

# Capitalism, nation, classes, Empire



## Practice and theory of the new movements

By Akis Gavriilidis

**I**N TWO phrases: (1) I claim that, in our effort to understand what are generally called “the anti-globalisation movements” and determine our position about (and in) them, the key point, what is at stake, is Lenin’s theory about imperialism — or a specific interpretation of it. (2) The view I take on this question is that we should go further than Lenin and back to Marx.

### The Maoist tradition

IN THE last half of the 20th century, the most developed paradigm in Marxist thought about international power relations was more or less the one linked to the Maoist tradition. Among other things, this tradition added to the well known Communist Manifesto slogan the element of “oppressed peoples and nations” (“workers of all countries, oppressed peoples and nations, unite”).

Although very few people today speak in the name of Maoism, a number of elements from this tradition were inherited and incorporated into the overall “luggage” of left and progressive thought about international capitalism, and are indeed to be found in the discourse of official or unofficial “spokespersons” for the new movements. To simplify, this heritage can be called the tradition of “third world-ism”. In my view, one serious consequence of it is the replacement of class struggle by struggle between nations.

This kind of approach usually invokes, or is based on, (a certain reading of) Lenin’s *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*. I will not deal here with the question whether this is “genuine” Leninism or a distortion of it. We should only reconsider whether it is still useful to us.

It is interesting to note that Maoist groups called themselves “Marxist-Leninist” and fiercely criticised “revisionism”. This is a paradox, as Lenin himself was a great “revisionist” of Marx. This is a neutral statement, not an accusation: Lenin in his time studied carefully the Marxist tradition, analysed the concrete reality before him and produced a politics. We have to do the same now.

### Class struggle vs. struggle between nations

IN WHAT follows, I will try to point out some instances of this tension between the two “paradigms”, the “struggle between nations” and the “class struggle”, in order to contribute to sorting out our theoretical and political options.

This tension is best reflected on the notion of food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty is arguably the only really new notion/demand produced by the new movement (introduced probably by the federation of radical farmers’ organisations, Via Campesina). I believe this term condenses the contradiction of the new movement:

1) Its first component quite rightly stresses the importance of eating, points to the fact that what matters for us is the production of life. It has, so to say, a biopolitical<sup>1</sup> aspect: we have to think about who controls food. This is an eminently political issue and not at all a “corporatist” one, as it leads also to the question of intellectual property on genes, on seeds, on life itself...

But how does the official discourse of the movement bring this link forward?

By using, precisely, the notion of sovereignty. So,

2) This term’s second component leads us to the problematic of “struggle between nations”.

The term sovereignty was used up to now exclusively in relation to the nation or the people. These terms designate the subject of an action, or the source of a capacity, as in the expression “national sovereignty”. But “food” cannot be the subject. So who is sovereign over what/whom in “food sovereignty”? This question seems to have no answer for the time being.

### The poverty of “anti-financierism”

ANOTHER ASPECT of this tension can be illustrated by using a concrete example from what we can term as “the dominant discourse of the movement’s spokespersons”:

“The key issue is that the World Bank and IMF are controlled exclusively by the rich nations and work exclusively in the poor nations. They set economic policies for those poor nations and effectively deny the governments of those nations from making a serious attempt at setting their own economic policies — and therefore their own political prescriptions.”<sup>2</sup>

In this passage, we see that:

From an economic point of view, the main point of this discourse is a criticism of financial capital and its “speculative” character. This element is very prominent also in the practice of ATTAC groups, organised on the base of the demand for a Tobin tax on capital movements in order to favour the development of the “real” economy.

First, this goal is pointless from the point of view of the Marxist criticism of political economy. There is no such thing as a distinction between “real” and “unreal” [?] economy. Finance is a “moment” of capital valorisation, one form that capital necessarily takes, not an isolated factor. And capital valorisation is by nature and as a whole “speculative”, as its goal is profit. Money, and accordingly the finance sector, has always been a constitutive element of the capitalist mode of production and not an additional level which can be added to or removed from it.<sup>3</sup>

Second, from a political point of view, capitalist exploitation in the above quotation is perceived exclusively as a relationship between nations — “poor” and “rich” ones, mainly the US.

These arguments imply that a country occupying a lesser position in the imperialist chain has (as a whole) a uniform interest in not joining “globalisation”, but that its “elites” are led, against their will, to do so through blackmail or corruption. This is not at all confirmed by the facts: the dominant classes in most of these countries (most recent example: China) never conceal their genuine enthusiasm and eagerness to be part of the international economy, as they have a class interest in this participation.

There is another variation of the ‘dominant movement discourse’: the claim that globalisation is the result of — and profitable to — “corporations” or “multinationals” which “are often more powerful than nations”. This is the symmetrical mistake: individual capitals as well are not subjects of history, they are not agents capable of influencing social development according to their will.

### The nation-state form

WHAT BOTH of these conceptions fail to see is the notion of the capitalist nation-state as a condensation of the overall class relations within a society.<sup>4</sup>

This way, the opposition between social classes within each nation is erased, as the interests of the dominated classes in, say, Italy, are presumed to be uniform with those of their dominant classes and opposed as a whole to the equally uniform interests of both capitalists and workers of another “third world” nation. The agents of international relations coincide here with the subjects of international law.

The manifest legalism of this approach to world capitalism is accentuated by the fact that exploitation is conceived as a relation between wills: rich nations are able to impose their “wills” on poor ones.

This is also reflected on the way we pose another important demand of this global “movement of movements”, the cancellation of the Third World debt.

Needless to say, I absolutely share this demand. However, it is important to see how we usually present it and what this seems to imply. In our discourse, most times the debt appears as a means for the countries of the “centre” to become/remain rich by extracting money from the “periphery”. This is supposedly possible by forcing the weaker countries to pay more money than they legitimately owe, through the use of military superiority.

So here too, some people are considered able to impose their will on other people with different “wills” because they are stronger — ultimately on the military level.

### War as a “permanent exception”

THIS OF course brings us to the topic of war.

Opposition to war is, very rightly of course, one of the main purposes of the European Social Forum. Let us consider how we speak about this war.

The dominant discourse of the movement tends to conceive it as a prolongation of imperialist wars of the 20th century, or even as a rebirth of colonial ones. In this sense, many people remind us that “imperialist countries stole raw material from colonies” and that they are eager to continue doing so.

This remark is true in the sense that capitalist countries extracted from their former colonies large quantities of use values by force; but, on the other hand, these objects were not source of wealth in the colonies. They became so only in a network of specific (capitalist) production relations, and at the same time they contributed to the establishment of these relations, through what we call primitive accumulation.

But, more importantly, today’s wars are clearly not wars for the acquisition of “things”. Saying “no blood for oil” is a very useful slogan for a rally, but is not sufficient in order to give a full account of what these wars are really about. For this aim, I consider much more fruitful a line of analysis put forward by mainly Italian theorists<sup>5</sup>, partly incorporated in the discourse of certain sections of the movement (mainly the *Disobedienti*, but also the *Rifondazione Comunista*). These analyses see this war as a constitutive element, as a “permanent state of exception” which is necessary for establishing a new order both in the country attacked against and in the society of the USA and Europe.

In this respect, it is very telling that George W Bush declared war not on any specific state, but against a method of warfare: “terrorism”. This is a campaign that bears with it the “general form of law” and is not against any specific subject.<sup>6</sup>

### “Fair trade”?

THE CONCEPTION of international power relations outlined above, we can call the model of armed robbery.

This essentially follows and prolongs the so-called “unequal exchange” and “dependency” theories of the 1960s.<sup>7</sup>

According to this conception, exploitation means that we have a determined quantity of “wealth” and two or more agencies to whom this wealth is to be distributed; so some of them are more powerful and get more, while others get less.

For certain people (mainly NGOs), a remedy to this could be the implementation of “fair trade” or the development of “ethical banking”.

This view has nothing to do with Marx’s theory of capitalist exploitation, for which the question is not (only) how this quantity of wealth is distributed, but how it was (and is being constantly) produced. For Marx, exploitation does not equal “unfair trade”, but is performed precisely through the exchange of equal

values. Capitalists, under normal conditions, pay the workers the full exchange value of their labour; but in spite of this, or rather precisely because and through this, they are exploiting them. This is because surplus value (a notion which is absent from Lenin's *Imperialism*) is not something that the individual capitalist "deducts" from the worker's salary, but an overall, structural effect concerning the whole of society, which is produced on "another scene" — to borrow Freud's expression.

From this point of view, it is very telling that the title of Monbiot's interview is "They Are Systematically Destroying Economies".

To this we must reply: no, they are not! Their action is not mere destruction. They are systematically reorganising economies, which is something quite different.

Both money and weapons are used not in view of a one-off acquisition of wealth, but for creating a more permanent relationship between power and what it is exerted upon.

### Some provisional conclusions

IT SEEMS that the "movement of movements" has two options: one that conceives globalisation as our opponent, and national/popular sovereignty as a point of defence against it; the other, one that is not necessarily against globalisation as such, but against *capitalist* globalisation and in favour of constructing another, alternative type of global relations.

At this point in time, most components of the movement in Europe would in principle recognise themselves in the latter formulation — although there are exceptions, for example in Greece and in countries of the so-called "Third World". But this abstract acceptance does not always correspond to the contents of our discourse practices: when we try to talk about actual political issues, we often use arguments stemming more from a "sovereignist" perspective. That is, we seem to adopt a defensive attitude of preserving — or returning to — the old certainties and not of creating something new.

On the other hand, we have the examples of the real practice of the new movement, notably the demonstrations in Seattle, Prague, Genoa, etc., that is, the "factual criticism of the masses". These practices were not in favour of or against any specific state, but were struggles of an international(ist) subject against an equally international opponent.

We have to draw the lessons from this practice. The task of political theory, especially materialist political theory, is not to teach people something they know nothing about, but to show them what they already know without knowing it; not to tell to people what they should do, but to show to people what they are already doing, so that they can do it better. As Marx said, communism is not a utopia or an ideal for the future, but is a material tendency already existing in the present order of things. So what we have to do is to detect where this tendency manifests itself and how one could best favour its development.

I claim that the dominant discourse in the movement presuppose an external-transcendental, static and legalist relation between the dominant and the dominated, rather than an immanent, dynamic and productive one.

A better solution would be to see power relations under the light of hegemony. Power is not a "thing" that one can possess and use in order to do whatever one pleases (and mainly in order to acquire other "things"), but is a relationship between two poles. The weaker pole is subordinated to but, at the same time, necessary for the stronger one.<sup>8</sup> And this is precisely its strong point, its weapon.

Which means, world capitalism is not a criminal offence; it is a productive system, an unequal articulation of social formations, each of which is characterised

by conflicts of class interests. If we want to fight against it, we have to fight not for or against this or that country (e.g., "Greece" or "Brazil" against "the USA"); we have to fight against exploiters, even — or, rather, most of all — if these are in our own country. And we have to fight in alliance with all other people subject to exploitation, even — or, rather, most of all — if these are in a foreign country.

Akis Gavriilidis (haralambos.gavriilidis@chello.be) is a Greek socialist currently based in Belgium. This article is based on a presentation at the European Social Forum in Florence, 8 November 2002.

1 About the notion of "bio-politics" see Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press 2000, p. 22 ff. (and further references there to Michel Foucault who introduced this term).

2 "They Are Systematically Destroying Economies", an interview with George Monbiot in *Socialist Worker*, USA, 27/09/02, [http://www.socialistworker.org/2002-2/423/423\\_06\\_Monbiot.shtml](http://www.socialistworker.org/2002-2/423/423_06_Monbiot.shtml).

3 See John Milios, Dimitri Dimoulis, George Economakis, *Karl Marx and the Classics. An essay on value, crises and the capitalist mode of production*, Ashgate, Burlington 2002, p. 36 ff.

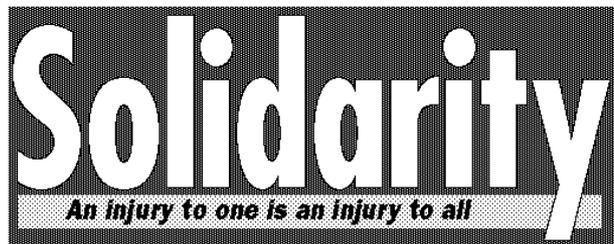
4 Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power and Socialism*, Verso Classics, London 1999.

5 Notably Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics 1998), Part I, chapter 4.

6 Cf. also Slavoj Žižek, "Are we in a war? Do we have an enemy?", in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 24 No. 10 (23 May 2002). Also in [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v24/n10/zize01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v24/n10/zize01_.html).

7 Developed by such authors as Samir Amin, Arghiri Emmanuel etc.

8 This, for once, is not after all very far from the famous Leninist metaphor about imperialism as a set of links in a chain.



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