

The Spectre of Barbarism and its Alternative

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The following two documents are presentations made or prepared for different purposes in Venezuela. The first ('The Spectre of Barbarism and its Alternative: Eight Theses') was presented at a conference of Venezuelan intellectuals organized by Centro Internacional Miranda (CIM) in Caracas on 'The New International Situation and Construction of Socialism in the 21st Century' on 1 October 2009; this paper points to both the international struggle and (peripherally on this occasion) the internal struggle. The second intervention ('The Responsibility of Revolutionary Intellectuals in Building Socialism') was presented at a CIM conference, 'Intellectuals, Democracy and Socialism,' on 2 June 2009 - a conference in Caracas composed largely of leading Venezuelan intellectuals which generated much controversy because of public criticisms of 'the process' made there; despite my statement that this presentation was 'general rather than specific to Venezuela,' it nevertheless was declared to be as an attack on PSUV (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela) by a Chavist faction linked to the oil ministry.

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I. The spectre of barbarism and its alternative: eight theses

Thesis One. The capitalist economic crisis is not over.

Although the immediate financial crisis appears to have been resolved, all of the underlying factors (which are the result of the overaccumulation to which capitalism is prone and which made fictitious capital so vulnerable) are still present. The incredible trade imbalance of the U.S. economy has not been addressed; the unprecedented deficit of the U.S. federal budget is rising; the over-extension of consumer credit hangs over the economy; unemployment is rising and thus consumer confidence and spending is not likely to return to previous heights; and, the general picture is one in which the U.S. economy, the dominant economy in the world, will continue to lose hegemony. When commentators stress signs of recovery, it is essential to remember that this pattern differs not at all from that of 1929 to 1933 - in other words, the period between the stock market crash and the bank failures - a period before much of the depression of the 1930s. At best, although capitalism itself may recover, the prospect is one of a significant geographical restructuring of capital on an international basis, which will require a painful adjustment for the U.S. economy - one which involves acceptance of continued stagnation or decline of incomes for the mass of people.

Thesis Two. The resource/food/water/climate/environment crisis is deepening.

All these elements are connected. There is a food crisis which reflects, among other things, drought as the result of climate change and the diversion of food for the production of biofuels. Despite the ability to produce sufficient food at this time for the world, unequal distribution has meant starvation for many and has been reflected in food riots over the price of staple products like rice. There is a process of land grab occurring in which countries such as China, India, South Korea and Saudi Arabia are in the process of leasing land in Africa, Pakistan, and the Philippines among other places for the purpose of securing food (especially grain) and fuels. For example, Daewoo of South Korea took a 99 year lease on 3,000,000 acres of land in Madagascar (half of all arable land in the country) for the purpose of producing corn and palm oil. Similarly, Pakistan offered a half million hectares of land and promised Gulf investors that if they signed up it would hire a security force of 100,000 to protect the assets. A significant aspect of these contracts which secure arable land for foreign investors is that it is a way of dealing with the impending crisis of water shortage. And, this problem is becoming increasingly serious with the melting of glaciers for example in Tibet and the Andes - which will affect the availability of water not only for consumption and agriculture but also for hydroelectric power. This problem, the problem of over-expansion of economic activity in relation to existing resources under capitalism, will only get worse as India and China in particular attempt to emulate the consumption standards of the developed North.

Thesis Three. The current internal political correlation of forces in the United States and other advanced capitalist countries is not favourable to the advance of progressive forces.

Here we can simply note the recent rightwing victories in elections in Germany, Italy and France, in the European Union, as well as the current prospect of a smashing defeat of the Labour government in England. Of course, it is stretching matters to think of these defeats for social democracy as defeats of progressive forces; however, what is evident is the failure of the left, of trade union organizations and social movements to make significant gains in this time of capitalist crisis. To this, it is important to add the very successful mobilization of forces in the United States against healthcare reform. What is striking is the composition of that mass opposition: the so-called "tea party" movement has been attacking not only Obama, not only big government and socialism but also Wall Street and corporations - and so many of those who have marched describe themselves as working class. There is no comparable mobilization of the working class from the left in the United States.

Thesis Four. In the context of resource shortages, the struggle to control resource supplies will become intense. That struggle is not likely to take the form of market and financial domination; rather, force will decide. This is one aspect of the spectre of barbarism.

Thesis Five. In the absence of strong political movements on the left, the response in the United States in particular and in other advanced capitalist countries is likely to be one best analyzed by psychologists.

For example, in the United States (where it is a matter of faith that 'this is the greatest country in the world'), the reaction to the changing world capitalist economy will be a tendency toward protectionism, xenophobia (manifested in particular against Muslims), quick military solutions, racism and attacks upon immigrants who are seen as stealing good jobs. In short, the likely response will be the search for scapegoats - those responsible for stealing the birthrights of true Americans. As we can see already in Europe (for example, in the fascist attacks upon the Roma people in Hungary), this is another aspect of the spectre of barbarism.

Thesis Six. The old concepts of socialism, the characteristics of socialism of the 20th century, will never challenge the mass psychology which prevails in advanced capitalist countries.

If there is anything clear in the reaction of masses in developed capitalist countries to the initial appearance of this crisis within capitalism, it is that the concept of a big state, of verticalism, of interference by distant entities (not only big government but also big companies) is precisely what people do not want. For them, that is the enemy.

Thesis Seven. The concept of socialism for the 21st century, with its emphasis upon communal councils and workers councils, is the only way to make inroads on the working class of advanced capitalist countries at this point.

What people do respond to favourably is the idea of local decision-making and the ability to make the decisions that affect their lives – precisely because that option has been removed in advanced capitalist countries. Those are precisely the elements needed for the battle of ideas in order to struggle against barbarism.

Thesis Eight. At this time, only Venezuela offers the vision that can arm militants around the world in the battle of ideas in the struggle against barbarism. For that reason, a special responsibility falls upon Venezuela. It not only must struggle against state domination and verticalism and for development of those antagonistic institutions which alone can transform people. This struggle is essential for the health of the Venezuelan revolution; however, the success of this struggle also is needed to provide an example internationally in order to defeat the spectre of barbarism.

1 October 2009

Michael A. Lebowitz

II. The responsibility of revolutionary intellectuals in building socialism

“Socialism for the 21st century ... a combination of social ownership of the means of production, social production organized by workers and communities, and a society based upon solidarity which is oriented toward producing for communal needs and communal purposes.”

When we talk about intellectuals, we have to recognize of course that there are many varieties of intellectual. So, let me be specific. I'm not talking about traditional intellectuals nor about academics. I am talking about intellectuals who are committed to building socialism. Further, my comments are not directed specifically about Venezuelan intellectuals – that would be inappropriate for me as a visitor. So, my comments are general rather than specific to Venezuela.

What I want to focus upon are revolutionary intellectuals – people who are committed to building socialism for the 21st century. And I have in mind here something quite specific – a particular combination of elements. So, when I speak of socialism for the 21st century, I have in mind a combination of social ownership of the means of production, social production organized by workers and communities, and a society based upon solidarity which is oriented toward producing for communal needs and communal purposes.

These revolutionary intellectuals are people, in short, who are committed to a revolutionary project – to a revolutionary labour process in which the goal (socialism for the 21st century) is clear, and where what is called for is discipline to achieve that goal. In other words, a revolutionary intellectual

must be disciplined in order to carry out the revolutionary project. Let me take this a further step. The revolutionary intellectual must be subject to discipline by the revolutionary party, a party dedicated to building socialism for the 21st century. The revolutionary intellectual must take guidance from that revolutionary party.

However, before my statement generates a hailstorm of shoes thrown at me, let me make one thing quite clear. We need to distinguish clearly between the revolutionary party and the party of the moment. I am using the term 'moment' here with its dialectical meaning – a step, a phase, a momentary stopping point which is and must be transcended in the course of progress.

So, the distinction that I am making is between the revolutionary party, the party of the socialist future, and the party of the moment. It is the former to which revolutionary intellectuals must be disciplined. After all, the party of the moment may not be committed to the socialist project. The dominant forces in the party of the moment may be oriented to a hierarchical command structure similar to the unfortunate experiences of the 20th century; they may have little interest or commitment to building a process of worker management which is essential for developing the capacities of working people, and they may believe that a focus upon producing on the basis of anything other than self-interest is utopian. Should revolutionary intellectuals discipline themselves to such a party? (I speak, incidentally, as someone who functioned for many years in a social democratic party.)

In other words, we have to recognize that there will be a gap between the concept of a revolutionary party oriented toward building socialism for the 21st century and the party of the moment. And, such a gap is inevitable. As Marx (and indeed every dialectical thinker) recognized, new forms always emerge within the old, and they inevitably reproduce defects of the old. Further, the new necessarily emerges in an inadequate form. Hegel commented that when we want to see an oak tree with its vigorous trunk, its spreading branches and its foliage, we are not satisfied to be shown an acorn instead.

So, how do we respond to that inevitable gap as revolutionary intellectuals? One possible stance is to stand outside and critique the inadequacy of the form that has emerged. The other, the revolutionary response, is the struggle to make what is potential real. Victor Serge was asked at one point, were the seeds of Stalin present in Lenin? Serge answered, 'there were many seeds in Lenin.' I suggest that the responsibility of revolutionary intellectuals is to nurture the revolutionary seeds. And, to do so everywhere possible. To communicate the vision of socialism for the 21st century to the masses because, as we know, ideas become a material force when they grasp the minds of masses. And to try to convince those who are providing leadership to the process about those same ideas and that same vision.

Of course, we understand that in committing ourselves to discipline by the revolutionary party of the future and not to discipline by the party of the moment, this may be seen as a criticism of the party of the moment. And, those least oriented toward building socialism for the 21st century will be most anxious to prevent such expressions. However, I think we must all be conscious of the consequences of abandoning the vision of socialism. If they are to be true to the project of building socialism for the 21st century, revolutionary intellectuals must place upon their banner Marx's comment about the importance of criticism which is as little afraid of the results it arrives at as it is of conflict with the powers that be.

And, if this is the responsibility of revolutionary intellectuals, there is also the responsibility of revolutionaries within the party of the moment. If the party of the moment truly wishes to explore the process of building socialism for the 21st century, it will ensure that there is space for revolutionary intellectuals to follow the discipline of the revolutionary party. Not to provide this

space and not to encourage the nurturing of revolutionary seeds is to allow the weeds to advance.

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P.S.

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