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Book Review

Socialisms: A critical debate

- Reviews section -

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Socialisms — Revolutions betrayed, mislaid and unmade, Resistance Books and the IIRE 2020.

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See the author speaking about his book [here](#).

Ian Parker is an activist and academic based in Manchester in the north of England. On the basis of a vast political culture and radical commitment in struggles against all intertwined forms of oppression, he offers us a journey in time and space, anchored in eight stopovers – Russia, Georgia, Serbia, North Korea, China, Cuba, Laos and Venezuela, They all ‘went through the process of revolt against capitalism in very different ways and the failure to build socialism’.

In his challenging presentation, Parker warns readers that they will not find in the book any ‘pretence to get “back-stage” and to directly see what these countries are really like’. Nevertheless, he wants us to know that his lens and political sympathy is close to the culture and legacy of the Fourth International (FI) and of Ernest Mandel – its former leading figure and Marxist economist.

No blueprint

He draws from such legacy – as do I – a dual and complex reflexion: on socialist democracy and against determinist and linear concept of history. Such a rejection of a determinist concept of history combined with the emphasis on socialist democracy expressed the deep rupture of a living Marxism with the ‘orthodox Marxism’ promoted by the Stalinist CPs. And this dual rupture also actualised Marx’s rejection of ‘models’ of socialism cut off from struggles, experiences and contexts.

Parker reaffirms the Marxist conviction that there was/is no blueprint for socialism– even if lessons are to be drawn from experiences and failures. At the heart of the difficulties investigated in the book: the internal and international grip of the dominant capitalist order even during and after a revolutionary process; the permanent inventiveness of capitalism when it comes to breaking or incorporating resistance to its domination; the difficulty to keep sparks of popular resistances burning – and therefore organic risks of parties’ ‘substitution’ and bureaucratisation. Moreover, ‘socialism is not a blueprint to be handed down to people’ but ‘a process of self-organisation through which people learn through their own collective self-activity what is possible and discover ways to put their ideas into practice’.

The break with the initial Marxist linear concept of history was initiated by Marx himself and began to divide Marxists within the 2nd International over the October revolution, in a society marked by the ‘uneven and combined development’ of capitalism produced by imperialist expansion. As stressed by Parker, the socialist revolution anchored and beginning in national contexts was to be articulated within a complex confrontation to capitalism as a world system of domination. This Bolshevik conviction and understanding explains their immediate effort to build the 3rd International at the very beginning of the 1920s with its dimensions of ‘decolonial communism’.

Parker's political trip to Korea and China recalls how much such orientation triggered links between the USSR and new revolutionary upsurges in Asia, first against Japanese imperialist domination and later against the US. But Parker also adds that the further waves of revolutions associated with the 2nd World War, were now confronted to Stalin's claim that socialism could and should be built 'in one country', in the Soviet Union as the 'homeland of socialism'. This meant their subordination to the Kremlin's hegemonic behaviour instead of equalitarian and comradely internationalist relations. The Stalinised USSR kept (and even strengthened because of its successes) its links with the workers movement and de facto stimulated anti-imperialist resistance, but at the very same time, extended at international levels its bureaucratic 'blueprint' through conditioned aid – and the subordination of revolutionary struggles to its 'line' and concepts of 'socialism'.

Parker recalls in different chapters that this new historical and political reality was at the root of both the Tito/Stalin schism in 1948 and of the Sino-Soviet conflict. He could have also reminded us that violent purges within the CPs, including assassinations, were associated with the 'excommunication' of the Yugoslav communists. The label 'Titoism' became as infamous as 'Trotskyism' within pro-Soviet CPs but also in pro-Maoist currents, as Mao endorsed Stalin's orientation and slanders against Khrushchev's 'deStalinisation'. Even with its specificities, the Cuban revolution, in the context of the imperialist threats at its doors, was also confronted with (and influenced by) this Stalinized political reality: Parker reminds us that Castro decided 'to endorse the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968' and later 'to condemn Solidarno?? in Poland in 1980.

All this had nothing to do with 'socialism' as such (nor with capitalist restoration) but with real disastrous political relations and choices within the 'workers movement' including 'vanguard' revolutionary parties. It divided and weakened the world communist movement, anti-colonial revolutions and the 'non-aligned movement' in spite of their real anti-imperialist advances in the 1970s.

Suppression of democracy

Behind those weaknesses and failures, as Parker says, 'the bureaucratic suppression of democracy' associated with the rule of the single party – managing bureaucratic planning, 'market socialism' or both – reduced the strength of workers and people's resistance to imperialist and capitalist counter-attacks and neo-liberal capitalist globalisation, radicalised after 1989.

It is in such context of the last decades that Parker's –and his intrepid and inquisitive' companions' political journey unfolds on three continents. In each stopover Parker sketches the revolutionary phases of the given national history in their regional and international context, shedding light on internal contradictions and limits. This is particularly useful for those more unknown within the radical left – from Georgia to North Korea or Laos – but also for those, more familiar, but which (still) would not produce consensus among those currents. Meanwhile, Parker makes us perceive opaque bifurcations, ideological shifts and new official narratives covering diverse form of integration within – but also still resistances to – the new capitalist world (dis)order.

Putin's Russia, Parkers says, refuting illusions about it, is not only 'zombie capitalism' but also 'zombie Stalinism' which 'entails a significant rewriting of history'. 'Lenin is now viewed as a threat', increasingly 'criminalised retroactively by the regime.' In such context, LGBTQ, ecological, feminist 'and socialist activists in anarchist and Trotskyist groups are targeted'.

The Russian leader is increasingly attracted to the kind of strong state-led capitalism that gives the Chinese regime a capacity for both repressive control of society and for weighing in international relations as an emerging Great Power. Parker underlines how much that 'huge Asian landmass seized from capitalism' once became 'the centrepiece of the

revolution not only in the region but around the world as an inspiration to peasant struggles as well as to the industrial working class, and operating as a counter-weight to the Soviet Union'. Nevertheless, analysing the main features of that specific experience, Parker also gives insights about what his recent visits reveal about the place of 'Marxism' relegated to 'academic' spheres cut off from public debates on the economic and social policy of the regime.

What role could Marxism and pluralist debate play in the Cuban regime still under US blockade? Parker keeps open many questions about that specific resistance – still trying to break its isolation while keeping its past and present revolutionary social assets and contradictions. He leaves open the present/future 'precise political economy diagnosis' stressing that 'what is most alive in Cuba is the inspiration it gives to revolutionaries outside.' Its fate depended significantly on what would happen on the continent, in particular the outcome of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela'.

This last stopover of Parker's trip belongs to another set of experiences and several of his visits since the new 'Bolivarian Republic' and its new constitution were proclaimed after Chavez first election in 1999. While recalling the legacy of Simon Bolivar ('The 'Liberator' against Spain' in the nineteenth century'), Parker explains why the new regime, challenging the relationship of forces with the oligarchy in favour of popular racialised classes, was 'posing difficult questions about populism and state power for all of us looking for alternative now'.

He criticizes Chavez's (and even more Maduro's) supporter's 'socialist' claims while the economy remained 'in the hands of the big capitalists' and prevented socialist transformations through its clientelism and verticalism. Challenging 'campist' criteria which minimize organic causes of the present crisis and popular disillusiones – he keeps alive internationalist solidarity and anti-imperialist stands – underlying the FI's efforts to maintain comradely relations among different radical left currents taking different positions in front of Maduro's politics.

Unfortunately, the FI is too weak to have weight (and 'Trotskyism' is certainly not a clear reference point either in terms of political practices or analyses as Parker's brief remarks recognize in several chapters) while Chavez's appeals to build a 5th International were not credible: The main issues Parker's political trip wanted to shed light on need a pluralist approach and updating, within the FI and with non FI anti-capitalist currents across the world).

This is the case with the historical bifurcation in 1989-1991 the opacity of which has yet to be fully exposed – as much for Germany, the Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia or – in a radically different condition in China (with, in between, all the specific scenarios for East European countries). This covers both internal, regional and international intertwined geo-political choices and relations – but also the very precise conditions of what has been called 'privatization' without real capital-money in a first phase, except when foreign capital was authorized to buy assets. Parker does not (could not through such a trip) clarify such a complex issue.

Future choices

In his chapter on Russia, he rightly distinguishes Glasnost, which he supports, and Perestroika, which he criticises. But he does not distinguish the first phase of laws of ownership – close to 'market reforms' of the 1960s within bureaucratic but non-capitalist systems (more on that in my study 'Plan, market and democracy' in Decolonised Communism...) – and the second ones which opened the road to Yeltsin's shock therapy and capitalist restoration. Those questions and debates are far from being simple and clarified even today – not only in Parker's book, but in general among Marxists. They are important not only in discussing the past but for making future choices.

And they are linked to another open, more conceptual debate: Parker reminds us (p.9) that 'though it was in some sense "post-capitalist", the Soviet Union was not, as it claimed, "socialist", still less communist'. He could have

recalled that for the Bolsheviks in the 1920s this combined feature ('no more' and 'not yet') was analysed as a 'transitional society' – where capitalism does not any longer dominate the state, the role of money, the social status of workers and general economic choices, but where socialist relations are to be created through a fight against internal and external capitalist pressures, but also non capitalist bureaucratic ones (including forms of oppression and exploitation of workers). I have used such methodology in my studies of the Yugoslav reforms. Parker should have recalled that Stalin broke with the Bolshevik concept by claiming the Soviet Union was fully 'socialist' on the basis of forced collectivisation of agriculture and the introduction of totalitarian bureaucratic planning. Even non Stalinist currents were influenced by such 'economist' criteria. I will later come back on that conceptual issue to conclude this 'critical conversation with Ian Parker' – and beyond, with the radical left in all its diversity.

But before, I wish to express a partial disagreement with Parker's presentation of Serbia. As he reminds us, the Yugoslav revolution and experience embodied the hope of a socialist alternative to the nationalism and logic of great Stalinist power. For reasons I cannot analyse here, the system and federation underwent the worst of the dismantling on the basis of ethnic cleansing of territories (the violent statist and chauvinist nationalist appropriation was to allow later clientist privatisations. In 1999, the NATO war concerning the then open issue of the status of the province of Kosovo produced sharp conflicts among the radical (anti-imperialist) Left currents, like did later the Ukrainian crisis. [[1](#)]

I have expressed in many articles and in a European campaign "for a just and lasting peace" (following the 'Workers convoy for Bosnia' campaign supported by the FI), a systematic opposition to all policies of ethnic cleansing and exclusive appropriation of historically mixed territories – wherever they come from, denounced or instrumentalised by neo-colonial "real politics". [[2](#)]

Meanwhile the FI (Parker and I within it, of course) opposed NATO's intervention which was not acceptable even from the point of view of Albanian self-determination; and I disagreed both with those who supported it against Great Serbian (real) policies and those who, because of anti-imperialist positions denied the rights of self-determination that should be recognised for both Albanians and Serbs, all scattered over many states. Parker's chapter on Serbia evokes the traces (both material and psychological) left by the NATO bombings – a way to express solidarity against them. Nevertheless his description is questionable to say the least – equating Serbia's position and resistance to external forces with that of the Titoist Yugoslavia, building socialism "in one republic".

Milosevic was a mutant. In order to consolidate his power (including the power to privatise according to his own criteria), he claimed to be a follower of Tito as well as of the Chetniks, of Yugoslavism (in fact, of the first Yugoslavia dominated by the Serbian dynasty) and of Serbian nationalism. This is why – even if I agree with what Parker says of the present Vucic-led regime, I disagree with any kind of 'identification' of the last Serbian-led last Yugoslavia at the end of the 1990s with the former Titoist Yugoslavia.

My last critical remark for 'conversation' is based precisely on Darko Suvin's approach to the Yugoslav past that refuses its reactionary burial. [[3](#)] Parker could have more clearly strengthened his extremely rich political trip and initial remarks quoting Darko Suvin's proposal in his study on Splendour, misery and possibilities – an X-ray of the Yugoslav socialist federation where he says that 'Socialism' could be used to describe 'a transitional period' – which may last for generations between exploitative capitalism and fully democratic communism: the term 'socialism' is useful only if understood as a field of forces polarized between a congeries of alienated societies and a communist radical and equalitarian democracy which remains to be created.

Source: [Socialist Resistance](#).

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[1] *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*. Volume 24, Issue 1, 2016. Published online: 09 May 2016: "[What internationalism in the context of the Ukrainian crisis? Wide open eyes against one-eyed "campisms"](#)".

[2] "[Dossier - On Slobodan Milosevic](#)".

[3] *New Left Review*, Issue 114 "[A Utopian in the Balkans](#)".