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Marxism

A Marxist Critique of Post-Marxism

- Features -

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“Post-Marxism” has become a fashionable intellectual posture, with the triumph of neo-liberalism and the retreat of the working class. The space vacated by the reformist left [in Latin America] has in part been occupied by capitalist politicians and ideologues, technocrats and the traditional and fundamentalist churches (Pentecostals and the Vatican). In the past, this space was occupied by socialist, nationalist and populist politicians and church activists associated with the “theology of liberation”. The centre-left was very influential within the political regimes (at the top) or the less politicised popular classes (at the bottom). The vacant space of the radical left refers to the political intellectuals and politicised sectors of the trade unions and urban and rural social movements. It is among these groups that the conflict between Marxism and “post-Marxism” is most intense today.

Nurtured and, in many cases, subsidised by the principal financial institutions and governmental agencies promoting neo-liberalism, a massive number of “social” organisations have emerged whose ideology, linkages and practices are in direct competition and conflict with Marxist theory and practice. These organisations, in most cases describing themselves as “non-governmental” or as “independent research centres”, have been active in propounding ideologies and political practices that are compatible with and complement the neo-liberal agenda of their financial patrons. This essay will proceed by describing and criticising the components of their ideology and then turn to describe their activities and non-activities, contrasting it with the class-based movements and approaches. This will be followed by a discussion of the origins of “post-Marxism” and its evolution and future in relation to the decline and possible return of Marxism.

Components of post-Marxism

The intellectual proponents of post-Marxism in most instances are “ex-Marxists” whose point of departure is a “critique” of Marxism and the elaboration of counterpoints to each basic proposition as the basis for attempting to provide an alternative theory or at least a plausible line of analysis. It is possible to more or less synthesise ten basic arguments that are usually found in the post-Marxist discourse:

â€¢Â Socialism was a failure and all “general theories” of societies are condemned to repeat this process. Ideologies are false (except post-Marxism!) because they reflect a world of thought dominated by a single gender/race culture system.

â€¢Â The Marxist emphasis on social class is “reductionist” because classes are dissolving; the principle political points of departure are cultural and rooted in diverse identities (race, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference).

â€¢Â The state is the enemy of democracy and freedom and a corrupt and inefficient deliverer of social welfare. In its place, “civil society” is the protagonist of democracy and social improvement.

â€¢Â Central planning leads to and is a product of bureaucracy which hinders the exchange of goods between producers. Markets and market exchanges, perhaps with limited regulations, allow for greater consumption and more efficient distribution.

â€¢ The traditional left’s struggle for state power is corrupting and leads to authoritarian regimes which then

subordinate civil society to its control. Local struggles over local issues by local organisations are the only democratic means of change, along with petition/pressure on national and international authorities.

â€¢Â Revolutions always end badly or are impossible: social transformations threaten to provoke authoritarian reactions. The alternative is to struggle for and consolidate democratic transitions to safeguard electoral processes.

â€¢Â Class solidarity is part of past ideologies, reflecting earlier politics and realities. Classes no longer exist. There are fragmented “locales” where specific groups (identities) and localities engage in self-help and reciprocal relations for “survival” based on cooperation with external supporters. Solidarity is a cross-class phenomena, a humanitarian gesture.

â€¢Â Class struggle and confrontation does not produce tangible results; it provokes defeats and fails to solve immediate problems. Government and international cooperation around specific projects does result in increases in production and development.

â€¢ Anti-imperialism is another expression of the past that has outlived its time. In today’s globalised economy, there is no possibility of confronting the economic centres. The world is increasingly interdependent and in this world there is a need for greater international cooperation in transferring capital, technology and know-how from the “rich” to the “poor” countries.

â€¢Â Leaders of popular organisations should not be exclusively oriented toward organising the poor and sharing their conditions. Internal mobilisation should be based on external funding. Professionals should design programmes and secure external financing to organise local groups. Without outside aid, local groups and professional careers would collapse.

Critique of post-Marxist ideology

The post-Marxists thus have an analysis, a critique and a strategy of developmentin a word, the very general ideology that they supposedly condemn when discussing Marxism. Moreover, it is an ideology that fails to identify the crises of capitalism (prolonged stagnation and periodic financial panics) and the social contradictions (inequalities and social polarisation) at the national and international level that impinge on the specific local social problems they focus on. For example, the origins of neo-liberalism (the socio-political and economic milieu in which the post-Marxists function) is a product of class conflict. Specific sectors of capital allied with the state and the empire defeated the popular classes and imposed the model. A non-class perspective cannot explain the origins of the social world in which the post-Marxists operate. Moreover, the same problem surfaces in discussion of the origins of the post-Marxiststheir own biography reflects the abrupt and radical shift in power at the national and international levels, in the economic and cultural spheres, limiting the space and resources in which Marxism operated while increasing the opportunities and funds for post-Marxists. Sociological origins of post-Marxism are embedded in the shift in political power away from the working class towards export capital.

Let us shift now from a sociology of knowledge critique of post-Marxist ideology and its generally inconsistent view of general theorising to discuss its specific propositions.

Let us start with its notion of the “failure of socialism” and the “end of ideologies”. What is meant by the “failure of socialism”? The collapse of the ussr and Eastern European Communist regimes? First, that is only a single concept of socialism. Secondly, even here it is not clear what failedâ€”the political system, the socio-economic system?

Recent election returns in Russia, Poland, Hungary and many of the ex-Soviet republics suggest that a majority of voters prefer a return of aspects of past social welfare policies and economic practices. If popular opinion in the ex-Communist countries is an indicator of “failure&148;, the results are not definitive.

Secondly, if by the “failure of socialism” the post-Marxists mean the decline in power of the left we must insist on a distinction between “failure” due to internal inadequacies of socialist practices and politico-military defeats by external aggressors. No one would say that Hitler’s destruction of Western European democracies was a “failure of democracy”. Terrorist capitalist regimes and/or US intervention in Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Angola, Mozambique and Afghanistan played a major role in the “decline” of the revolutionary left. Military defeats are not failures of the economic system and do not reflect on the effectiveness of socialist experiences. Moreover, when we analyse the internal performances during the period of relatively stable socialist or popular governance, by many social indicators the results are far more favorable than that which came afterwards: popular participation, health, education and equitable growth under Allende compared very favorably to what came afterward with Pinochet. The same indicators under the Sandinistas compared favorably to Chamorro’s regime in Nicaragua. The Arbenz government’s agrarian reform and human rights policies compared favorably to the installed government’s policy of land concentration and 150,000 assassinations.

Today, while it is true that neo-liberals govern and Marxists are out of power, there is hardly a country in the Western hemisphere where Marxist- or socialist-influenced mass movements are not leading major demonstrations and challenging neo-liberal policies and regimes. In Paraguay, Uruguay and Bolivia, successful general strikes; in Mexico, major peasant movements and Indian guerrillas; in Brazil, the landless workers’ movementsall reflect Marxist influence.

Socialism outside of the Communist bloc was an essentially democratic, popular force that secured major support because it represented popular interests freely decided. The post-Marxists confuse Soviet Communism with grassroots revolutionary democratic socialist movements in Latin America. They confuse military defeats with leftists’ political failures, accepting the neo-liberal amalgamation of the two opposing concepts. Finally, even in the case of Eastern Communism, they fail to see the changing and dynamic nature of communism. The growing popularity of a new socialist synthesis of social ownership, welfare programmes, agrarian reform and council democracy is based on the new socio-political movements.

In this sense, the post-Marxist view of the “end of ideologies” is not only inconsistent with their own ideological pronouncements but with the continuing ideological debate between past and present Marxists and present debates and confrontations with neo-liberalism and its post-Marxist offspring.

The dissolution of classes and the rise of identities

The post-Marxists attack the Marxist notion of class analysis from various perspectives. On the one hand, they claim that it obscures the equal or more significant importance of cultural identities (gender, ethnicity). They accuse class analysts of being “economic reductionists” and failing to explain gender and ethnic differences within classes. They then proceed further to argue that these “differences” define the nature of contemporary politics. The second line of attack on class analysis stems from a view that class is merely an intellectual constructionit is essentially a subjective phenomenon that is culturally determined. Hence, there are no “objective class interests” that divide society since “interests” are purely subjective and each culture defines individual preferences. The third line of attack argues that there have been vast transformations in the economy and society that have obliterated the old class distinctions. In “post-industrial” society, some post-Marxists argue, the source of power is in the new information systems, the new technologies and those who manage and control them. Society, according to this view, is evolving toward a new

society in which industrial workers are disappearing in two directions: upward into the “new middle class” of high technology and downward into the marginal “underclass”.

Marxists have never denied the importance of racial, gender and ethnic divisions within classes. What they have emphasised, however, is the wider social system which generates these differences and the need to join class forces to eliminate these inequalities at every point: work, neighborhood, family. What most Marxists object to is the idea that gender and race inequalities can and should be analysed and solved outside of the class framework: that landowner women with servants and wealth have an essential “identity” with the peasant women who are employed at starvation wages; that Indian bureaucrats of neo-liberal governments have a common “identity” with peasant Indians who are displaced from their land by the free market economic policies. For example, Bolivia has an Indian vice-president presiding over the mass arrest of cocoa-growing Indian farmers.

Identity politics in the sense of consciousness of a particular form of oppression by an immediate group can be an appropriate point of departure. This understanding, however, will become an “identity”; prison (race or gender) isolated from other exploited social groups unless it transcends the immediate points of oppression and confronts the social system in which it is embedded. And that requires a broader class analysis of the structure of social power which presides over and defines the conditions of general and specific inequalities.

The essentialism of identity politics isolates groups into competing groups unable to transcend the politico-economic universe that defines and confines the poor, workers, peasants, employees. Class politics is the terrain within which to confront “identity politics” and to transform the institutions that sustain class and other inequalities.

Classes do not come into being by subjective fiat: they are organised by the capitalist class to appropriate value. Hence, the notion that class is a subjective notion, dependent on time, place and perception confuses class and class consciousness. While the former has objective status, the latter is conditioned by social and cultural factors. Class consciousness is a social construct which, however, does not make it less “real” and important in history. While the social forms and expressions of class consciousness vary, it is a recurring phenomenon throughout history and most of the world, even as it is overshadowed by other forms of consciousness at different moments (that is, race, gender, national) or combined with them (nationalism and class consciousness).

It is obvious that there are major changes in the class structure, but not in the direction that the post-Marxists point to. The major changes have reinforced class differences and class exploitation, even as the nature and conditions of the exploited and exploiter classes has changed. There are more temporary wage workers today than in the past. There are many more workers employed in unregulated labour markets (the so-called informal sector today) than in the past. The issue of unregulated exploitation does not describe a system that “transcends” past capitalism: it is the return to nineteenth century forms of labour exploitation. What requires new analysis is capitalism after the welfare populist state has been demolished. This means that the complex roles of states and parties which mediated between capital and labour have been replaced by state institutions more clearly and directly linked to the dominant capitalist class. Neo-liberalism is unmediated ruling class state power. Whatever the “multiple determinants” of state and regime behavior in the recent past, today the neo-liberal model of accumulation depends most directly on centralised state control horizontally linked to the international banks to implement debt payments and to export sectors to earn foreign exchange. Its vertical ties to the citizen as subject and the primary link is through a repressive state apparatus and para-statal “NGOs” who defuse social explosions.

The dismantling of the welfare state means that the social structure is more polarised: between low-paid or unemployed public employees in health, education, social security on the one hand and on the other hand, well-paid professionals linked to multinational corporations, NGOs and other externally financed institutions linked to the world market and centres of political power. The struggle today is not only between classes in factories but between the state and uprooted classes in the streets and markets displaced from fixed employment and forced to produce and

sell and bear the costs of their social reproduction. Integration into the world market by elite exporters and medium and small compradores (importers of electronic goods, tourist functionaries of multinational hotels and resorts) has its counterpart in the disintegration of the economy of the interior: local industry, small farms with the concomitant displacement of producers to the city and overseas.

The import of luxury goods for the upper middle class is based on the earnings remitted by “exported” labour of the poor. The nexus of exploitation begins in the impoverishment of the interior, the uprooting of the peasants and their immigration to the cities and overseas. The income remitted by “exported labour” provides hard currency to finance imports and neo-liberal infrastructure projects to promote the reign of domestic export and tourist businesses. The chain of exploitation is more circuitous, but it still is located ultimately in the capital-labour relation.

In the age of neo-liberalism, the struggle to recreate the “nation”, the national market, national production and exchange is once again a basic historic demand just as the growth of deregulated employment (informality) requires a powerful public investment and regulatory centre to generate formal employment with livable social conditions. In a word, class analysis needs to be adapted to the rule of unmediated capital in an unregulated labour market with international linkages in which the reformist redistributive politics of the past have been replaced by neo-liberal policies reconcentrating income and power at the top. The homogenisation and downward mobility of vast sectors of workers and peasants formerly in the regulated labour market creates a great objective potential for unified revolutionary action. In a word, there is a common class identity which forms the terrain for organising the struggles of the poor.

In summary, contrary to what the post-Marxists argue, the transformations of capitalism have made class analysis more relevant than ever.

The growth of technology has exacerbated class differences, not abolished them. The workers in micro-chip industries and those industries in which the new chips have been incorporated have not eliminated the working class. Rather, it has shifted the sites of activity and the mode of producing within the continuing process of exploitation. The new class structure insofar as it is visible combines the new technologies to more controlling forms of exploitation. Automation of some sectors increases the tempo of work down the line; television cameras increase worker surveillance while decreasing administrative staff; “quality work circles”, in which workers pressure workers, increase self-exploitation without increases in pay or power. The “technological revolution” is ultimately shaped by the class structure of the neo-liberal counter-revolution. Computers allow for agribusiness to control the costs and volume of pesticides, but it is the low-paid temporary workers who spray and are poisoned. Information networks are linked to putting out work to the sweatshop or household (the informal economy) for production of textiles, shoes and such like.

The key to understanding this process of combined and uneven development of technology and labour is class analysis and within that gender and race.

State and civil society

The post-Marxists paint a one-sided picture of the state. The state is described as a huge inefficient bureaucracy that plundered the public treasury and left the people poor and the economy bankrupt. In the political sphere, the state was the source of authoritarian rule and arbitrary rulings, hindering the exercise of citizenship (democracy) and the free exchange of commodities (“the market”). On the other hand, the post-Marxists argue, “civil society” was the source of freedom, social movements, citizenship. Out of an active civil society would come an equitable and dynamic economy. What is strange about this ideology is its peculiar capacity to overlook 50 years of [Latin

American] history. The public sector was of necessity instrumental in stimulating industrialisation in the absence of private investment and because of economic crisis, that is, world crisis of the 1930s and war in the 1940s. Secondly, the growth of literacy and basic public health was largely a public initiative.

In the century and a half of free enterprise, roughly from the eighteenth century to the 1930s, Latin America suffered the seven scourges of the Bible, while the invisible hand of the market looked on: genocide, famine, disease, tyranny, dependency, uprootedness and exploitation.

The public sector grew in response to these problems and deviated from its public functions to the degree that it was privately appropriated by business and political elites. The “inefficiency of the state” is a result of it being directed toward private gaineither in subsidising business interests (through low costs of energy) or providing employment to political followers. The inefficiency of the state is directly related to its subordination to private interests. The state’s comprehensive health and educational programmes have never been adequately replaced by the private economy, the church or the NGOs. Both the private sector and the church-funded private clinics and education cater to a wealthy minority. The NGOs, at best, provide short-term care and education for limited groups in local circumstances dependent on the whims and interests of foreign donors.

As a systematic comparison indicates, the post-Marxists have read the historical record wrong: they have let their anti-statist rhetoric blind them to the positive comparative accomplishments of the public over the private.

The argument that “the state” is the source of authoritarianism is both true and untrue. Dictatorial states have and will exist, but most have little or nothing to do with public ownership, especially if it means expropriating foreign business. Most dictatorships have been anti-statist and pro-free market, today and in the past and probably in the future.

Moreover, the state has been an important supporter of citizenship, promoting the incorporation of exploited sectors of the population into the polity, recognising legitimate rights of workers, blacks, women and others. States have provided the basis for social justice by redistributing land, income and budgets to favour the poor.

In a word, we need to go beyond the statist/anti-statist rhetoric to define the class nature of the state and its basis of political representation and legitimacy. The generalised ahistorical, asocial attacks on the state are unwarranted and only serve as a polemical instrument to disarm citizens of the free market from forging an effective and rational alternative anchored in the creative potentialities of public action.

The counter-position of “civil society” to the state is also a false dichotomy. Much of the discussion of civil society overlooks the basic social contradictions that divide “civil society”. Civil society or, more accurately, the leading classes of civil society, while attacking the “statism” of the poor have always made a major point of strengthening their ties to the treasury and military to promote and protect their dominant position in “civil society”. Likewise, the popular classes in civil society when aroused have sought to break the ruling classes’ monopoly of the state. The poor have always looked to state resources to strengthen their socio-economic position in relation to the rich. The issue is and always has been the relation of different classes to the state.

The post-Marxist ideologues who are marginalised from the state by the neo-liberals have made a virtue of their impotence. Uncritically imbuing the stateless rhetoric from above, they transmit it below. The post- Marxists try to justify their organisational vehicles (NGOs) for upward mobility by arguing that they operate outside of the state and in “civil society” when in fact they are funded by foreign governments to work with domestic governments.

“Civil society” is an abstraction from the deep social cleavages engendered by capitalist society; social divisions which have deepened under neo-liberalism. There is as much conflict within civil society, between classes, as there

is between “civil society” and the state. Only in exceptionally rare moments do we find it otherwise. Under fascist or totalitarian states which torture, abuse and pillage the totality of social classes do we find instances of a dichotomy between the state and civil society.

To speak or write of “civil society” is to attempt to convert a legalistic distinction into major political categories to organise politics. In doing so, the differences between classes are obscured and ruling class domination is not challenged.

To counterpose the “citizen” to the “state” is to overlook the profound links of certain citizens (the export elites, upper middle class) to the state and the alienation and exclusion of the majority of citizens (workers, unemployed, peasants) from effective exercise of their elementary social rights. Elite citizens using the state, empty citizenship of any practical meaning for the majority, converting citizens into subjects. Discussion of civil society, like the state, needs to specify the social contours of social classes and the boundaries imposed by the privileged class. The way the post-Marxists use the term as an uncritical, undifferentiated concept serves to obscure more than reveal the dynamics of societal change.

Planning, bureaucracy and the market

There is no question that central planning in the former Communist countries was “bureaucratic”, authoritarian in conception and centralised in execution. From this empirical observation, the post-Marxists argue that “planning” (central or not) is by its nature antithetical to the needs of a modern complex economy with its multiple demands, millions of consumers, massive flows of information. Only the market can do the trick. Democracy and the market go togetheranother point of convergence between the “post-Marxists” and the neo-liberals. The problem with this notion is that most of the major institutions in a capitalist economy engage in central planning.

General Motors, Wal-Mart, Microsoft all centrally programme and plan direct investments and expenditures toward further production and marketing. Few, if any, post-Marxists focus their critical attention on these enterprises. The post-Marxists do not call into question the efficiency of central planning by the multinational corporations or their compatibility with the competitive electoral systems characteristic of capitalist democracies.

The theoretical problem is the post-Marxists’ confusion of central planning with one particular historic-political variant of it. If we accept that planning systems can be embedded in a variety of political systems (authoritarian or democratic), then it is logical that the accountability and responsiveness of the planning system will vary.

Today in capitalist societies, the military budget is part of state planning and expenditures based on “commands” to the producers (and owners of capital) who respond in their own inefficient way, producing and profiting for over 50 years. While no “model” of planning, the point that needs to be made is that central state planning, is not a phenomenon confined to “Communist systems”. The defects are generalised and found also in capitalist economies. The problem in both instances (Pentagon and Communism) is the lack of democratic accountability: the military-industrial complex elite fix production, costs, demand and supply.

The central allocation of state resources is essential in most countries because of regional inequalities in resource endowment, immigration, productivity, demand for products or for a wealth of historical reasons. Only a decision made at the centre can redistribute resources to compensate less developed regions, classes, gender and racial groups adversely affected by the above factors. Otherwise, the “market” tends to favour those with historic advantages and favorable endowments creating polar patterns of development or even fostering inter-regional/class exploitation and ethnic conflicts.

The fundamental problem of planning is the political structure which informs the planning process. Planning officials elected and subject to organised communities and social groups (producers, consumers, youth, women, racial minorities) will allocate resources between production, consumption and reinvestment different from those who are beholden to elites embedded in industrial-military complexes.

Secondly, planning does not mean detailed specification. The size of social budgets can be decided nationally by elected representatives and allocated according to public assemblies where citizens can vote on their local priorities. This practice has been successful in Porto Alegré in Brazil for the past several years under a municipal government led by the Workers' Party. The relation between general and local planning is not written in stone, nor are the levels of specification of expenditures and investments to be determined at the "higher levels". General allocations to promote strategic targets that benefit the whole country, such as infrastructure, high technology and education, are complemented by local decisions on subsidising schools, clinics, cultural centres.

Planning is a key instrument in today's capitalist economy. To dismiss socialist planning is to reject an important tool in organising social change. To reverse the vast inequalities, concentration of property, unjust budget allocations, requires an overall plan with a democratic authority empowered to implement it. Together with public enterprises and self-management councils of producers and consumers, central planning is the third pillar to a democratic transformation.

Finally, central planning is not incompatible with locally owned productive and service activities, such as restaurants, cafes, repair shops and family farms. Clearly, public authorities will have their hands full managing the macro-structures of society.

The complex decisions and information flows are much easier to manage today with the mega-information processing computers. The formula is: democratic representation plus computers plus central planning equals efficient and socially equitable production and distribution.

â€˜State power corrupts': local politics submits

One of the principal critiques of Marxism among the post-Marxists is the notion that state power corrupts and that the struggle for it is the original sin. They argue that this is so because the state is so distant from the citizens, that the authorities become autonomous and arbitrary, forgetting the original goals and pursuing their own self-interest. There is no doubt that throughout history people seizing power have become tyrants. But it is also the case that the rise to power of individuals leading social movements have had an emancipating effect. The abolition of slavery and the overthrow of absolutist monarchies are two examples. So "power" in the state has a double meaning depending on the historic context. Likewise, local movements have had successes in mobilising communities and improving immediate conditions, in some cases significantly. But it is also the case that macro-political economic decisions have undermined local efforts. Today, structural adjustment policies at the national and international level have generated poverty and unemployment, depleting local resources, forcing local people to migrate or to engage in crime. The dialectics between state and local power operates to undermine or reinforce local initiatives and changes depending on the class power manifested at both levels. There are numerous cases of progressive municipal governments that have been undermined because reactionary national regimes cut off their funding. On the other hand, progressive municipal governments have been a very positive force helping neighborhood-local organisations, as has been the case with the socialist mayor of Montevideo in Uruguay or the leftist mayor in Porto Alegre in Brazil.

The post-Marxists who counterpose "local" to "state power" are not basing their discussion on historical experience,

at least not of Latin America. The antinomy is a result of the attempt to justify the role of NGOs as mediators between local organisations and neo liberal foreign donors (World Bank, Europe or the us) and the local free market regimes. In order to “legitimate” their role, the post-Marxist NGO professionals, as “agents of the democratic grassroots”, have to disparage the left at the level of state power. In the process, they complement the activity of the neo-liberals by severing the link between local struggles and organisation and national/international political movements. The emphasis on “local activity” serves the neo-liberal regimes just right, as it allows its foreign and domestic backers to dominate macro-socio-economic policy and to channel most of the state’s resources on behalf of export capitalists and financial interests.

The post-Marxists, as managers of NGOs, have become skilled in designing projects and transmitting the new “identity” and “globalist” jargon into the popular movements. Their talk and writing about international cooperation and self-help micro-enterprises creates ideological bonds with the neo-liberals while forging dependency on external donors and their neo-liberal socio-economic agenda. It is no surprise that after a decade of NGO activity that the post-Marxist professionals have “depoliticised” and deradicalised whole areas of social life: women, neighborhood and youth organisations. The case of Peru and Chile is classic: where the NGOs have become firmly established, the radical social movements have retreated.

Local struggles over immediate issues are the food and substance that nurture emerging movements. The crucial question is over their direction and dynamic: whether they raise the larger issues of the social system and link up with other local forces to confront the state and its imperial backers or whether it turns inward, looking to foreign donors and fragmenting into a series of competing supplicants for external subsidies. The ideology of post-Marxism promotes the latter; the Marxists the former.

Revolutions always end badly: the â€˜possibilism’ of post-Marxism

There is a pessimistic variant to post-Marxism which speaks less of the failures of revolution as the impossibility of socialism. They cite the decline of the revolutionary left, the triumph of capitalism in the East, the “crisis of Marxism”, the loss of alternatives, the strength of the us, the coups and repression by the militaryâ€”all these arguments are mobilised to urge the left to support “possibilism”: the need to work within the niches of the free market imposed by the World Bank and its structural adjustment agenda, and to confine politics to the electoral parameters imposed by the military. This is called “pragmatism” or incrementalism. Post-Marxists played a major ideological role in promoting and defending the so-called electoral transition from military rule in which social changes were subordinated to the reintroduction of an electoral system.

Most of the arguments of the post-Marxists are based on static and selective observations of contemporary reality and are tied to predetermined conclusions. Having decided that revolutions are out of date, they focus on neo-liberal electoral victories and not on the post-electoral mass protests and general strikes that mobilise large numbers of people in extra-parliamentary activity. They look at the demise of communism in the late 1980s and not to its revival in the mid-1990s. They describe the constraints of the military on electoral politicians without looking at the challenges to the military by the Zapatista guerrillas, the urban rebellions in Caracas, the general strikes in Bolivia. In a word, the possibilists overlook the dynamics of struggles that begin at the sectoral or local level within the electoral parameters of the military and then are propelled upward and beyond those limits by the failures and impotence of the electoral possibilists to satisfy the elementary demands and needs of the people. The possibilists have failed to end the impunity of the military, to pay the back salaries of public employees (the provinces of Argentina) or to end crop destruction of the cocoa farmers (in Bolivia).

The post-Marxist possibilists become part of the problem instead of part of the solution. It is a decade and a half

since the negotiated transitions began and in each instance the post-Marxists have adapted to neo-liberalism and deepened its free market policies. The possibilists are unable to effectively oppose the negative social effects of the free market on the people, but are pressured by the neo-liberals to impose new and more austere measures in order to continue to hold office. The post-Marxists have gradually moved from being pragmatic critics of the neo-liberals to promoting themselves as efficient and honest managers of neo-liberalism, capable of securing investor confidence and pacifying social unrest.

In the meantime, the pragmatism of the post-Marxists is matched by the extremism of the neo-liberals: the decade of the 1990s has witnessed a radicalisation of neo-liberal policies, designed to forestall crisis by handing over even more lucrative investment and speculative opportunities to overseas banks and multinationals.

The neo-liberals are creating a polarised class structure, much closer to the Marxist paradigm of society than the post-Marxist vision. Contemporary Latin American class structure is more rigid, more deterministic, more linked to class politics or the state, than in the past. In these circumstances revolutionary politics are far more relevant than the pragmatic proposals of the post-Marxists.

Class solidarity and the â€˜solidarity’ of foreign donors

The word “solidarity” has been abused to the point that in many contexts it has lost meaning. The term “solidarity” for the post-Marxists includes foreign aid channelled to any designated “impoverished” group. Mere “research” or “popular education” of the poor by professionals is designated as “solidarity”. In many ways the hierarchical structures and the forms of transmission of “aid” and “training” resemble nineteenth century charity and the promoters are not very different from Christian missionaries.

The post-Marxists emphasise “self-help” in attacking the “paternalism and dependence” on the state. In this competition among NGOs to capture the victims of neo-liberalism, the post-Marxists receive important subsidies from their counterparts in Europe and the usa. The self-help ideology emphasises the replacement of public employees for volunteers and upwardly mobile professionals contracted on a temporary basis. The basic philosophy of the post-Marxist view is to transform “solidarity” into collaboration and subordination to the macro-economy of neo-liberalism by focusing attention away from state resources of the wealthy classes toward self-exploitation of the poor. The poor do not need to be made virtuous by the post-Marxists for what the state obligates them to do.

The Marxist concept of solidarity in contrast emphasises class solidarity and within the class, solidarity of oppressed groups (women and people of colour) against their foreign and domestic exploiters. The major focus is not on the donations that divide classes and pacify small groups for a limited time period. The focus of the Marxist concept of solidarity is on the common action of the same members of the class sharing their common economic predicament and struggling for collective improvement.

It involves intellectuals who write and speak for the social movements in struggle, committed to sharing the same political consequences. The concept of solidarity is linked to “organic” intellectuals who are basically part of the movementthe resource people providing analysis and education for class struggle. In contrast, the post-Marxists are embedded in the world of institutions, academic seminars, foreign foundations, international conferences and bureaucratic reports. They write in esoteric postmodern jargon understood only by those “initiated” into the subjectivist cult of essentialist identities.

Marxists view solidarity as sharing the risks of the movements, not being outside commentators who question

everything and defend nothing. For the post-Marxists, the main object is “getting” the foreign funding for the “project”. The main issue for the Marxist is the process of political struggle and education in securing social improvement. The objective is raising consciousness for societal change; constructing political power to transform the general condition of the great majority. “Solidarity” for the post-Marxists is divorced from the general object of liberation; it is merely a way of bringing people together to attend a job retraining seminar, to build a latrine. For the Marxists, the solidarity of a collective struggle contains the seeds of the future democratic collectivist society. The larger vision or its absence is what gives the different conceptions of solidarity their distinct meaning.

Class struggle and cooperation

The post-Marxists frequently write of the “cooperation” of everyone, near and far, without delving too profoundly into the price and conditions for securing the cooperation of neo-liberal regimes and overseas funding agencies. Class struggle is viewed as an atavism to a past that no longer exists. So we are told “the poor” are intent on building a new life. They are fed up with traditional politics, ideologies and politicians.

So far, so good. The problem is that the post-Marxists are not so forthcoming in describing their role as mediators and brokers, hustling funds overseas and matching the funds to projects acceptable to donors and local recipients. The foundation entrepreneurs are engaged in a new type of politics similar to the “labour contractors” (enganchadores) of the not-too-distant past: herding together women to be “trained”; setting up micro-firms subcontracted to larger producers of exports.

The new politics of the post-Marxists is essentially the politics of compradors: they produce no national products, rather they link foreign funders with local labour (self-help micro-enterprises) to facilitate the continuation of the neo-liberal regime. In that sense the post-Marxists in their role of managers of NGOs are fundamentally political actors whose projects, training and workshops do not make any significant economic impact either on the gnp or in terms of lessening poverty. But their activities do make an impact in diverting people from the class struggle into harmless and ineffective forms of collaboration with their oppressors.

The Marxist perspective of class struggle and confrontation is built upon the real social divisions of society: between those who extract profits, interest, rent and regressive taxes and those who struggle to maximise wages, social expenditures and productive investments. The results of post-Marxist perspectives are today evident everywhere: the concentration of income and the growth of inequalities are greater than ever, after a decade of preaching cooperation, micro-enterprises and self help. Today banks like the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) fund the export agribusinesses that exploit and poison millions of farm labourers while providing funds to finance small micro-projects. The role of the post-Marxists in the micro projects is to neutralise political opposition at the bottom while neo-liberalism is promoted at the top.

The ideology of “cooperation” links the poor through the post-Marxists to the neo-liberals at the top. Intellectually, the post-Marxists are the intellectual policemen who define acceptable research, distribute research funds and filter out topics and perspectives that project class analysis and struggle perspectives. Marxists are excluded from the conferences and stigmatised as “ideologists” , while post-Marxists present themselves as “social scientists”. The control of intellectual fashion, publications, conferences and research funds provide the post-Marxists with an important power basebut one ultimately dependent on avoiding conflict with their external funding patrons.

The critical Marxist intellectuals have their strength in the fact that their ideas resonate with the evolving social realities. The polarisation of classes and the violent confrontations are growing, as their theories predict. It is in this sense that the Marxists are tactically weak and strategically strong vis-a-vis the post-Marxists.

Is anti-imperialism dead?

In recent years anti-imperialism has disappeared from the political lexicon of the post-Marxists. The ex-guerrillas of Central American turned electoral politicians, and the professionals who run the NGOs speak of international cooperation and interdependence. Yet debt repayments continue to transfer huge sums from the poor in Latin America to the European, us and Japanese banks. Public properties, banks, and above all natural resources are being taken over at very cheap prices by us and European multinationals. There are more Latin American billionaires with the bulk of their funds in us and European banks than ever before. Meanwhile, entire provinces have become industrial cemeteries and the countryside is depopulated. The us has more military advisers, drug officials and federal police directing Latin American “policing” than ever before in history. Yet we are told by some former Sandinistas and ex-Farabundistas that anti-imperialism/imperialism disappeared with the end of the Cold War. The problem, we are told, is not foreign investments or foreign aid but their absence and they ask for more imperial aid. The political and economic myopia that accompanies this perspective fails to understand that the political conditions for the loans and investment is the cheapening of labour, the elimination of social legislation and the transformation of Latin America into one big plantation, one big mining camp, one big free trade zone stripped of rights, sovereignty and wealth.

The Marxist emphasis on the deepening of imperial exploitation is rooted in the social relations of production and state relations between imperial and dependent capitalism. The collapse of the ussr has intensified imperial exploitation. The post-Marxists (ex-Marxists) who believe that the unipolar world will result in greater “cooperation” have misread US intervention in Panama, Iraq, Somalia and elsewhere. More fundamentally, the dynamic of imperialism is embedded in the internal dynamic of capital not in external competition with the Soviet Union. The loss of the domestic market and external sector of Latin America is a return to a “pre-national” phase: the Latin economies begin to resemble their “colonial” past.

The struggle against imperialism today involves the reconstruction of the nation, the domestic market, the productive economy and a working class linked to social production and consumption.

Two perspectives on social transformation: class organisations and NGOs

To advance the struggle against imperialism and its domestic neo-comprador collaborators passes through an ideological and cultural debate with the post-Marxists inside and on the periphery of the popular movements.

Neo-liberalism operates today on two fronts: the economic and the cultural-political, and at two levels, the regime and the popular classes. At the top, neo-liberal policies are formulated and implemented by the usual characters: the World Bank, the IMF working with Washington, Bonn and Tokyo in association with neo-liberal regimes and domestic exporters, big business conglomerates and bankers.

By the early 1980s the more perceptive sectors of the neo-liberal ruling classes realised that their policies were polarising the society and provoking large-scale social discontent. Neo-liberal politicians began to finance and promote a parallel strategy of “from below”, the promotion of “grassroots” organisation with an “anti-statist” ideology to intervene among potentially conflicting classes, to create a “social cushion”. These organisations were financially dependent on neo-liberal sources and were directly involved in competing with socio-political movements for the allegiance of local leaders and activist communities. By the 1990s these organisations, described as “non-governmental”, numbered in the thousands and were receiving close to US$4 billion world-wide.

The confusion concerning the political character of the NGOs stems from their earlier history in the 1970s during the days of the dictatorships. In this period they were active in providing humanitarian support to the victims of the military dictatorships and denouncing human rights violations. The NGOs supported “soup kitchens” which allowed victimised families to survive the first wave of shock treatments administered by the neo-liberal dictatorships. This period created a favorable image of NGOs even among the left. They were considered part of the “progressive camp”. Even then, however, the limits of the NGOs were evident. While they attacked the human rights violations of local dictatorships, they rarely denounced their and European patrons who financed and advised them. Nor was there a serious effort to link the neo-liberal economic policies and human rights violations to the new turn in the imperialist system. Obviously the external sources of funding limited the sphere of criticism and human rights action.

As opposition to neo-liberalism grew in the early 1980s, the and European governments and the World Bank increased funding of NGOs. There is a direct relation between the growth of movements challenging the neo-liberal model and the effort to subvert them by creating alternative forms of social action through the NGOs. The basic point of convergence between the NGOs and the World Bank was their common opposition to “statism”. On the surface the NGOs criticised the state from a “left” perspective defending civil society, while the right did so in the name of the market. In reality, however, the World Bank, the neo-liberal regimes and Western foundations co-opted and encouraged the NGOs to undermine the national welfare state by providing social services to compensate the victims of the MNCs. In other words, as the neo-liberal regimes at the top devastated communities by inundating the country with cheap imports, external debt payments and abolishing labour legislation, creating a growing mass of low-paid and unemployed workers, the NGOs were funded to provide “self-help” projects, “popular education” and job training, to absorb temporarily, small groups of poor, to co-opt local leaders and to undermine anti-system struggles.

The NGOs became the “community face” of neo-liberalism, intimately related to those at the top and complementing their destructive work with local projects. In effect, the neo-liberals organised a “pincer” operation or dual strategy. Unfortunately, many on the left focused only on “neo-liberalism” from above and the outside (IMF, World Bank) and not on neo-liberalism from below (NGOs, micro-enterprises). A major reason for this oversight was the conversion of many ex-Marxists to the NGO formula and practice. Post-Marxism was the ideological transit ticket from class politics to “community development”, from Marxism to the NGOs.

While the neo-liberals were transferring lucrative state properties to the private rich, the NGOs were not part of the trade union resistance. On the contrary, they were active in local private projects, promoting the private enterprise discourse (self-help) in the local community by focussing on micro-enterprises. The NGOs built ideological bridges between the small-scale capitalists and the monopolies benefitting from privatisation all in the name of “anti-statism”, and building civil societies. While the rich accumulated vast financial empires from the privatisation, the NGO middle-class professionals got small sums of funds to finance offices, transportation and small-scale economic activity. The important political point is that the NGOs depoliticised sectors of the population, undermined their commitment to public employment and co-opted potential leaders in small projects. NGOs abstain from public school teacher struggles as the neo-liberal regimes attack public education and public educators. Rarely if ever do NGOs support the strikes and protests against low wages and budget cuts. Since their education funding comes from the neo-liberal governments they avoid solidarity with public educators in struggle. In practice, “non-governmental” translates into anti-public spending activities, freeing the bulk of funds for neo-liberals to subsidise export capitalists while small sums trickle from the government to NGOs.

In reality, non-governmental organisations are not non-governmental. They receive funds from overseas governments or work as private sub-contractors of local governments. Frequently they openly collaborate with governmental agencies at home or overseas. This “sub-contracting” undermines professionals with fixed contracts, replacing them with contingent professionals. The NGOs cannot provide the long term comprehensive programmes that the welfare state can furnish. Instead they provide limited services to narrow groups of communities. More importantly, their programmes are not accountable to the local people but to overseas donors. In this sense NGOs undermine democracy by taking social programmes out of the hands of the local people and their elected officials

and creating dependence on non-elected, overseas officials and their locally anointed officials.

NGOs shift people's attention and struggles away from the national budget toward self-exploitation to secure local social services. This allows the neo-liberals to cut social budgets and transfer state funds to subsidise bad debts of private banks and loans to exporters. Self-exploitation (self-help) means that, in addition to paying taxes to the state and not getting anything in return, working people have to work extra hours with marginal resources, expending scarce energies to obtain services that the bourgeoisie receives free from the state. More fundamentally, the NGO ideology of "private voluntary activity" undermines the idea that the government has an obligation to look after its citizens and provide them with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that political responsibility of the state is essential for the well-being of citizens. Against this notion of public responsibility, the NGOs foster the neo-liberal idea of private responsibility for social problems and the importance of private resources to solve these problem. In effect, they impose a double burden on the poor: paying taxes to finance the neo-liberal state to serve the rich and private self-exploitation to take care of their own needs.

NGOs and socio-political movements

NGOs emphasise projects not movements. They "mobilise" people to produce at the margins not to struggle to control the basic means of production and wealth. They focus on technical financial assistance of projects not on structural conditions that shape the everyday lives of people. The NGOs co-opt the language of the left: "popular power", "empowerment", "gender equality", "sustainable development" and "bottom up leadership". The problem is that this language is linked to a framework of collaboration with donors and government agencies that subordinate practical activity to non-confrontational politics. The local nature of NGO activity means "empowerment" which never goes beyond influencing small areas of social life with limited resources within the conditions permitted by the neo-liberal state and macro-economy.

The NGOs and their post-Marxist professional staff directly compete with the socio-political movements for influence among the poor, women, racially excluded and such like. Their ideology and practice diverts attention from the sources and solutions of poverty (looking downward and inward instead of upward and outward). To speak of micro-enterprises as solutions, instead of the exploitation by the overseas banks, is based on the notion that the problem is one of individual initiative rather than the transference of income overseas. The NGOs' aid affects small sectors of the population, setting up competition between communities for scarce resources, generating insidious distinction and inter- and intra-community rivalries thus undermining class solidarity. The same is true among the professionals: each sets up their NGO to solicit overseas funds. They compete by presenting proposals closer to the liking of the overseas donors for lower prices, while claiming to speak for more followers. The net effect is a proliferation of NGOs that fragment poor communities into sectoral and sub-sectoral groupings unable to see the larger social picture that afflicts them and even less able to unite in struggle against the system. Recent experience also demonstrates that foreign donors finance projects during "crises"â€"political and social challenges to the status quo. Once the movements have ebbed, they shift funding to NGO-regime "collaboration", fitting the NGO projects into the neo-liberal agenda. Economic development compatible with the "free market" rather than social organisation for social change becomes the dominant item on the funding agenda. The structure and nature of NGOs with their "apolitical" posture and their focus on self-help depoliticises and demobilises the poor. They reinforce the electoral processes encouraged by the neo-liberal parties and mass media. Political education about the nature of imperialism, the class basis of neo-liberalism, like class struggle between exporters and temporary workers are avoided. Instead the NGOs discuss "the excluded", the "powerless", "extreme poverty", "gender or racial discrimination" without moving beyond the superficial symptom, to engaging the social system that produces these conditions. Incorporating the poor into the neo-liberal economy through purely "private voluntary action", the NGOs create a political world where the appearance of solidarity and social action cloaks a conservative conformity with the international and national structure of power.

It is no coincidence that as NGOs have become dominant in certain regions, independent class political action has declined, and neo-liberalism goes uncontested. The bottom line is that the growth of NGOs coincides with increased funding from neo-liberalism and the deepening of poverty everywhere. Despite its claims of many local successes, the overall power of neo-liberalism stands unchallenged and the NGOs increasingly search for niches in the interstices of power. The problem of formulating alternatives has been hindered in another way. Many of the former leaders of guerrilla and social movements, trade union and popular women's organisations have been co-opted by the NGOs. The offer is tempting: higher pay (occasionally in hard currency), prestige and recognition by overseas donors, overseas conferences and networks, office staff and relative security from repression. In contrast, the socio-political movements offer few material benefits but greater respect and independence and, more importantly, the freedom to challenge the political and economic system. The NGOs and their overseas banking supporters (Inter-American Bank, the World Bank) publish newsletters featuring success stories of micro-enterprises and other self-help projectsâ€"without mentioning the high rates of failure as popular consumption declines, low price imports flood the market and as interest rates spiralas is the case in Mexico today.

Even the "successes" affect only a small fraction of the total poor and succeed only to the degree that others cannot enter into the same market. However, the propaganda value of individual micro-enterprise success is important in fostering the illusion that neo-liberalism is a popular phenomenon. The frequent violent mass outbursts that take place in regions of micro-enterprise promotion suggests that the ideology is not hegemonic and the NGOs have not yet displaced independent class movements.

Finally, NGOs foster a new type of cultural and economic colonialism and dependency. Projects are designed, or at least approved, according to "guidelines" and priorities of the imperial centres or their institutions. They are administered and "sold" to communities. Evaluations are done by and for the imperial institutions. Shifts in funding priorities or bad evaluations result in the dumping of groups, communities, farms and cooperatives. Everything and everybody is increasingly disciplined to comply with the donors' demands and their project evaluators. The new viceroys supervise and ensure conformity with the goals, values and ideologies of the donor as well as the proper use of funds. Where "successes" occur they are heavily dependent on continued outside support, otherwise they could collapse.

While the mass of NGOs are increasingly instruments of neo-liberalism there is a small minority which attempt to develop an alternative strategy that is supportive of class and anti-imperialist politics. None of them receive funds from the World Bank or European and governmental agencies. They support efforts to link local power to struggles for state power. They link local projects to national socio-political movements occupying large landed estates, defending public property and national ownership against multinationals. They provide political solidarity to social movements involved in struggles to expropriate land. They support women's struggles linked to class perspectives. They recognise the importance of putting politics in command in defining local and immediate struggles. They believe that local organisations should fight at the national level and that national leaders must be accountable to local activists. In a word, they are not post-Marxists.

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