

Interview for CULT (Brazilian magazine), February 2008
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1) We would like to start with a question recently proposed by Seymour Lipset (*It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States?* New York: W.W Norton, 2000). Why there wasn't a strong socialist movement in the US? It is possible to explain that – as that author does – by a supposed “American exceptionalism?”

This question has a very different character if it is strictly asked about the past – why *wasn't there* a strong socialist movement – or if it asked about the overall trajectory of class struggles and politics in developed capitalist countries. If we ask about the overall trajectory the striking fact is that in no developed capitalist country today is there a “strong socialist movement”. The United States, Britain, the countries of northern Europe and continental Europe – in none of these places is there anything that could be called a strong anti-capitalist political party or social movement. Given this present reality, then, the question about the past takes on a different character. To be sure, there were special historical conditions in the United States – lumped together as “American exceptionalism” – which explains why a hegemonic capitalism consolidated there earlier and in such a way that anti-capitalist movements had such little traction. But perhaps the proper way of posing the problem is to ask why there was such a delay in this process in Europe, rather than “why no socialism in the U.S.” Undoubtedly a full answer to that question is complex, but it includes the fact that from the start capitalism and capitalist development in the US was less encumbered by the persistence of precapitalist economic structures (with the obvious exception of slavery), and this allowed for a more dynamic and hegemonic form of capitalism to develop more rapidly.

So to answer your question: the US today should not be considered an exception but the norm to which so many national bourgeoisies aspire – just think of the competition between India and China to emulate the free market touted by the US, just think of the enthusiastic adoption of market principles across the whole of the former Soviet Union and its satellites. Even in Africa and the Arab world, hostility to the US does not imply any rejection of market capitalism. We will let your readers decide whether Latin America, whether Brazil, Bolivia or Venezuela, offer genuine alternatives to the US model. Perhaps, the final irony is that the US, in so many ways, is one of the best known exceptions to its own championing of free markets, liberal democracy, and human rights.

2) In spite of the inexistence of a strong Socialist Party, is it possible to affirm that in the US a kind of radical thought was always present during the 20th Century?

Because radical thinking in the US was never embodied in a stable mass political party, it is easy to think that it is perpetually at the margin of intellectual and cultural life, with little continuity and impact. This is a mistake. There have always been diverse currents of radical thinking within the US, but these currents have not crystallized around a unifying program in the way that happens when a strong leftwing political party is present. Thus, in the last fifty years in the US radical/critical ideas have revolved around mainly race, gender, the environment,

and sexuality rather than around class and labor. Some of these strands of radical thinking have been vibrant and creative and contributed much to global discussions of these agendas. The best work of American feminism and environmentalism, for example, has certainly influenced the discussion of these issues around the world. But with some exceptions these discussions are disconnected from the critique of capitalism and the politics of class.

Still, the absence of a mass party with left wing or social democratic tendencies as well as a weakly institutionalized labor movement have diminished the durability and continuity of an oppositional politics. Class struggles have come in waves but there are all too few institutions to carry collective memories forward between waves, so that each epoch of movements has to start afresh. There are no cumulative historical oppositional legacies as there are in European countries – although even here those national memories are daily becoming more anachronistic in a globalizing world.

3) Perry Anderson (*In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*. London: Verso, 1983), states that in the decade of 1970 a strong Marxist – or at least influenced by Marxism – intellectual movement arose in the US, restoring classical themes such as the analysis of labor processes and class and exploitation theories. How you evaluate such flourishing of theoretical Marxism in the US after 1968?

Yes, indeed, there was a certain flourishing of Marxism, especially in the 1970s and into the 1980s, but it is easily exaggerated since it was confined to the academic world and it had limited connections to social movements beyond the University for whom Marxism was liability. Today Marxism has virtually disappeared from the academy, although it should be said that some of the core themes and ideas within Marxism have become absorbed into the mainstream in some disciplines, especially sociology. Students today in sociology are still attracted to critical perspectives, including feminism, critical race analysis and critical cultural studies, and many graduate students still want to do their research on questions linked to social justice and social change. But Marxism as a comprehensive framework for social analysis is no longer at the center of these efforts.

The irony is that as the power of capital consolidates at local, national and global levels, the power of Marxism as science increases but at the same time Marxism as ideology – ideology meant in the best sense of the word, ideas becoming a material force – diminishes. Resurgent Marxism comes with the expansion of social movements, with the effervescence of civil society, with labor offensives and today these are to be found in countries outside the United States, perhaps in Latin America.

4) Is it still possible today to perceive the vitality of this intellectual movement?

If there is vitality in radical or critical thinking today it comes mainly from hybrid disciplines that sprung up in response to the social movements of the 1960s and created auxiliary departments within universities, department of African American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Native American Studies, Women's Studies. These still

harbor a strong oppositional stance. Within more traditional disciplines, critical perspectives continue to have a presence, especially (again) within Sociology. It is noteworthy, for example, that in recent years a number of the presidents of the American Sociological Association have been unambiguously identified with the Left – Frances Fox Piven (2007), Troy Duster (2005), Michael Burawoy (2004), and Joe R. Feagin (2000). Clearly, within the community of academics in sociology there is still a strong constituency for critical, oppositional perspectives.

The recent interest in public sociology, both in the United States and abroad, bespeaks a latent aspiration to return to sociology's roots in social transformation. If the Marxist impulse of the 1970s drew on social movements to build a new sociology against the sclerotic theories of modernization and American triumphalism, the Marxist impulse of the new century has turned outward, taking up the challenge of disaster capitalism, and in so doing has had to sacrifice theoretical purity for practical engagement.

5) Recently, two political and social issues called general attention in the US: the war in Iraq and the rights of the immigrants. Some important mobilizations took place. How have radical intellectuals positioned themselves in relation to these movements?

Radical intellectuals in the US can only be opposed to the War in Iraq because it is inhumane, irrational, and counter-productive. The outpouring of protest and demonstrations at the beginning of the Iraq war – exceeding the protests against the Vietnam War – have been singularly unsuccessful in reversing state policy that has been pursued with a uncompromising single-mindedness. Far more successful have been the massive and unexpected protests to defend the rights of immigrants who perform crucial labor tasks at the bottom end of the service economy. Latino immigrants – documented and undocumented -- have indeed been at the vanguard of social movements as they express their labor demands in terms of a language comprehensible to all – civil rights.

The big change came in 2000 when the AFL-CIO reversed its position on immigrants and instead of throwing up barriers to their entry, chose to ally with them as they so often proved to be the most militant of workers. Suddenly from being unorganizable immigrants became the workers who were most susceptible to organization. This shift is part of a sea change in labor strategy that has taken place over the last 10 years, a turn from the business unionism focused on what was a labor aristocracy of industrial workers to a social movement unionism focused on the more marginalized workers of the service sector. Here radical intellectuals have been divided – some opposed to any split in an already weak the labor movement while others see the need to jettison the strategies of old labor in favor of new labor.

6) Several authors, like David Harvey, have been restoring the concept of Imperialism in order to explain the US current stance within the international scenario. The Marxist theory of Imperialism still makes sense?

There are, of course, a variety of different “Marxist” theories of “imperialism.” Some emphasize the centrality of military competition within global patterns of

economic expansion; others use the term more to designate relations of political domination between core and peripheral states within a global system; and others use the term mostly to designate the character of the global system of capital accumulation and uneven development. All of these ideas are relevant to the current situation in one way or another, and so Marxist discussions of imperialism are still useful.

It is another thing to imagine that in the current context of 21st century capitalist globalization and interdependency imperialism in the sense of a project of global hegemony anchored in military-backed empire is still plausible. This is a political venture doomed to failure. Neo-Conservatives in the United States announced the ambitions for such a political venture of establishing a militarized imperial order in a well-known document written in the late 1990s, *The Project for a New American Century*. The war on terror provided the political opening within the US for the aggressive pursuit of this vision. The disaster in Iraq has certainly stalled this plan, but it has not killed it. In any case, it seems quite unlikely that a revamping of the strategic details of an imperial plan would enable it to succeed given the developing structure of global capitalism and the decisive shift of the dynamic locus of accumulation to East Asia.

7) During the stock market crisis of 1997, the magazine *New Yorker* published an article by John Cassidy in which he stated the importance of Marx in order to understand present day capitalism. Right now the US go through a new economic crisis. How Marxism could explain it?

Marxism has never had much trouble explaining crises of capitalism. At the core of the specific economic crisis in the US today is the cumulative effect of trajectory of policies linked to neoliberalism: the unraveling of a speculative boom in housing caused by the deregulation of credit markets, the long term trade imbalance linked to deindustrialization, the massive public debt generated by militarism combined with relentless tax cuts. These kinds of processes are familiar to Marxists, but of course they are also familiar to non-Marxist critics of neoliberalism. What is distinctive about the Marxist view of these kinds of phenomena is seeing them as intimately linked to the central structures and institutions of capitalism as such and backed by configurations of class forces.

While Marxism may be good at diagnosing capitalist crises and contradictions, where it has failed is in the anticipation of something new. Marxism for too long depended upon flawed theories of history and the laws of motion of economic systems. Its aspiration was to imagine the future as the immanent outcome of those laws of motion. We have no longer such a crutch, and if we remain radical critics of capitalism we need to think more seriously and systematically about alternatives to capitalism. We need to explore them wherever they may appear, think about their conditions of existence and diffusion. We have to keep alive the imagination of alternative utopias, but these must be real utopias created within the interstices of capitalism, not just fantasies. In keeping them alive we generate struggles both for the improvement of conditions under capitalism but also the possibility of something else.

8) What may change in American foreign policy after the elections?

Elections can provide the occasion for ameliorating mistakes in foreign policy such as the war in Iraq; they are rarely the occasion for fundamental changes in foreign policy. That is shaped by the new global order in which we live. Except for the rather wacky libertarian Rob Paul in the Republican Party (who promises to completely demilitarize American foreign policy by closing all U.S. military bases abroad and reduce the U.S. military budget by 70% or so) none of the contenders for the nomination have renounced the use of military force as an important instrument in foreign policy. They all affirm the same basic stance towards the principle sources of tension in foreign policy: strong, unequivocal support for Israel; strident hostility to Iran; commitment to fighting the “war on terror”; concern about the rise of China as an economic power. They are all committed to maintaining US military pre-eminence and they all affirm the principle that U.S. military intervention is a legitimate tool of foreign policy and is not subject to formal restriction by international bodies. This kind of militarism, after all, been at the core of American foreign policy for more than half a century and has been vigorously supported by both Democratic and Republican Parties. None of this is likely to change much regardless of who is elected.

All of that being said, there is a broad recognition at both the elite and popular level that the War in Iraq has been a disaster and has not in fact served U.S. interests. The Democrats, at least, have indicated that they want to disengage from that War and pursue a more multilateral approach to future conflicts. Nevertheless, while a Democratic President may be less reckless and militarily aggressive than Bush, there is good reason to be skeptical that there will be any fundamental change in the deeply militaristic character of American foreign policy.

There is more uncertainty about the prospects of any substantial change in the internal repression against racial minorities most obviously measured by escalating rates of incarceration of African-Americans, and most visibly apparent to the outside world in the abandonment and then expulsion of African Americans from New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. On the one hand there are important segments of the electoral base of the Democratic Party which are deeply concerned about poverty, marginalization, and racism. They recognize the profound injustice and human costs of the social and economic policies of the last quarter century, and are especially outraged by extreme indifference to human welfare of the Bush Administration. Some Democratic Party politicians seem to genuinely share this outrage, and the leading Democratic Party candidates for the presidency have at least symbolically tapped into these concerns. On the other hand, the dismantling of the already minimalist American welfare state and the pervasive deregulation of the American economy was supported by the leadership of the Democratic Party, and there is little reason to believe that any presidential candidate who gets solid support from large corporation and financial institutions would be able to reverse these developments. A serious political project for reducing economic inequality and marginalization is very unlikely to be pursued by any American President in the absence of strong and vibrant social movements for social justice.