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"Global Left vs. Global Right: From 1945 to Today"

The period 1945 to the 1970s was one both of extremely high capital accumulation worldwide and the geopolitical hegemony of the United States. The geoculture was one in which centrist liberalism was at its acme as the governing ideology. Never did capitalism seem to be functioning as well. This was not to last.

The high level of capital accumulation, which particularly favored the institutions and people of the United States, reached the limits of its ability to guarantee the necessary quasi-monopoly of productive enterprises. The absence of a quasi-monopoly meant that capital accumulation everywhere began to stagnate and capitalists had to seek alternative modes of sustaining their income. The principal modes were to relocate productive enterprises to lower-cost zones and to engage in speculative transfer of existing capital, which we call financialization.

In 1945, the geopolitical quasi-monopoly of the United States was faced only with the challenge of the military power of the Soviet Union. In order to ensure its quasi-monopoly, the United States had to enter into a tacit but effective deal with the Soviet Union, nicknamed "Yalta." This deal involved a division of world power, two-thirds to the United States and one-third to the Soviet Union. They mutually agreed not to challenge these boundaries, and not to interfere with each other's economic operations within their sphere. They also entered into a "cold war," whose function was not to overthrow the other (at least in a foreseeable future) but to maintain the unquestioned loyalty of their respective satellites. This quasi-monopoly also came to an end because of the growing challenge to its legitimacy from those who lost out by the status quo.

In addition, this period was also one in which the traditional antisystemic movements called the Old Left - Communists, Social-Democrats, and National Liberation Movements - came to state power in various regions of the world-system, something that had seemed highly improbable as late as 1945. One-third of the world was governed by Communist parties. One-third was governed by Social-Democratic parties (or their equivalent) in the pan-European zone (North America, western Europe, and Australasia). In this zone, power alternated between Social-Democratic parties that embraced the welfare state, and Conservative parties that also accepted the welfare state, only seeking to reduce its extent.

And in the last region, the so-called Third World, national liberation movements come to power by winning independence in most of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, and promoting popular regimes in already independent Latin America.

Given the strength of the dominant powers and especially the United States, it might seem anomalous that antisystemic movements came to power in this period. In fact, it was the opposite. In seeking to resist the revolutionary impact of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements, the United States favored concessions with the hope and expectation that they would bring to power "moderate" forces in these countries that would be willing to operate within accepted norms of interstate behavior. This expectation turned out to be correct.

The turning point was the world-revolution of 1968, whose dramatic if short-lived upsurge of 1966-1970 had two major results. One was the end of the very long dominance of centrist liberalism (1848-1968) as the only legitimate ideology in the geoculture. Instead, both radical leftist ideology and rightist conservative ideology regained their autonomy and centrist liberalism was reduced to being only one of three competing ideologies.

The second consequence was the worldwide challenge to the Old Left by movements everywhere that asserted that the Old Left was not antisystemic at all. Their coming to power had changed nothing of any importance, said the challengers. These movements were now seen as part of the system that had to be rejected in order that truly antisystemic movements take their place.

What happened then? In the beginning the newly-assertive Right seemed to win the day. Both U.S. President Reagan and U.K. Prime Minister Thatcher proclaimed the end of previously dominant "developmentalism" and the advent of production oriented to world market sale. They said that "there is no alternative" (TINA). Given the decline of state income in most of the world, most governments sought loans, which they only received if they accepted the new terms of TINA. They were required to reduce drastically the size of governments and eliminate protectionism, while ending welfare state expenditures and accepting the supremacy of the market. This was called the Washington Consensus, and almost all governments complied with this major shift of focus.

Governments that didn't comply fell from office, culminating in the spectacular collapse of the Soviet Union. After some time in office, the compliant states discovered that the promised rise in real income of both governments and most workers did not occur. Instead, these compliant states were suffering from the austerity policies imposed upon them. There was a reaction to TINA, marked by the 1995 Zapatista uprising, the 1999 successful demonstrations against the attempt in Seattle to enact mandatory guarantees for so-called intellectual property rights, and the 2001 founding in Porto Alegre of the World Social Forum in opposition to the World Economic Forum, long-standing pillar of TINA.

As the Global Left regained strength, conservative forces needed to regroup. They shifted from exclusive emphasis on market economics, and launched their alternative socio-cultural face. They initially spent much energy on such issues as anti-abortion and insistence on exclusive heterosexual behavior. They used such themes to pull supporters into active politics. And then they turned to xenophobic anti-immigration, embracing the protectionism that the economic conservatives had specifically opposed.

However, supporters of expanded social rights for everyone and "multiculturalism" copied the new political tactics of the right and successfully legitimated over the last decade significant advances on socio-cultural issues. Women's rights, first Gay rights and then Gay marriage, rights of "indigenous" peoples all became widely accepted.

So, where are we? The economic conservatives first won out and then lost strength. The succeeding socio-cultural conservatives first won out and then lost strength. Yet the Global Left seems nonetheless to flounder. This is because they have not yet been willing to accept that the struggle between the Global Left and the Global Right is a class struggle and that this should be made explicit.

In the ongoing structural crisis of the modern world-system, which began in the 1970s and will probably last another 20-40 years, the issue is not the reform of capitalism, but its successor system. If the Global Left is to win that battle, it must solidly ally the anti-austerity forces with the multicultural forces. Only recognizing that both groups represent the same bottom 80% of the world's population makes it likely that they can win out. They need to struggle against the top 1% and seek to attract the other 19% to their side. That is exactly what one means by a class struggle.

by Immanuel Wallerstein