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Imperialism today

Notes on the "Imperialism and geopolitics" discussion

- Debate - Imperialisms today -

Publication date: Wednesday 29 October 2014

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These notes incorporate elements of oral contributions in the discussion on imperialism introduced by Pierre Rousset at the meeting of the Bureau of the Fourth International on 18 October [Geopolitical chaos and its implications: introductory notes for collective thinking](#). Contributions to this discussion will be published in a special section ["Imperialism today"](#).

Summary

Differences between the imperialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the globalized imperialism of the early twenty-first century have been presented in the notes of Pierre Rousset [1] and in the text of Michel Husson. [2] I would like, for my part, to highlight here two major differences between these two historical periods:

– The first is a shift in the world, with a change in the centres of gravity of the world economy (the rise of China and of emerging economic powers in Asia).

– The second difference relates to the organized workers' movement. It was developing and expanding - even though that was interrupted by the world wars and by fascism - in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. On the other hand, it is going through a historic crisis at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

1. The shift in the world

We have to take the measure of this shift. This is not a cyclical change or shift, with a return to normal once the crisis is over... In order to measure it, we can take as a reference the turning points where the centres of gravity of the global economy change, as in 1760 -1780 between the Netherlands and England, or during the inter-war period, between England and the United States ... Except that this time, it is not only a change on a continental scale, but a change to another world in the economic, social, political and cultural sense...This is a change that the West (Europe and the USA), which has dominated the world since the discovery of America, is losing its hegemony in favour of new emerging powers or old powers which are regaining their strength after four or five centuries.

1.1 In these new global relations, Europe is decline and the United States is losing its economic hegemony, even though it is still the first global military power. Much will depend on the developments of the crisis in the USA. But the share of G7 countries in world GDP, which was 56 per cent in the early 1980s, is no longer in 2010 more than about 40 per cent. Forecasts indicate that the curves of growth between the ex-G7 on the one hand and on the other, China and emerging powers in Asia, will even cross during the coming decade; and in terms of per capita income, this could also happen in the years 2030-2040. The indications of growth in the last ten or fifteen years - around 8 to 12 per cent for China and India, against 1 to 2 per cent for Europe and 2 to 3 per cent for the USA - or in terms of global stocks, demonstrate these changes.

1.2 In this crisis, the map of the world is being redrawn and the competition is fierce.

These new relationships of forces are leading to new inter-capitalist and inter-imperialist economic tensions that can in some circumstances lead to military conflict. The decline of the United States is expressed by a crisis of its

hegemony. The USA remains the principal world power, but its positions have weakened on all the war fronts of the planet. The relationships of forces have changed between the new world order of the early 1990s and the present situation.

1.3 We cannot explain the European crisis without this shift in the world. The EU wants to align the European labour market on the world market. But it is in Europe that the crisis can take on forms of a crisis of collapse due, at bottom, to its positions of weakness in global competition. Germany remains one of the principal exporting countries – 47 per cent of GDP, as against 17 per cent for Japan and 15 per cent for China - but it is also affected by the contraction of the world market. So, in order to respond to global competition, the European ruling classes want to liquidate what remains of the "European social model". There is still too much of the social and, in their eyes, it must be dismantled; that is the explanation of the speculative offensive on the European markets - the "markets", which are material realities: bankers, pension fund managers, leaders of multinationals, demand an increase in the rate of surplus value by the lowering of wages, the liquidation of social security and increased working hours. Hence the brutality of the austerity policies – to adapt to the global labour market workforce driven by the social relations of the emerging powers - ,which involves a drop in purchasing power of between 10 and 15 points over the next few years.

But also - and this is what gives a sharp, explosive character to the crisis - the kind of political construction that Europe has experienced has added to the problem: with the divergences or divergent trajectories between the various poles of the EU (Germany and the German circle – the Netherlands, Austria, Northern Europe, the southern periphery of Europe - with France somewhere in the middle)... Franco-German relations express the economic, political and institutional reality of Europe, but without a European state, without direction, without a development plan or fundamental responses to the crisis.

So this shift in the world is leading to a decline of Europe and is undermining the foundations of political democracy and the social and electoral bases of the major traditional parties. It is creating the conditions for the development of authoritarian tendencies. We see this in the relations between the Troika and certain countries of Southern Europe. But we also see it in national political crises, where the far right can be projected to the front of the political stage. Although the interests of the globalized bourgeoisie do not match those of a "national protectionist" option of the far right, a "political accident" can occur, leading the far right to the gates of power...

2. A historic crisis of the workers' movement

2.1 This new imperialist redeployment can only be understood in the new relationships of forces between the classes in the imperialist centres, marked by a historic weakening of the traditional workers' movement. In this context, what is the situation of the workers' movement, of the left? We thought (and the Fourth International was not alone in thinking this!) that the depth of the economic crisis would lead to a new dynamic of recomposition and reorganization of the workers' movement and social movements... There are certainly experiences like that of SYRIZA, of new movements like the Indignados, but there is nevertheless a gap between the explosiveness of the situation and the political, organic expression of these movements: no strengthening of unions, of the reformist parties, of the radical left, of the revolutionary left,... or of left currents in the big organizations, nor even the emergence of new organizations, with the exception of Podemos. Admittedly, there are new forms of organization, but they are for the moment too unstable... Also, in retrospect, that is to say since the beginning of capitalist crises, there has never been simultaneously such a profound crisis of the capitalist system and a workers' movement that is so weak in the face of it (with the exception of circumstances where the workers' movement had been physically liquidated by fascism or military dictatorships).

2.2 Several factors exert a negative influence on the situation of the workers' movement:

a) The liberal counter-reforms since the late 1970s have led on a world scale to a restructuring of the work force, to its individualization, its increasing precariousness, the weakening of collective rights and of trade-union organization. Deindustrialization liquidated dozens of working-class concentrations. Not to mention the "informal" sector. Blue- and white-collar workers make up more than 60 per cent of the active population, but the social structure is not the same as before. In China and other Asian countries, industrialization has led to an unprecedented expansion of the proletariat, but we are only at the beginning of the organization of independent workers' movements, and there again, at this stage, there is no synchronization between unions, associations or parties in Europe, the United States and Asia... There is a retreat in the West and only fragile beginnings in the East...

b) The balance sheet of the past century weighs heavily on the problems of forming a revolutionary socialist consciousness: in particular the influence of Stalinism on the short twentieth century, when for millions of people there was an identification of Stalinism with communism - a twentieth century that ended in neoliberal capitalist globalization.

c) The social democratic parties and organizations have gone through a social-liberal, it would be more exact to say neoliberal, mutation. They maintain historical links with the social democracy of yesteryear. They are alternating governmental forces, so they must distinguish themselves from right-wing parties taking into account, there too, national characteristics, but they are fully integrated into the managing of the crisis. There is no difference between social democracy and the leaders of the European right. The processes of primaries and the similarities with the Democratic Party in the USA are moving in the same direction. These parties are less and less working-class and more and more bourgeois... As for the post-Stalinist parties, they are reduced to sectarian coagulation like the PCP or the KKE; or else they tail-end the social democratic parties; or again they may resist by trying to have a policy, called "anti-liberal", but which involves running the capitalist economy and institutions. Parties like the PS in France are moving so far to the right that they leave a space for these formations, which can play their own role as long as they are not obliged to go directly into government.

d) The combination of the weakening of the workers' movement in the face of more than three decades of neoliberal attacks, plus the policies of the leaderships of the left, give the world bourgeoisie room for manoeuvre to "manage the crisis" by strengthening the positions of financial markets and deepening the attacks against the working class, indeed even, in the BRICS, improving the material situation of millions of people ... For capital, there is always a way out of the crisis if there are no working-class solutions. The problem is that the social, ecological and human cost of its "solution" is more and more terrible.

[1] [Geopolitical chaos and its implications: introductory notes for collective thinking](#), also on ESSF "[Geopolitical chaos and its implications: introductory notes for collective thinking](#)". The contributions to this debate on the ESSF site are linked by the keyword "DebateGeopol".

[2] <http://hussonet.free.fr/ncs14w.pdf>.