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Socialism, social struggles and the new way of life in Latin America

O socialismo, lutas sociais e novo modo de vida na América Latina

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Resumo

O objetivo deste texto é refletir sobre a experiência recente do socialismo com o olhar voltado para a América Latina. Se ao longo do século XX, a tese do “socialismo em um só país” sofreu uma derrota profunda, mesmo em seu espaço ampliado de incidência, qual poderá ser o papel (econômico, social e político) de países como o Brasil, México, Argentina, Venezuela, Bolívia e Colômbia, Cuba etc, nas lutas pelo socialismo, tanto no espaço latinoamericano, quanto mundial? Nesta era de mundialização do capital, como será possível pensar o socialismo em um espaço simultaneamente nacional e também global/universal? E quais são os polos sociais capazes de lutar por estas transformações, quando se toma o exemplo da América Latina? São estes alguns dos pontos tratados neste artigo

Palavras-chave: Socialismo e América Latina; Classe trabalhadora e socialismo; revolução nacional e internacional.

Abstract

The intent of this text is to reflect on the recent experience of socialism with a view towards Latin America. If, in the course of the 20th century, the thesis of "socialism in one country" has suffered a profound defeat, even in its broader space of incidence, what can be the role (economical, social and political) of countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia and Colombia, Cuba, etc., in the struggles for socialism, both in Latin America space and in the world? In this age of globalization of capital, how can we think of socialism in a space both national and also global / universal? And what are the social poles capable of fighting for these transformations, when taking the example of Latin America? These are some of the questiones dealt with in this present article.

Keywords: Socialism and Latin America; Working class and socialism; national and international revolution.

An initial note¹

At the threshold of the twenty-first century, the search for a new socialist project is in today's agenda once more. Nowadays we have the conditions to take a more conclusive account of the experience lived in the twentieth century: considering its most important experiences defeated, with the USSR at the forefront, it is possible to certify that these projects were not able to defeat the system of social metabolism of capital.

This system, constituted by the tripod of capital, labour and state, can not be overcome without eliminating all elements which comprise it. As István Mészáros² says, it is not enough to eliminate one or even two of its poles. The challenge is to overcome the tripod, including the hierarchical social division of labour which subordinates work to capital.

By not having advanced in this direction, post-capitalist countries, led by the USSR, were incapable of breaking the logic of capital. A similar phenomenon occurs today with China, which oscillates between a broad opening to the world market under the command of capital and the strengthening of rigid political control exercised by the state and the Chinese Communist Party. I believe that the reflection on this point is a first and decisive challenge.

Let's focus on a second point: the experience of "socialism in one country" or even in a limited set of countries was also a defeated enterprise in the century which has passed. As Marx says, socialism must be conceived as a world-historical processuality; political revolutions may initially assume a more limited and partial national conformation. But social revolutions have an intrinsic universalizing³ meaning.

¹ This text resumes ideas presented at the CEMAX International Seminar and was partly published in the book *The Continent of Labor* (Boitempo, 2011).

² István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, São Paulo, Boitempo, 2002.

³ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right/Introduction*, São Paulo, Boitempo, 2005 e Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, São Paulo, Boitempo, 2007.

In the phase of globalized capital, marked by a globally unequal capital system – in the characterization of François Chesnais⁴, socialism can only be conceived as a global / universal enterprise. Its effectiveness in the national space will depend, decisively, on its development in other national spaces, which tends to give it a historical-world process. In this movement, the more it can reach the heart of capital (the United States, Unified Europe and Japan in the foreground), the greater will be its effective possibilities.

Likewise, the preservation of market elements during the socialist transition of the twentieth century proved to be a condign path for the capital system to be reinstated. Thus, the constitution of a free association of workers, creating a new system of social metabolism based on autonomous and self-determined work, is incompatible with the gears of the market. The apologetic and justifying “concepts” of the “socialist market economy” or “socialist market” are euphemisms used to cover up the return and command of the capital system in its restoration process.

The cases of China and the former USSR are too strong. Many believed that Soviet economic openness, alongside with its political openness, was going to be a condition for the preservation of what was also mistakenly termed as “real socialism”. The collapse of the Soviet system is already part of our recent history, and only a lot of naivety could imagine that “Chinese socialism” can control the system of capital that spreads intensely throughout China, whose degradation of labour has become the standard used by the system capital to further dilapidate the workforce on a global scale.

The major difference, when we compare the Chinese case and the Soviet one, is that the first one made a monumental economic opening to capital, hypertrophying the political apparatus of the state and its control over the class society which exists today in China. With that in mind, the economic opening was materialized, maintaining ultra-centralized control of the state through the Communist Party and the Army. An example of these changes and the advance of

⁴ François Chesnais, *The globalization of capital*, São Paulo, Xamã, 1996.

the capital system is the fact that the Chinese Communist Party already allows, among its members, businessmen affiliation. It is not difficult to imagine what will result from this picture in the coming years and decades.

Disregarding this processuality, when one thinks of socialism of the twenty-first century, would be the same as disregarding history. And the critical history of the socialist experiment of the twentieth century is fundamental to the effective exercise of socialism in the twenty-first century.

In this context, the possibilities of socialism in Latin America must be thought of as part of a processuality that is not depleted in its national space. As we saw earlier, throughout the twentieth century, the thesis of “socialism in one country” had a tragic result. The major challenge, therefore, is to seek the rupture with the logic of capital on a national, continental and global scale simultaneously. Countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia and Colombia may play significant roles in this scenario, since that, on one hand, they are important poles of the global structuring of capital and, on the other, they have a significant number of social and political forces of work and struggles and social movements of extreme importance.

Economically, several of these countries have a significant productive base, such as Brazil and Mexico; others have strategic political importance, as in the case of Venezuela, which, together with Bolivia and, to less extent, Ecuador, seeks alternatives that are contrary to the dominant neoliberal logic.

Along with the outbreak of struggles and popular uprisings in India, Russia, Korea and in Indonesia, among other countries that are not directly at the center of the capitalist world, they all constitute a range of popular social and work forces capable of propel a project which has as its horizon a socialist societal organization of a new type, renewed and radical, quite different from the revolutionary undertakings attempted in the twentieth century.

The centralities of social struggles and the new morphology of work

In this time of history, the development of social and political movements of the left and of the masses, capable of facing some of the most acute challenges of this century, is also present. From the social and political movement of the zapatistas, in Mexico, in 1994, against North-American imperial domination, passing through the Oaxaca commune that unsettled the oligarchic power, in Mexico, recently, or yet through the advent of the Movement of Rural Workers Without Land (MST), in Brazil, for the resumption of work and union struggles in Latin America and for the social explosions of unemployed workers in so many other parts of the world. Not to mention the struggle of the piqueteros in Argentina and the social struggles of indigenous and popular communities for vital issues, such as battles against privatization and the “commodification” of water, gas and oil, as has been happening in Bolivia, Venezuela, In Uruguay and in other countries of our continent.

These struggles increasingly take the form of movements against the complete commodification of the world, against the totalizing (and totalitarian) “commodification” of everything that is produced, and are increasingly being intensified, in order to strike capital in a more persistent way in its own materiality. Its greatest strength lies in indicating the centrality of its struggles in the very own space of capital and of its system, and hence, extra-parliamentary and extra-institutional central struggles.

As Mészáros teaches us, since capital is a system of social metabolism which is essentially extra-parliamentary, any attempt to overcome it that is limited to the institutional and parliamentary sphere will be impossible to carry out the difficult task of destroying capital system and its support pillars. The greatest merit of these new social and political movements mentioned above flourishes in the centrality that they confer on social struggles of essentially (or predominantly) extra-parliamentary profile.

The greatest challenge in the world of work and left-wing social movements is to create and invent new forms of autonomous action capable of articulating and giving centrality to class actions against capital and its destructive logic. This is at a stage where capital has never been so destructive in work, nature and the environment, in short, to humanity.

The refusal of the separation, introduced by the capital, between economic action – carried out by the unions and by the political-parliamentary action of the parties – between social and political struggles conceived separately – it is absolutely imperative and even indispensable when it is intended to defeat the powerful system of social metabolism structure of the capital, structured from the tripod state, capital and wage labour⁵. Action against the dominion of capital in search of socialism must articulate social struggle and political struggle in an inseparable complex.

The world of work and class social struggles, in their complex relations with the struggles of ecology, gender, ethnic, generational, for substantial equality (Mészáros), have increasingly a globalized conformation. With the expansion of capital on a global scale and the new form assumed by the international division of labour, the responses of the workers' movement assume a growing universalizing sense. Increasingly, national-level struggles must be articulated with a struggle of international scope.

The transnationalization of capital and its productive system forces the working class and popular struggles even more to fight the privatizations of water, oil and gas and to fight for the right to work, for reducing their time and their work days, for the expansion of social rights, and finally, for vital issues. For this it is imperative a strong international articulation in actions and struggles, both for solidarity and for strengthening forms of confrontation. To the globalization of capital corresponds, therefore, a globalization of social and labor struggles is increasingly and untransferably.

⁵ Idem.

This is because the working class in the contemporary world, in its new morphology, is more complex and heterogeneous than the one existing during the period of fordist expansion. The rescue of what Alain Bihir called a sense of class belonging, against the numerous objective and subjective fractures imposed by capital, is one of his most prompt⁶ challenges. Yet, we must have an expanded conception of work that does not lead us to the equivocal and Eurocentric thesis of the myth of the end of work⁷.

Preventing precarious workers from being marginalized from forms of class social and political organization is an imperative challenge in the contemporary world. The understanding of the complex connections between class and gender, between “stable” and precarious workers, between nationals and immigrants, between workers of different ethnic groups, between qualified and unqualified, between young and old, between employees and unemployed, ultimately, among so many fractures which capital imposes on the working class, it becomes fundamental to respond through a social and political movement of male and female workers in the search for and effective realization of a new socialist project in this 21st century.

Once again the redeeming sense of class belonging (which implies understanding the conformations of the working class today and its new morphology) is a crucial issue at this turn of the century.

Two examples may help us to better understand this new morphology of work and social struggles. In Argentina, we witnessed the organization of unemployed workers, known as piqueteros, who, together with the pauperization of the⁸ middle classes, deposed the De La Rúa government in December 2001 and

⁶ Alain Bihir, *From the big night to the alternative: the European workers' movement in crisis*, São Paulo, Boitempo, 1998.

⁷ This problematic was developed in *Goodbye to work?* (São Paulo, Cortez) and *The senses of labor* (São Paulo, Boitempo).

⁸ Nota da tradutora: A acepção nas traduções na obra marxiana em português de “pauperização da classe trabalhadora” equivalem ao inglês “immiseration of the working class”. Contudo, o termo “immiserated” não me parece corrente, por isso optei por “impoverished”, mas que pode conotar uma simplicidade alheia à construção da categoria. Pelo rigor vocabular e metodológico, é possível uma reconstrução da sentença para “immiseration of the middle classes”.

several alleged “presidents” in the “days that unsettled Argentina”. We have also seen the expansion of an important process of factory occupation by the workers (the “recovered factories”), struggling to preserve their jobs and wages, in a country whose neoliberal governments have reached the maximum of servility towards the IMF and its destructive policy.

We can also recall the expressive zapatista resistance in Mexico, which played a decisive role in the anti-neo-liberal social and political struggles of the early 1990s, when many believed that history had ended its cycle; and also the recent commune of Oaxaca, in 2005, which denudated the destruction of the public good token place in Mexico.

Thus, despite the heterogenization, complexity and fragmentation of the Latin American working class and its social struggles, we advocate the thesis that the possibilities of an effective human and social emancipation, through the conquest of the socialist alternative, can find concreteness and social viability from the revolts and rebellions that originated centrally (and not exclusively) in the world of work; a process of simultaneous emancipation from work, at work and for work.

This formulation does not exclude or suppress other important forms of rebellion and contestation. But, living in a society that produces commodities, exchange-values, whose logic is focused on the valorization of capital and its perverse cycle, labour revolts end up having a statue of centrality in the direct fight against capital.

The whole range of wage workers comprising the service sector, plus the “outsourced” workers, the ones from the informal market, “domestic workers”, unemployed, the underemployed and the unemployed, they all sum decisively to the directly productive workers, configuring themselves in the social and political pole endowed with greater potentiality and anti-capitalist radicalism.

In the same way, ecological struggle, feminist movements, ethnic (indigenous, black, immigrant) movements, LGBTs, etc., among others, find greater

vigor and vitality when they manage to articulate their singular and authentic claims against the multiple oppressions of the capital system.

In the case of ecological and environmental movements, the axis of their struggles must be against the destructive logic of capital (which destroys nature on a global scale) and, in the case of women's struggle, their actions must turn against the fetishized character, outlandish, "desoraling" and virulent form of patriarchal domination which subordinates them in their double space, family and professional, preventing their struggle in search of an effective substantive equality. The same can be said in relation to the struggle of various people, ethnic groups and cultures for the rupture of the deconstructions carried out by capital to prevent the attainment of a substantial equality.

Strikes and social explosions are also important examples of the new forms of social confrontation against capital, given the new morphology of labor and its multifaceted character. They merge elements of these poles differentiated from what I have been calling the class-which-lives-from-work and constitute important examples of these new confrontations against the destructive logic that presides contemporary (dis)sociability that the 21st century has witnessed in intensity and abundance. These struggles ultimately lead us to debate some important points when thinking about the design of a socialist societal project in this century that begins.

For a new way of life

Socialist enterprise can not effect another way of life if it does not grant labor something radically different both from structural subordination to capital and from its heteronomous sense, subordinated to a system of command and hierarchy, as occurred during the validity of the Soviet system and in the countries of the so-called "socialist bloc" or "real socialism", euphemism for hiding the

affronts which impeded the autonomy of labor outside the gears of capital and its system of command.

This brings us to another crucial point when it comes to understanding the true meaning of labor in socialism and its profound difference in relation to the social form of work under the capital system. As we have developed in the book “The Senses of Work”, a meaningful life outside work supposes a meaningful life within work. It is not possible to reconcile salaried, fetishized and outlandish work with truly free time. A meaningless life at work is incompatible with a meaningful life outside work. To some extent, the sphere outside work will be tainted by the ineffectiveness which happens within labor life.

As the global system of capital, in our present day, also intensively covers the spheres of life outside work, the de-fetishisation of society of consumption has as essential corollary the de-fetishisation in the means of production of things. What makes its conquest much more difficult if one does not decisively interrelate action for free time with the struggle against the logic of capital and the validity of the use of abstract labour.

If the foundation of collective action is radically turned against the forms of (de)socialization of the commodity world, the immediate struggle to reduce working days or hours becomes important and fully compatible with the right to work (less working hours without reduction of salary). In this way, the immediate contemporary struggle to reduce working days or hours and the struggle for employment, instead of being excluding, necessarily becomes complementary. And societal enterprise for meaningful work and for authentic life outside work, for a time available for work and for a truly free and autonomous time outside work – both, therefore, outside the oppressive control and command of capital – convert into essential elements in the construction of a socialist society no longer regulated by the system of social metabolism of capital and its mechanisms of subordination.

The societal invention of a new life, authentic and endowed with meaning, thus reinstates, at the beginning of the 21st century, the imperative necessity of

building a new system of social metabolism, of new means of production based on self-determined activity. Time-based available activity to produce socially necessary values of use, in the accomplishment of the socially necessary work and against the heterodetermined production, which characterized capitalism, based on the surplus-time for the exclusive production of exchange values for the market and for the reproduction of the capital.

The central constitutive principles, which must be present since the construction of 21st century socialism, should be guided by the following foundations:

1) the essential meaning of production and societal life will be directed exclusively towards reaching actual human and social needs;

2) The exercise of work should always be synonymous with self-activity, free activity, based on available time, in a way that is deeply articulated with the previous principle, based on human-social needs.

During the period of capitalism (and, more broadly, of the capital system itself), the use-value of socially necessary goods was subordinated to its exchange-value, which began to govern the logic of the system of production of capital. The basic productive functions, as well as the control of their process, were radically separated between those who produce (the workers) and those who control (the capitalists and their managers). As Marx says, capital operated the separation between workers and the means of production, between “the snail and its shell”⁹, deepening the separation between production geared to the fulfillment of human-social needs and to the needs of self-reproduction of the capital.

Since it was the firsts means of production to create a logic that does not primarily take into account real societal needs, and which therefore also differed radically from all previously existing social control systems of metabolism (which they produced in order to give priority to the needs of human self-reproduction), capital has established a system aimed at self-valorization, which is independent of the real self-reproductive needs of humanity.

⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital* (Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira, 1971).

The second essential societal principle is, as Marx teaches, to conceive work as a vital activity, free, self-activity, based on the available time. What this means is saying that the new socialist societal structuring must refuse to operate on the basis of the dichotomous separation between working time needed for social reproduction and surplus-labour time for the reproduction of capital. This is because the time available will be that expenditure of self-determined labour activity, directed “towards autonomous activities, external to the money-commodity relationship”¹⁰, deniers of the totalizing relationship given by the commodity-form and thus contrary to the commodity-producing society.

As a conclusion: a life full of meaning in all spheres of social being, given by social happiness and human omnilaterality, can only be effected by demolishing the barriers between working time and nonworking time, so that, from a vital activity full of meaning, self-determined, beyond the hierarchical division that subordinates work to current capital¹¹ and, therefore, under entirely new foundations, a new sociability can be developed. Woven, as we present in our book “The Senses of Work”, by socially and freely social associated individuals (men and women), where ethics, art, philosophy, truly free time and otium, in accordance with the most authentic aspirations, aroused within daily life, open ways to the conditions for the realization of the identity between individual and human genre, in its multilateral dimension. A life with entirely new forms of sociability, where freedom and necessity are mutually fulfilling.¹²

The exercise of autonomous labour, eliminating the expenditure of excess time for the production of commodities, also eliminating the destructive and superfluous time of production (spheres which are controlled by capital), will enable the real rescue of the structuring meaning of living labour, against the meaning of (de)structuring of abstract labour for capital. This is because the work which structures capital deconstructs the social being, that is, salaried work that gives meaning to capital generates an inauthentic subjectivity, alienated /

¹⁰ Robert Kurz, *The collapse of modernity* (São Paulo, Paz e Terra, 1992).

¹¹ István Mészáros, op. cit.

¹² Ricardo Antunes, *The senses of work*, op. cit.

outlandish in the work itself. In a form of authentically socialist sociability, labour, by restructuring human and social sense of production, will disrupt capital and its market system. And this same self-determined work which will render capital no meaning will generate the social conditions for the flowering of an authentic and emancipated subjectivity, giving a new meaning to work.

If work becomes endowed with meaning, it will also (and decisively) be through art, poetry, painting, literature, music, free time, otium, that the social being can be humanized and emancipated in its deepest sense. What would be a ravishing attempt of 21st century socialism.

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The author is the only responsible for writing this article.