peoples or States to autonomous initiative.

### **What can be Done Today, Right Now?**

Say we were all to agree on this distant goal. What must we do right now to embark on this path? The ruling classes of Western countries have realized that they cannot maintain their domination, which is at the root of the huge profits and monopoly revenue of capital, otherwise than through military control of the planet. For our region, the Greater Middle East, this objective implies the destruction of our societies, the annihilation of the capacity of States to refuse to submit to “neo liberalism”.

Reactionary political Islam, the Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists, is an ally of choice for the promoters of the new imperialist project. Intellectually limited and opportunistic in its behaviour, reactionary political Islam guarantees the destruction of our societies. If the FIS [Islamic Salvation Front] had come to power, there would be no more Algeria. If the Muslim Brotherhood had remained in power for ten years, there would be no more Egypt. The destruction of Iraq and Libya testifies to this. The danger concerns not only the Arab world. Mali is likewise threatened, as were Somalia and Central Africa. Foiling the plot for military control by Washington and its allies will determine any future progress.

The start of a different development begins, in the initial phase, with the implementation of the best (or the least-worst) possible sovereign projects, while accepting the limitations of any revolutionary advance. I am favourably inclined towards all the revolutionary advances that were realized in Latin America, even if I am aware of the danger of potentially

disastrous setbacks. One must proceed with caution and not condemn an advance on the pretext that it has not ushered in “communism of the year 3000”, nor allow oneself to call its instigators traitors, thereby playing into the hands of the imperialists.

Therefore, one must imagine a real sovereign project that is part of a historical heritage. Before justifying or condemning, one must try to understand. And one cannot understand China or any other country if one disregards its history and the real challenges it has faced during the different phases of its history. The start of a sovereign project implies making decisions and establishing specific economic programs. It is not a key that opens all doors, a blueprint like the prescriptions of the World Bank, which proposes liberalism as a universal remedy – whereas in fact it makes everyone ill!

Get away from neo-liberalism through economic policies that allow more social justice, truly improve working conditions, offer more education, better healthcare. One cannot achieve these with the neo-liberal recipe – anywhere. Not even in wealthy countries, in spite of the safety cushions available there. How could one achieve it in any country of the South?

A sovereign project worthy of the name creates and reinforces the working class base that supports it, a condition of its success. A regime that has no working class base is vulnerable – even to military attack. This is the situation in which Iraq found itself after years of dictatorship under Saddam Hussein. And one cannot conquer legitimacy by means of magical nationalist rhetoric alone (or parareligious rhetoric – the resistance of Muslims to the aggression of Western and Christian imperialism). One can do it only based on an authentic development project: democratization is indissociable from social progress.

Bandung gave the signal for the recovery of our independence. The recovery of our independence in today’s context is still on the agenda.

The sovereign project, by breaking with the neoliberal doctrinaire approach and the diktats of financial globalization, makes it possible to initiate social advances and the reconstruction of a negotiated polycentric world respectful of national sovereignty, and thus prepare the best possible conditions in which to forge ahead and invent a new civilisation respectful of the environment and the human being.

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