

The Need for a Radical Alternative: Interview with István Mészáros (Monthly Review) – Interview by Elias Kanellis

1. From the modern vision, the great revolutions, the anti-Nazi war, to the collapse of socialism in East Europe and to the sovereignty of the market, what do you think about the twentieth century—the "century of extremes" as Hobsbawm calls it?

I am very glad you asked this question, because the issues raised in it have far-reaching implications. First, the revolutions. They are best compared to monumental earthquakes. The mountain ranges they bring to the surface cannot be undone and pushed back into the earth's belly. Take this example of conservative wishful thinking by a prominent member of President Kennedy's Brain Trust, Walt Rostow, who eagerly tried to undo the Russian Revolution by saying that: "if the First World War had not occurred—or had occurred a decade later—Russia would almost certainly have made a successful transition to modernization and rendered itself invulnerable to communism."

Such argumentation by "counter-factual conditionals" would not get a good mark even at the lowest level of introductory philosophy; but propagandistic eagerness hails it as profound wisdom. In truth, however, great revolutions reverberate over centuries, until their underlying causes are resolved. "After-shocks" can be almost as powerful as the original earthquake itself. Moreover, their significance is not confined to the locality where they first erupt. Thus the French Revolution of 1789 shook North America as well as the whole of Europe. And even today, 210 years later, it retains in many ways its historical relevance, on account of the demands it raised, which still remain unrealized. Whatever happened to liberty, fraternity, equality? They have been either completely eliminated from public consciousness, or reduced to a formalistic skeleton. Indeed, on the two hundredth anniversary of the French revolution the world political dignitaries assembled in Paris were not ashamed of listening respectfully to the tirades of Margaret Thatcher against the French Revolution and in favor of the invincibility of her side.

The premature burial of the French Revolution well illustrates the foolishness and political bias of those who engage in it. It is likewise foolish and politically biased to try to bury the October Revolution of 1917, just because of what happened in its place of origin ten years ago. It was a revolution with socialist aspirations which cannot be wiped out of history. Its reverberations included the Hungarian Council Republic of 1919; the German upheavals in the years following the First World War; the Chinese Revolution from 1927 to 1949; the Cuban revolution of 1957; the colonial liberation struggles in Africa and Southeast Asia, and the struggle of the Vietnamese people, successfully defying the might of the United States in its war of aggression. We may also remember that in China they are celebrating in our days the fiftieth anniversary of the victory of their revolution which extricated the country from long foreign domination. Whatever the troubles and contradictions in all these areas, the socialist aspirations which inspired October 1917 have not disappeared from twentieth century history.

If we look at the earth-shaking upheavals from this perspective, the picture of the twentieth century is much more positive than many people—mainly those called by

the Italians i pentiti—now present it. The same people, in the past, were busy producing absurdly rosy pictures of the same historic events.

In sum: we must bear in mind that moving from one social formation—i.e., in our case from capital's mode of social metabolic reproduction—to its radical alternative (which appeared in practical terms on our historical horizon a little over eight decades ago) is an immensely complicated and troubled social process, not only with moves forward but also suffering major relapses. But no relapses, no matter how great and tragic, can extinguish the human aspirations and forces pressing for a qualitative transformation.

As to the "sovereignty of global markets," in this regard several major qualifications are required: 1.) the most fundamental of them is that—notwithstanding all capitalist triumphalism—half of the world's population does not reproduce its conditions of existence according to the rules of the "sovereign global market." Think of the majority of India's vast population; or of the thousand million plus of China's 1250 million people. In China one can speak of relatively small capitalist enclaves, and even those under the overall political control of the non-capitalist Chinese state. To this we must add a major part of Africa and Southeast Asia (e.g. many millions of people who are subsistence-farming in Indonesia, and therefore all talk in front of them about 'the sovereign market' would sound like a joke in bad taste). And we should also remember in this respect a far from negligible part of Latin America.

Even in Russia, fifteen years after Gorbachev's ill-fated attempts, we find the failure to restore capitalism, except in the mafia-ridden big cities. Millions of Russian workers do not receive their wages for months; many of them for as long as one year and a half. Try and run a "market economy" on a wageless basis!

In all these respects we have to face the great historical failure of the capital system to complete itself, as a global system, in its properly capitalist form. Moreover, it is inconceivable—for a number of grave reasons, including the prohibitive ecological costs implicit in the capitalist developmental process—that "advanced capitalism," with its "sovereign market," could globally complete itself in the future.

2.) Even in the capitalist West "market sovereignty" must be treated with critical qualifications. There used to be many political jokes told in the East, which took the form of questions addressed to "Yerevan Radio." One of them ran like this: "Is it true that luxurious American motor cars will be given away on Saturday on Moscow Square?" The answer came: "Yes, comrade, it is perfectly true; with three qualifications: 1.) They won't be American, they will be Russian; 2.) They won't be motor cars, they will be bicycles; and 3.) They won't be given away; they will be taken away." Somewhat similar qualifications must be made about our "sovereign markets" and their "perfect competition." For three main reasons: a.) we find ever greater monopolistic developments in every capitalist country (evidently, they are not enhancers of "market sovereignty" but, on the contrary, they represent a domineering interference with it, tending to undermine and ultimately endanger the market in any meaningful sense of the term); b.) our "sovereign markets" are characterized by the massive protective involvement of the state (from "common agricultural policies" to "export guarantees," and from huge research funds put at the disposal of capitalist enterprises free of charge, to the astronomical sums given over to the "military industrial complex"); and c) "transnational globalization," in accordance with the

prevailing power relations, distorts enormously the economic market relations, in favor of the hegemonic superpower, the United States.

Robert Reich, President Clinton's former Labor Secretary, did not hesitate to spell out in the clearest terms that the United States will enforce with every means at its disposal its "positive economic nationalism." Even the closest ally of the United States, and a major industrial power in its own right, Great Britain, is forced to suffer the impact of these grossly iniquitous power relations. Thus one of the most prominent members of Margaret Thatcher's government, Michael Heseltine, had to protest—though, characteristically, only in his resignation speech—against the negative consequences for Britain of U.S. "technology transfer regulations, American protection laws, extra-territorial controls co-ordinated through the Pentagon and protected by Congress," and against the practice of "funds channelled into the largest and richest companies on earth in such a way that, if the ongoing process continues unchecked, it will buy its way through sector after sector of the world's advanced technologies." It seems, then, that our industrial and political leaders, and especially the Americans, have been born followers of Yerevan Radio's wisdom of how to qualify the "sovereignty of the market."

2. Is there a place for philosophy and philosophers in the years to come? How can you define their contemporary role? Is there a connection between philosophy and politics?

Yes, perhaps more than ever before. For intellectual production—under the pressure of capital's imperatives and determinations—tends to be fragmented into countless specialisms, at the great detriment of the comprehensive dimension. But philosophy cannot renounce addressing itself to comprehensive issues. Such issues do not disappear, just because the prevailing fashions neglect them. In this neglect there is also a powerful ideological determination: the ruling order takes itself absolutely for granted, admitting only the possibility (and legitimacy) of marginal correctives, but never the viability of comprehensive alternatives. If philosophy agrees to that, it commits suicide.

The connection between philosophy and politics is a necessary one. Politics affects the life of everybody. No one can opt out. For this reason, I always say to my students that politics is far too important to be left to politicians, even to the most far-sighted of them. In the course of history the power of comprehensive decision making has been alienated from the social individuals, and appropriated by professional politics. This is a gravely iniquitous and ultimately untenable condition. Philosophers—from the time of Greek Antiquity to the present—tried to intervene in the process aimed at actively redressing the situation. Not surprisingly, though, the relationship between philosophy and politics was very far from being a happy one. It is enough to mention here the names of Plato, Campanella, Giordano Bruno, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Marx, Gramsci, and Lukacs to illustrate this point. They all had to suffer, severely, for their active intervention in politics.

The challenge in this respect is very great today, given the profound crisis of politics itself. We know the old definition of politics as "the art of the possible." But we also hear with ever greater frequency—from every shade of governmental wisdom—that

"there is no alternative." Margaret Thatcher used to repeat it ad nauseam, and in her footsteps also Mikhail Gorbachev; until they had to find out that there could be and there had to be an alternative to both of them. In any case, the wisdom of "there is no alternative"—which insists that "the art of the possible" means that "the possible is impossible" is an indictment of the decisionmaking processes of our time. Philosophy is concerned with the cause of human emancipation, and therefore must challenge the prevailing wisdom which emanates from capital's narrowing margins for the production of even small improvements. Indeed, capital must take back today even past improvements, as demonstrated by its attacks on the Welfare State. This is why the role of philosophy today is perhaps greater than ever before.

3. You are talking about "Socialisme ou barbarie," as Castoriadis did in a more extreme period. In the Europe of social democracy and its "third way," in the period of globalization, do you think that great mass movements have a chance to blossom again?

It is true that Castoriadis, Lyotard, and some others once upon a time had a journal called *Socialisme ou barbarie*. Sadly, however, they completely abandoned that project, and—having made their peace with the established order—they ended up producing theories which were meant to prove that there can be no way out of that order.

My own use of Rosa Luxemburg's striking phrase is very different. I show in my paper that—in contrast to Luxemburg's time, when her warning had a still indeterminate temporal character—in our own days the alternative (first formulated by Marx in 1845) has a truly dramatic urgency.

Given the way in which the ongoing trends of global development assert themselves, in a clearly identifiable way, we may have perhaps a few decades to bring to a halt their destructiveness, but certainly not centuries. The great liberal economist, Schumpeter, used to characterize—and idealize—capitalism as a system of "productive destruction." This was, on the whole, true of capital's ascending phase of development. Today, by contrast, we have reached a stage when, instead of "productive destruction," we are ever increasingly confronted by capital's destructive production, proceeding on a frightening scale.

You ask: "do you think that great mass movements have a chance to blossom again" in the age of globalization and under the "third way" of European social democracy?

For me the "third way" is nothing more than a wishful fantasy, in defence of the established, untenable, order. Sociologists like Max Scheler have been predicting for almost a century the merging of the classes into a happy "middle class"—one could only wonder: the middle of what? In reality, social polarization in our time is greater than ever before, making a mockery of the old social democratic expectations of eliminating—or at least greatly reducing—inequality through "progressive taxation." As things turned out, we saw the diametrical opposite. To give you just two, very recent, examples: 1.) according to the Budget Office of the U.S. Congress (no "left-wing exaggerator," for sure), the income of the top 1 percent is equivalent to that of the bottom one hundred million people, i.e., nearly 40 percent of the population. Twenty years ago it was "only" 1 percent against forty-nine million, i.e., less than twenty percent of the U.S. population. Some "equalization" and "merging of the classes into one another!" 2.) In England child poverty trebled in the last twenty years,

and continued to be aggravated under the "New Labour" government in the last two and a half years. The "New Labour" government preaches the vacuous "third way" sermon, and practices with ever greater severity the politics of antilabor measures, imposing even such policies which Mrs. Thatcher did not dare to introduce, cutting the Welfare State in every possible way, including even the precarious livelihood of the handicapped. Only a fool can assume that this can go on forever.

So, in answer to your question, I am firmly convinced that there is a future for a radical mass movement, not only in England but also in the rest of the world. Or, to put it in another way, if there is no future for such a movement, there can be no future for humanity itself. If I had to modify Rosa Luxemburg's dictum, in relation to the dangers we face, I would add to "socialism or barbarism:" "barbarism if we are lucky"—in the sense that the extermination of humankind is the ultimate concomitant of capital's destructive course of development. And the world of that third possibility, beyond the alternatives of "socialism or barbarism," would be fit only for cockroaches, which are said to be able to endure lethally high levels of nuclear radiation. This is the only rational meaning of capital's third way.

4. What do you think about cultural globalization?

"Cultural globalization" inescapably goes with socioeconomic and political globalization, and is subject to the same contradictions. The capital system is a thoroughly hierarchical one in which the weaker members are always at the receiving end. The "pecking order" is determined by the prevailing socioeconomic and political power relations. In this sense, the question of cultural globalization is inseparable from the antagonisms of contemporary imperialism. Thus the dominant imperialist power—the United States—is doing everything it can get away with in order to impose on the rest of the world its cultural hegemonism; naturally, in the name of "democracy" and the "free circulation" of cultural products. The power relations actually embedded in the material vehicles of "free cultural circulation" remain hidden: they range from film distributive networks (which ram down the throats of everybody even the tenth-rate products of Hollywood) to giant media-empires, to telecommunication and satellite stations, and to the institutions devised to be the international watchdogs of American "intellectual property rights."

Paul Baran already, in 1957, described the other former colonial powers as "junior partners of American imperialism." This characterization remains true also in the domain of "cultural globalization." The "junior partners" also try to impose their cultural interests on the smaller countries, to the extent to which this is compatible with their subsidiary role as strictly junior partners of the United States.

Naturally, all this generates great resentment among all those who are at the receiving end. The future in this respect is bound to bring significant conflicts and the defense of legitimate national cultural interests against the encroaching powers. But this is likely to be a very painful process, because the odds are very strongly in favor of the economically and politically dominant powers.

5. Is the answer "nation-state" convincing enough opposite globalization? Would you accept the term "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo from the Serbs?

No, taking refuge in the "nation-state" from the troubled waters of globalization is certainly not convincing enough. For we are talking about a process dense with contradictions. The "nation-states" are not outsiders to globalization but an integral part of it. In the same way as we cannot opt out of politics, the nation-states cannot opt out of transnational globalization. Like it or not, they actively participate in it, according to their relative prominence in the global pecking order of capital.

What is important to bear in mind here is that the nation-state constitutes the reality of capital's most comprehensive political command structure. For there is no such thing as the global state of the capital system as such; only particular states, however strong or weak. This is a tremendous contradiction, which becomes particularly acute in our own time. And there can be no way of overcoming it, notwithstanding the fact that transnational globalization itself arises from the irrepressible logic of capital, and therefore cannot be brought to an end before it plays itself out. The implications of this state of affairs are grievous. We have witnessed two devastating world wars as a result of one of the big national states attempting to make its own state formation prevail over the others. Today, when globalization is in full swing, the imperative to make the most powerful state impose itself as the "globally pre-eminent" state (U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot's expression) over against all of the others is that much greater, and the dangers also accordingly greater. So here, again, we face an antagonism—between globalizing transnational capitals and the national states—which can only be solved by a genuinely socialist alternative. In the meantime, the antagonism can only intensify, projecting the possibility of a catastrophic collision at some point in the not too distant future.

As to the notion of "ethnic cleansing," it is a horrendous concept, reflecting the chronic insolubility of inter-ethnic and inter-state conflicts under the rule of capital. But it is not confined to Kosovo. It must be also remembered that 270, 000 Serbs have been "ethnically cleansed" from Krajina, under American supervision; and now the Serbs themselves are overwhelmingly "cleansed" from Kosovo itself; maybe another two hundred thousand of them.

All these problems are crying out for a viable solution, on the basis of a substantive equality between individuals and social groups. Substantive equality, however, is structurally incompatible with capital's mode of social control.

6. What do you think about the United Nations' politics for human rights?

The record of the UN on human rights is painfully bad, and understandably—though by no means justifiably—so. For the UN has been (and still is) dominated by the United States: the country with innumerable violations of human rights all over the world. It is enough to remember here a long history of extreme human rights violations, from the Philippines at the turn of the century to installing Marcos there after the war; from the invasion of Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and Grenada to the Vietnam war; from installing Suharto in Indonesia (and five hundred thousand ethnic Chinese murdered in the course of Suharto's U.S.-backed counterrevolution) to imposing and sustaining dictatorial regimes in Latin America (including Pinochet) and Africa; not to forget the Middle East and the Colonels' Dictatorship in Greece: the list is endless. Yet, the UN—and the Western powers so keen to justify their military actions in the Balkans in the name of human rights—did not move a little finger to even restrain, let alone to put an end to, such violations.

Nowadays leading American political figures quite unashamedly admit that they were using the Helsinki accords on human rights as a convenient weapon against the Soviet Union. Just like they were using the "China card"—under Nixon and Kissinger—against the Soviets, and the "Russian card" against the Chinese in the Vietnam war. The cynicisms of big power politics is thus dressed up in the hypocritically embellished suits of—extremely selective—concern with human rights. For while the war in Kosovo, for instance, was sonorously justified in the name of human rights, the "Western democracies" (as they like to call themselves) did nothing to counter the most brutal violation of human rights—at times bordering on genocide—by the Turks against the Kurds, or at the time of the extermination of almost one million people in Rwanda. And there is yet another form of gross violation of human rights: the death of one million children in Iraq as a result of sanctions continued to be imposed by the United States, and rubber-stamped by the UN with the total subservience of the allies of the United States. No one can take seriously the UN as the protector of human rights for as long as the actual power relations of world politics make a mockery of human rights concerns.

7. What is the U.S. role in the new state of things? What do you think about the future of Europe?

With the implosion of the Soviet system the United States acquired a global dominance as the one remaining military superpower. It maintains its military bases in sixty-nine countries, totally dominating NATO—at the last NATO summit redefined as a self-legitimizing aggressive force—as well as the far eastern military alliances, especially the "U.S.-Japan security treaty:" now similarly redefined as a "legitimately offensive force," in total violation of the Japanese Constitution which renounces war. All this, however, cannot be considered an enduring solution. For U.S. global domination—or "U.S. global pre-eminence" in Strobe Talbot's more polite words—is dense with potentially explosive antagonisms. The most serious aspect of these objective antagonisms is the coming confrontation with China. For liberal economists now predict that by 2020, China's economy will be three times bigger than that of the United States. Facing such prospects, the old "China lobby" in Washington is more active today than ever before, inducing Rear Admiral Eugene Carroll—head of the Centre of Defence Information, an independent think-tank—to comment: "There is a demonization of China here, orchestrated to show China as the yellow peril." There is also a lot of talk about a necessary "preventive strike" against China.

At the same time, despite all appearances, we should not forget the objective antagonisms and serious conflicts of interest between the United States and Europe. This is bound to intensify in the future, even if the United States will be able to continue to enforce its domination over Europe in the near future. Europe itself is also torn internally by contradictions, manifest at the moment most clearly by the English Conservative Party's attempt to blow up the European Union as a political entity, retaining it only as a common trade area: a policy which at the moment commands the majority in England, as demonstrated by the Conservative Party's victory at the recent European Parliamentary elections. All the same, the attempts to break up the European community will not succeed, although the pressure to do so will grow, and not only in England. Here, again, we face a typical contradiction of the system,

whereby neither an untroubled integrative cooperation or federation of the national members is feasible, nor can they individually go it alone after the envisaged break-up. To solve this contradiction would require a very different way of relating the particular national communities to one another than what the insurmountable constraints of the capital system allow.

8. Finally, now is the end of "Great narratives"—as Lyotard says? Are the great visions for a better world finished?

Lyotard's discourse on "grand narratives" and "little récits"—following in the footsteps of conservative thinkers who, for a very long time, were insisting on the one and only viable and legitimate method of changing "little by little"—was his way of making peace with the established order, turning his back to his own past of *Socialisme ou barbarie*. If we consider these propositions from a critical distance, we find that they undermine themselves. For without a comprehensive strategic framework into which the "little récits" are inserted, there can be no guarantee whatsoever that the accumulation of "little by little" will produce even a little good, rather than utter disaster. Lyotard was trying to make a paradigm—one should say, rather, a myth—out of the local administration's computer at a small French town of Yverdon, which was supposed to take on board the opinions and concerns of the local people.

Needless to say, the paradigmatic computer could not make the slightest difference even to the population of Yverdon, let alone to France as a whole. For even if you establish an ideal way of registering the opinions of a locality, that means nothing by itself in terms of the decision making processes of even that local community, not to mention the required connections with the rest of France and with the much larger decision making processes to which France, too, is subjected. More so today, in the "age of globalization," than ever before.

Thus, the need for comprehensive strategies—with their viable mediations of the particular modalities of action at all levels, from the "microcosms" of societal reproduction to the highest levels of national and transnational interchange—could not be greater. And one more thing needs to be stressed here: while we must be alert to the immense dangers on our horizon and oppose them with all means at our disposal, negations alone are not enough. It is equally necessary to spell out, in as great a detail as possible, the positive alternative. For the chosen target of social action, if positively defined, has a vital bearing on the feasibility of success. If nothing else, this should be amply clear from the painful lessons of the collapse of so-called "actually existing socialism:" the prisoner, throughout its history, of negative determinations. Also for this reason, the "visions for a better world" are very far from finished, but remain on the historical agenda today.

9. What is the meaning of the "Left"—now and in the future?

The way the "Left" had acquired its name was a matter of historical contingency. Something like driving on the right side of the road, rather than on the left, as in England. However, it is not a matter of indifference on which side of the road you drive in both directions, making the traffic flow rather than getting inextricably stuck in a chaotic gridlock within the shortest time.

Those who argued (and argue) that there can no longer be any significant difference between "Left" and "Right," want us to believe that there is no real difference between regularly flowing traffic—even in almost prohibitively high-density Athens—and an absurdly self-imposed total gridlock.

Despite all mystifications, generated by massive vested interests—which self-contradictorily want to maintain that the "Left" is only a historical anachronism, but the "Radical Right" of neoliberalism is a perfectly coherent notion—the Left (or more precisely, a variety of Left forces) remains in existence. It has suffered in the recent past some major setbacks, but it remains a thorn in the flesh of the established order. At the last annual Conference of "New Labour"—and no one should accuse the latter of being on the left, even if many of its, now completely marginalized, members are—Tony Blair declared that he will fight "against the conservatism of the right and the left," meaning of course only the left, which the present leadership could not quite eliminate. Naturally, the political left is far more extensive than what we find in former social democratic parties. Also today, the Left means projecting alternatives to the existent. Its fragmentation and divisions today are a major obstacle to the Left's successful intervention in the political process.

As to the future, the deepening structural crisis of the capital system is bound to confront the Left with a great historical challenge: to work out and realize a comprehensive strategy that could show a way out of the destructive trends of development of our social order. What can be said with absolute certainty is that the Right, in any one of its existing or potential configurations, will not offer to us anything of the kind.

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