

Interview

# The socialist project has been betrayed and must be reinvented in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Friday 10 April 2009, by [TOUSSAINT Éric](#) (Date first published: 29 March 2009).

As he assesses the international crisis and the proposals made by the Left to meet a fast deteriorating global situation, Eric Toussaint distinguishes between two very different kinds of Left that suggest different ways of resolving the interconnected crises of capitalism. One alternative, he explains, is still concerned with socialism and the environment; it proposes a form of ecosocialism, and finds its expression in social movements and struggles to implement anti-capitalist, feminist and anti-racist solutions. The other alternative, the social-liberal or social democrat Left, is to be found in governments such as those of Barack Obama, Lula, Gordon Brown, José-Luis Zapatero. These, he claims, while they are still caught in the neoliberal economic model, just cannot perceive the depth of the environmental crisis; they boost the productivist mode of production, possibly sprinkling some green measures without ever considering the required radical measures.

The Belgian politologist also sees the current civilisation crisis as a reflection of the history of the social-democrat Left that adapted to capitalist society. In this special interview given to IHU ON-Line, [1] Toussaint claims that apart from not respecting a genuine democracy based on self-management, the deep crisis of the Left is somehow related to a distortion of the proposals of socialists such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. As he stands up for socialism in the 21<sup>th</sup> century, he stresses that we must not reproduce what was done in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but on the contrary develop a deeply democratic and self-managed response to the negative experiences of the past.

When asked about the possibility of building a more radical proposal to put an end to capitalism, he becomes sharper: This involves massive social mobilisations to set up a truly revolutionary process similar to the one that triumphed 50 years ago in Cuba on 1 January 1959. And unambiguous: We need a new anti-capitalist, socialist and revolutionary policy which must include feminist, environmental, internationalist, anti-racist dimensions. These dimensions must be consistently integrated into what is at stake in 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism.

Eric Toussaint, president of CADTM Belgium (Committee for the Cancellation of Third World Debt, [www.cadtm.org](http://www.cadtm.org)), has a PhD in political sciences from the University of Liège (Belgium) and the University of Paris VIII (France). He is the author of *Bank of the South. An Alternative to the IMF-World Bank*, VAK, Mumbai, India, 2007 ; *The World Bank, A Never-Ending Coup d'Etat*, *The Hidden Agenda of the Washington Consensus*, Mumbai, VAK, 2007; *The World Bank, A Critical Primer*, Pluto Press, Between The Lines, David Philip, London-Toronto-Cape Town 2008) ; *Your Money or Your Life, The Tyranny of Global Finance*, Haymarket, Chicago, 2005. Co-author with Damien Millet of *60 Questions/60 réponses sur la Dette, le FMI et la Banque mondiale*, coédition CADTM / Syllepse, Liège-Paris (2008), soon to be published in English.

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## The interview

**IHU On-Line - You claim that in order to solve global issues we need a radical break. Can this be achieved only by the Left, and how?**

Eric Toussaint - You can see that proposals for a radical break away from capitalist society come from sectors of the Left that include parties and social organisations. It derives from the radical Left the world over through such parties of the revolutionary left as PSOL or PSTU in Brazil. Other parties in Latin America share the same orientation. In Europe revolutionary parties are under construction as in France where the 'Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste' was founded in February 2009, with the emblematic figure of postman Olivier Besancenot. [2] We can observe the same process in other countries, also in Asia. As to social movements we should read the declarations they adopted at the World Social Forum at Belém on 30 January. [3] You'll notice that this declaration of social movements proposes a complete break with capitalism and rejects the possibility of reforming capitalism through new regulations. When we read the declaration of the Women's Assembly [4] adopted at Belém on 1 February and the final declaration of indigenous peoples, [5] we are aware of the same determination. My answer is therefore, yes, it is clear that nowadays a number of parties and social movements propose a radical break from capitalism.

**IHU On-Line - Among sectors of the Left two alternatives are presented when thinking of change. Some try to go beyond the neoliberal stage by retrieving state-regulated development while others stand for a socialist break. Are these avenues possible? Hasn't the time come to propose something different?**

Eric Toussaint - Yes, clearly these avenues are possible. The first approach has been implemented by left-wing organisations and also the Peronist party in Argentina that are in power. This is the policy developed by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, by Cristina Kirchner in Argentina, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, etc. In Argentina, two months ago, Cristina Kirchner's government renationalised pension funds. So policies that fit the first alternative you described are actually developed. Yet I do not think they make it possible to meet the challenge of the global crisis. As we can see it rather supports the domination of a capitalist society in which the State steps in as firefighter to quench the fire lit by the global crisis of capitalism.

The other alternative that proposes a genuine socialist break still has the status of proposals. I cannot mention governments that implement it consistently even though some, such as Hugo Chavez' and Evo Morales', are moving partially in that direction. Their discourse calls for a socialist break but their actions are more moderate. Is the more radical approach possible? It certainly is. But it requires massive social mobilisations to initiate a genuinely revolutionary process such as that which triumphed in Cuba fifty years ago on 1 January 1959. In the years that followed the victory of the Cuban revolution we could observe several changes on the island: redistribution of resources to the people, loss of the capitalists' control of the means of production, and a process of democratisation. Afterwards, as Cuba was under US embargo and felt the influence of the USSR, there was a partial change. But we cannot forget the deep revolutionary momentum of the early years. I cannot see why, when facing a global crisis, we could not go through similar revolutionary explosions in the future.

**IHU On Line - You are saying that the current crisis is not just financial and economic but**

## **reaches much further. In what way is this global conundrum related to the crisis of the Left? Can we say that the two are indeed linked?**

Eric Toussaint – Yes. This is a good question. There is indeed a crisis in social-liberal management. I am referring here to the policies of the Lula government, but also to Zapatero in Spain or Brown in Britain. The crisis is deep because those who voted those governments into power expected other policies. We must remember the election of Lula and how the programme on which he was elected in 2002 announced a break at least with neoliberalism (I am not talking about a break with capitalism). Instead of a break what we have had is continuity in neoliberal policies. So a crisis of credibility for those parties of the Left is part of the global crisis.

On the other hand it is clear that the dramatic experiences of what was called ‘real socialism’ in the past century cannot be dismissed. In our collective memory ‘socialism’ is often somehow associated with state economy, the domination of one single party, and the negation of democratic freedom.

In short, on the one hand the outcome of social-liberal management, i.e. of social-democrat policies, is utterly negative; on the other, the outcome of the Stalinist management of ‘real socialism’ that dominated the Soviet bloc in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was disastrous. We still have to overcome this credibility crisis. This is what is at stake in the debate on what some call 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism.

21<sup>st</sup> century socialism must be a democratic and self-managed response to the negative experiences of the past. So we must not reproduce what happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the face of this global crisis of the capitalist system, combined with a crisis of civilisation, we have to counter the crisis of the Left with a new anti-capitalist, socialist and revolutionary approach which includes feminist, environmentalist, internationalist and anti-racist dimensions. These various dimensions must be consistently integrated and taken into account in 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism.

## **IHU On-Line - What does the Left propose to meet the global financial crisis?**

Eric Toussaint – There are two different answers depending on which ‘Left’ you mean. The Left that carries out social-liberal policies – Lula, Brown, Zapatero – does not propose very different policies from those we find in France with Sarkozy, or even in Italy with Berlusconi or with Bush before Barack Obama. It consists of bailing out bankers: spending enormous amounts of public money to salvage a private banking system dominated by capitalist finance corporations. This is the answer provided by the Left that is in power, and it looks very much like right-wing policies. You cannot distinguish either between Lula’s response to the private financial system and Sarkozy’s policy in France.

But there is another alternative. The proposals of that other kind of Left are expressed in the Declaration adopted in Caracas on 10 October 2008, during the International Political Economy Conference: Responses from the South to the Global Economic Crisis, the text of which can be read on various websites including CADTM. [6] This final declaration demands the nationalisation of the banking industry, which means transferring the banking industry from the private to the public sector without compensation. The State must run the banking industry without any compensation to large shareholders. We must go even further since the policy of the banks’ large shareholders and CEOs is responsible for the global finance crisis, and of the bankruptcy of several banks.

## **Measures to deal with the crisis**

The States that nationalise these banks must recover the cost of the operation by taking back the money from the assets of the large shareholders and directors of these companies. Other measures must be taken to face the crisis. For example, a radical reduction of working time for employees,

without wage cuts, is needed. The work available in our society must be shared, thus giving employment to many more people than has been the case so far, and to allow those already employed to work less with guaranteed wages. In this scenario, where wages for those already working are guaranteed and employment is given to the unemployed, the purchasing power of workers rises and the economy is boosted. This urgently needed measure has various advantages. It gives jobs to the jobless, increases the social security contributions paid by employees and employers, and ensures the financing of retirement pensions. It also contributes to the revenues needed to pay unemployment benefits, and possibly to finance the universal allowance that is talked about in some countries.

As a more structural measure, the private control of the main means of production, distribution and credit as well as private control over the cultural and information sectors must be brought to an end. Nowadays the main means of production, communication and services are in the hands of private capital. The control and property of the main means of production, distribution and services (including the means of communication) must be transferred to the public sector. And the public control and property of the main means of production must be combined with other forms of ownership: small private and family ownership in the sectors of agriculture, craft industry and services. For instance, electricians, plumbers, retail trade, catering, a whole range of occupations that are essential to everyday life, for which it is natural that there be small private ownership. Other forms of property are also to be fostered, such as cooperative or communal property and the traditional property of indigenous peoples must be preserved. As far as public ownership is concerned, a democratic control of the public sector by the citizens is needed. If these structural reforms are implemented, a radical break with the capitalist system will be achieved. A series of other measures would be necessary to tackle the various dimensions of the global crisis.

To deal with climate change and other aspects of the environmental crisis, radical measures are needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In order to solve the food crisis, it is clear that a policy of food sovereignty should be implemented so as to ensure that local producers meet the population's needs without depending on food imports from the global market. These are some proposals for a radical, revolutionary reform of the system.

### **IHU On-Line - What is going on within the global Left? Why is there such a gap between the theory and practice of political left-wing thought?**

Eric Toussaint - The global Left is going through a deep crisis due to its history. The history of the social-democrat current is the history of a profound defeat, for it fitted into the capitalist society. The defeat of the Left is also the one of the Stalinist Left, i.e. the experience that dominated the attempts at building socialism in the Soviet Union and China. It was also a profound defeat because genuine democracy based on collective management was not respected in the sense that the bureaucracy in power in these countries wanted to bring it all under state control. It was a serious mistake! Socialism is not about the state controlling the whole economy. The Left's deep crisis is somehow related to a betrayal of the proposals made by socialists and communists, such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Karl Marx said that the society we aspire to, i.e. communism, is the free association of free producers. He also said the emancipation of the workers will come from the workers themselves. He added that in socialism, the State should tend to disappear. And socialism is a transition from capitalism to communism (which implies the extinction of the State). In a socialist society, the State still exists but as a provisional institution that must aim at its own disappearance.

Now, what did the Soviet experience consist in? Instead of making the State disappear, the communist party, under Stalin's leadership, reinforced it more than ever and forbade a whole range of democratic expressions. It was a complete perversion of the socialist project which, quite to the contrary, is eminently democratic. If we take the experience of socialists, what is called social-

democracy, Lula, Zapatero, Brown or Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, they are not in favour of the State's disappearance either. They are in favour of maintaining the capitalist State with socialists in the government. In their opinion, what is needed is a capitalist State which regulates the activities of capital, but not too much.

The Left which is in power and has dominated in the past has betrayed the true liberating and emancipating socialist project. These are the root causes of the crisis of the Left.

A radical and revolutionary Left defends the original socialist project; it tries, from the action of the social movements, to strengthen it by different means. This radical Left also takes part in election campaigns. It tries to get members elected in Parliament who wage an anti-capitalist struggle in the parliamentary institutions, with a view to breaking with the system and not conforming to it. The idea is to foster a genuine revolution, a radical change in property and social relations in society.

### **IHU On-Line - Were the guidelines of Marxism diverted from what they really meant? What is the place of the environmental issue in Marxist thought?**

Eric Toussaint – As regards the socialist project as designed by Karl Marx during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has to be mentioned that, among the dimensions analysed by Marx, some were not developed, or not enough. The important feminist dimension, which challenges patriarchal domination, and the environmental dimension were not developed by Marx even if he designed an emancipating project placing human beings in nature. Marx considered humankind as an integral part of nature. There is not, in Marx, a dichotomy between humankind on the one hand and nature on the other. This Marxist approach prepared for environmental issues to be taken into account.

The current environmental problems are the legacy of a little more than two centuries of a capitalist and productivist mode of production, which has entailed the destruction of nature. To be fair and complete, it has to be said that the 20<sup>th</sup> century experience of 'real socialism' (in the Soviet Union or in Maoist China) is also extremely negative in terms of the environment. In these countries a brutal and aggressive mode of production contributed to the destruction of nature in the same way as capitalism did in Western Europe, North America or Japan.

The gap between theory and practice has to be bridged. We must go back to the revolutionary and innovative fundamentals in theory. It is necessary to include in Marx's contributions a reflection on the issues faced by society today, such as the environmental issue. The feminist dimension is also crucial. Women have been struggling for equality for centuries. There were female revolutionary leaders long before Marx, especially female revolutionary leaders who actively took part in the 1789 French revolution and who already put forward feminist claims at that time. But the feminist movement really expanded and questioned patriarchal domination during the past 60 years; today, it bears a revolutionary project. This is why the feminist dimension must absolutely be included.

### **IHU On-Line - Besides the economic and political issues, in this time of crisis, it seems that a new energy and environmental paradigm is perceived as urgent and essential to overcome the problems. Is the Left still unaware of the seriousness of these issues?**

Eric Toussaint – Quite the opposite, I think that the radical Left has fully taken into consideration the seriousness of these issues. That is why it proposes a feminist, environmentalist, antiracist, anti-capitalist and socialist alternative. The environmentalist dimension is extremely important and that is precisely why the radical Left talks about « ecosocialism », a notion that embraces environmentalism and socialism. On the other hand, the social-liberal Left has not measured the extent of the environmental crisis. It can be noted that during Lula's social-liberal administration, the destruction of a region such as the Amazon has continued at the same pace as under the

governments of Fernando Henrique Cardoso and his predecessors. Over the past five years of Lula's government, the Brazilian Amazon has been deforested over a surface as large as the territory of Venezuela. And if we take the examples of other governments of the traditional Left such as the Brown or Zapatero governments in Europe, we can see they are equally unable to realise the extent of the environmental crisis. So my answer to the latter question is that the radical Left has taken into account this environmental crisis and proposes an ecosocialist response whereas the traditional Left continues and strengthens the productivist mode of production, sprinkling some green measures without ever considering the required radical measures.

### **IHU On-Line - What does this historical moment mean for humanity?**

Eric Toussaint - Humanity is again at a historical crossroads. The global crisis has various dimensions: environmental, food, migration, financial, economic as well as a crisis of global governance, not to mention the series of wars of aggression like the ones waged in Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with non compliance with the rights of the peoples such as the right of the Palestinian people to have a territory and a State. Humanity is faced with two alternatives: on the one hand, the capitalist solution of the crisis, that is, the solution proposed by Barack Obama, Lula, Sarkozy, Brown, Zapatero, the Chinese government, Putin, etc; on the other hand, the option of turning one's back on capitalism and implementing anti-capitalist, environmentalist, feminist and antiracist solutions. I hope humanity will choose the latter option, because if we want to respond to the global crisis as a whole, we need a global anti-capitalist, ecosocialist and feminist response.

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Eric Toussaint

international cadtm.org

CADTM

345, Avenue de l'Observatoire

4000 LIEGE

Belgique

[www.cadtm.org](http://www.cadtm.org)

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### **P.S.**

\* Special interview with Eric Toussaint by Patrícia Fachin. The original Portuguese version was published in Revista do Instituto Humanitas Unisinos in Brazil. Translated by Stéphanie Jacquemont and Christine Pagnoulle in collaboration with Judith Harris.. Eric Toussaint's answers are mainly geared to a Brazilian or Latin-American audience but they are equally valid for other parts of the world.

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### **Footnotes**

[1] <http://www.unisinos.br/ihuonline/in...>

[2] Olivier Besancenot, member of the Communist Revolutionary League, was the youngest candidate for the French presidency, representing a far Left party. At the 2002 elections he obtained 4.25%. From 5 to 8 February 2009 he participated in the foundation of the 'Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste' just after the 'Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire' had voted its own dissolution by 87% after forty years of existence (IHU On-Line).

[3] See complete text: [We won't pay for the crisis. The rich have to pay for it !](#)

[4] See complete text: [Women's Assembly Declaration at the Belem FSM](#)

[5] See Spanish text: <http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?artic...>

[6] See the full text of the final declaration on ESSF at [Final Declaration of the International Political Economy Conference: Responses from the South to the global economic crisis](#) and Eric Toussaint's contribution at [Latin America: In support of regional integration and partial delinking from the world capitalist market](#)