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What lasted for 3000 years has been destroyed in 30": the struggle for food sovereignty in Tunisia

31 October 2018, by **Max Ajl**

Gabès, the Tunisian South's garden-city, is otherworldly. It is the world's only maritime oasis, and very different from the Saharan or desert groves which the term tends to call up in the mind's eye. Natural sweet springs have nourished horticulture and arboriculture there for millennia, back to Carthaginian times, forming the basis of a technical system that has outlasted empires and Beys.

One cannot help but be enchanted by the emerald multi-storied gardens of Chenini, a section of Gabès. Palms stand sentinel on the perimeter, a windbreak which shatters the desert sirocco. The Mediterranean cools the summers and heats the winters, while the oasis effect seals in moisture. Below palms sit grapes on trestles and the telltale pale green of olives. Lower still are shrubs with bursts of the

ruddy red and pale yellow of pomegranates. Below them on the ground story sit peppers, canary melons, and depending on the time of year, nitrogen-fixing alfalfa.

We were there on the third day of the Food Sovereignty Days, the brain-child of Tunisian geographer-cinematographer Habib Ayeb and his organization, the Tunisian Observatory for Food Sovereignty and the Environment (OSAE). [1]The tour had descended down Tunisia's littoral, from the National Gene Bank in Tunis to the Zaghuan bread-basket, sitting south of the capital, to the Sahelian town of M'Saken.

Day three was devoted to Gabès. The farm we visited, that of Amm Salah, is one of the few that still keeps livestock helping to ensure a closed metabolic

cycle. Indeed, until the 1970s most farmers also used night-soil to seal yet more tightly the nitrogen cycle. [2] These days, the majority of those farmers, amidst haphazard sprawl, do not reserve space for animals and instead resort to fertilizers. This is not because they yield better. In fact, it has been known since the 1970s that the techniques deployed in the oasis, a year-round polyculture fed by a delicate and socially-managed system for allotting spring-water, were already what agronomists typologize as intensive.

In the same wooden structure housing the animals were dozens of differently-size receptacles holding landrace seeds, stored with tobacco leaves, a natural prophylactic against pests. Such seeds are the genetic treasure of Tunisia. Amm Salah keeps and sells

them, seeking to break the dependent relationship which colonialism and even more, post-colonial agricultural modernization instituted in Tunisia: reliance on foreign seeds, often poorly adapted to the local biomes, and turned into commodities by Euro-American agribusiness.

There is precious little left of the oasis, and even less of it is devoted to agro-ecological farming. As Ayeb noted, what "lasted for 3000 years has been destroyed in 30." The installation of the Gabès industrial pole, part-and-parcel of the developmental mirage began in Tunisia in the 1960s and 1970s, set in motion a rapid process of mostly unplanned urbanization. This metropolitan boom pulled in people from the poorer surrounding steppes, who had been neglected and marginalized in state development planning. Oasis land values increased, pushing people to sell their land or build on it, rapidly overtaking the farms of the oasis. In this time, there has been increased pressure to turn to commodity cultivation, forging cross-country- or cross-Mediterranean supply chains through which value leaches out from the oasis. Fresh yellow dates which sell for one Dinar a kilogram in Gabès might sell for five in Tunis.

Price compression for tropical crops also leads to value hemorrhages. Keeping northern supermarkets stocked does not come without its costs. [3]

Later in the day we visited Shott al-Salem. Located next to Gabès's phosphate processing plant, Shott al-Salem is the other side of the developmental coin in Tunisia. It is popularly known as the shore of death. It deserves the moniker. The seawater is dyed brown with effluent, the shoreline's sand is pocked here and there with animal cadavers. Slightly in-land, the earth is covered with desiccated and poisoned vegetation. The air is thick with fumes from the processing, which is sent skyward and seaward untreated. We could not breathe properly. My stomach turned and knotted in reaction to the contamination carried on the currents of the wind. Our group suffered steady attrition as people peeled off, unable to tolerate the stink or the steadily

mounting irritation in the mouth and eyes.

The plant visibly harms the oasis flora. We could see fronds with their edges pointing towards the plant scarred by chemical burns. Anatomical surveys of reptiles and, the birds of Rachel Carson's cautions, show they are riddled with heavy metals, while the mats of *Posidonia oceanica* sea grass have collapsed and died amidst phosphogypsum toxification. Epidemiological studies were not permitted on the people during the US-backed Zineddine Ben Ali dictatorship, and the people of the oasis still await a serious study. But what hits the fauna hits the people, survey or no. Cancer rates in the neighborhoods adjoining the plant are around one in every ten people for liver and kidney cancers.

The phosphate plant is the emblem and distillation of the global and local regimes that control the Global South: toxic, entropic, carcinogenic, a technology which has concentrated wealth into very few hands, and is articulated into international monopoly production chains, while doling out liberally and locally the externalities of environmentally unequal exchange.

Our trip to that moonscape shore abutting the factory was about two contrasting developmental models. The dominant one is industrial-dedevelopmentalist, which dumps the costs of production on the poor of the oasis – those who cannot afford to leave and have nowhere to go. Then there are the evaporating, although embryonic, possibilities latent in Chenini and elsewhere – the seeds, literal and figurative, of a very different model for the future: food sovereignty.

Like socialism, food sovereignty is a political and conceptual battleground. Definitions bloom along with the movements fighting for their varying visions of the world. It is perhaps best-known as the program of the peasant international, La Via Campesina. [4]

Defining these movements are calls for the right of peoples to healthy food, produced sustainably, using agro-ecology, as well as the right to define

their own food and agriculture systems. In Tunisia, explains Nada Trigui, a member of OSAE, it is a question of reducing "dependency of peasants, consumers, communities, as well as on the state level," on foreign food and inputs, "in the wake of the Green Revolution and agricultural modernization." Regionally – unavoidably – imperialism and war are part of the food sovereignty program, since foreign violence precludes the political capacity to mold national agricultures. [5]

The next day we went to the Matmata Mountains, which till the sky in the Tunisian steppe. There were no artesian wells to irrigate the arid lands here. Instead, a dazzling water-harvesting system called the *jissr* dominates. *Jessour* are small check-dams, wherein water concentrates from the rocky hills, cascading onto flat earth plots held up by a retaining wall. The soil and wall are safehouses for storing scarce water. A lower plane of dirt sits below that mini-plateau, and sometimes another, then another, with water percolating from one to the next. During these lands' intermittent inundations, water flows freely over them.

The fecund soil and greenery in the steppic landscape seems surreal until one sees that it is everywhere. A patch-work of light and dark greens, the milk chocolate of moist soil, the silver shimmer of sun-licked water on earth after the last week's deluges, amidst more monochrome tan escarpments, blankets one small valley after another in life.

Even without much extension work from the state agronomic research institutions, which have devoted huge amounts of funding to white elephant mega-dams compared to studies of the *jessour*, such small-scale infinitely renewable systems allow enough water for date and olive trees, and, in exceptional years, vegetables. Farmers also plant hard wheat and barley. Indeed, the National Gene Bank, where another of the OSAE team, Amine Slim works, carried out some of its first landrace gathering expeditions in the Matmata, where farmers had preserved such seeds in situ – a technique the BNG is deliberately replicating in the North.

Of course, poverty and plenty walk hand-in-hand. The poverty of the Tunisian South has, in making cheap labor, often been the maker of wealth whether for Tunisian corporations or further afield through labor export. Food sovereignty is also about arresting that poverty, and thus, the OSAE has its enemies, and not merely amongst transnational seed companies or northern cereal exporters who are used to the markets the US government made for them in Tunisia through its Trojan Horse PL-480 aid programs. These enemies are also within Tunisia itself, where government agencies, importers, contractors, and those intoxicated by the ambrosia of a very particular, parochial, and shortsighted version of modernity, do not want food sovereignty on the agenda.

Some of what OSAE is doing, explained Emna Mornagui, an engineer who works with the organization, is "connecting people in the city with the countryside." *Sensibiliser*, which has no easy Anglophone analogue but is close to consciousness-raising, peppered conversations with the OSAEers as they discussed the food sovereignty tour. It is a means of combating the alienation which is part-and-parcel of the metabolic rift which occurs at the physical level in periphery and core countries alike. Such a distance can easily take the form of a chauvinism

which forgets the centrality of food getting to civilization. As people forget how food is made, we may often accidentally authorize a politics which undercuts the small-scale systems of production which still produce at least half of the world's food.

However, what is lost may not be so easily found once it is well and truly gone. Food production is based, above all, on the expertise of peasants, Trigui adds. The tour's participants mentioned that foreign seed vaults are often necessary for restoring and restocking Tunisia with its ancestral genetic varieties, including, quite often, cultivars resistant to the droughts which will hammer Tunisia ever-more-frequently in a warming world. But if seedstock can be stored *ex situ* - and not without problems, not least the climactic or war-related destruction of seed banks - knowledge cannot. [6] Making and maintaining *jessour*, tending to the water-turns which allocate oasis water, knowing which rotations are appropriate for which soils and which micro-climates, or erecting and protecting the myriad other technics which are inseparable from the social systems with which they gestated, are also being lost amidst the destruction of the last patches of oasis polycultures or human out-migration to slums.

Whether technologies that have

outlasted Rome will outlast industrial capitalism remains to be seen. It does not depend only on whether work-groups like OSAE are able to permeate the membrane separating production and consumption in the South. It is also a question of whether we in the North can help secure southern countries the space to protect their own farming systems, not from biological blights but socio-political ones, like NAFTA, or the ALECA trade agreement under discussion with the EU. [7]

This is not a matter of charity but of survival, for such trade agreements have ripped apart not merely southern farming systems but also northern ones. [8] The message of food sovereignty is not merely for countries like Tunisia but also larger and richer ones which have long neglected our own agricultures and their capacity to help solve social and climate crises alike. [9] [10] As fossil capitalism nears its nova-stage, there is much of interest, I think, beyond nostalgia or antiquarianism, in farming systems whose lifespan can be dated in terms of millennia. Not merely of interest, but to learn from and protect. [11] And not at any cost, but precisely because the cost of losing a sustainable agriculture is far more than we can afford to pay, whether we now know it or not.

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The fight for the Hambach forest: impressions of the weekend of victory

30 October 2018, by **Angela Klein**

On 6 October in a nearby meadow, 50,000 people celebrated the cessation of deforestation decided the previous day by the Regional Administrative Court of Münster. This demonstration, the largest ever seen here, was organized by the three major organizations BUND [12], Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, in association with Campact [13], and

supported by the associations "Buirer für Buir" ("The inhabitants of Buir for Buir"), "Ende Gelände" [18] and others have held "climate camps", with each year a greater influx, against the coal mines of the Rhine basin, "Ende Gelände" organized effectively massive successful blockades in open-cast mines. Moreover, it was not limited to the

Rhine region, but was taken up in Poland and the Czech Republic. Small groups specialized in sabotage actions, others set up large training programmes. The coordinating committee of "trade unionists for the protection of the climate" set itself the goal of changing the positions of the unions, the environmental organizations published reports of

experts and took legal action, the Catholics organized religious services ...

To sum up, in Germany, the climate movement has become a mass movement and has found in the Hambach forest a place from which to organize and radiate. But it is necessary to make it clear that the centrepiece is the forest guide Michael Zobel and his educational walks in the forest of Hambach, first monthly, then weekly since August. It is a fixed point for the movement, because it is unifying, at the same time as influencing to those who come out of curiosity: once they have come once, they will stay. Without these forest walks, the movement would never have made the leap that made it massive. One afternoon, there were up to 10,000 walkers.

Without him, without the "Buirer für Buir", without the "tree occupiers", without "Ende Gelände", without BUND, there would not be this broad mobilization. But without the change in the collective consciousness that the Paris climate summit initiated and the hot summer of this year has further accelerated, the terrain would not be so favourable. The decision of the court in Münster cannot be explained otherwise. What is particularly important here is that in Germany a higher judicial authority accords as much importance to a protected species (a bat) as to the economic interests of an energy giant, which it further reproaches for not having made a credible demonstration of the indispensable character for the common good of its activity. This is a huge success for the protection of nature and the climate. RWE was not expecting it; moreover, it was also a surprise for many of the activists.

Is this already total victory? No, the fight for the abandonment of carbon

energy remains hard manual labour [19]. RWE is digging a ditch around the forest to prevent people from continuing to enter and to continue to do whatever it wants. For a while there was talk of building a fence a metre high around the forest, but there is no longer any question of that, perhaps it is too expensive. It is not forbidden to go into the forest, but it will be forbidden to build huts. RWE has integrated the forest into the domain of the company. Thus, the company has the possibility to have the "tree occupiers" arrested for trespassing and to suffocate them with large fines.

In fact, it is too late to put this strategy in place, it only makes sense if RWE wanted to use the fence to remove from the forest the most valuable symbol of what there is to preserve there: the bats called "Murin de Bechstein". Once already RWE tried to drive them out of the forest by covering with plastic sheets the cavities of the old trees in which they nest. At that time the ecologists who were on the terrain denounced these actions and got them stopped. If they can no longer come and keep watch, RWE will do whatever it wants. That may sound rather cynical. How can we attribute such ideas to them? German capitalists have, however, proved several times in history that they do not become wiser when they have their back to the wall, and that they choose the tactics of destruction.

In any case, thanks to our mass mobilization, and the fact that RWE is so obviously clinging to outdated technology, the energy producer has been forced onto a defensive position, and the BCE union along with it. This week-end RWE received the bill: the price of its shares fell by nearly 10 per cent on Friday, accompanied by a new wave of termination of contracts by its

customers. Year after year, RWE makes 100 to 200 million euros less profit. Meanwhile polls show that the SPD and the CDU continue their descent into hell while the Grünen see their support rising. This will not be without consequences for the decisions of the "Coal Commission".

That is why "Ende Gelände" is right to call on people to continue to go into the forest, to occupy trees and to continually refill the ditch. At least until the courts have decided the main question, whether the forest should be declared to the European Commission as falling under the directive on the conservation of natural habitats and species of wild fauna and flora, environmental activists must closely survey what RWE does in the forest.

And after this weekend, a second thing is becoming obvious: the movement for the climate must win over the cities. It must make alliances with small farmers and promoters of alternative means of transport, and to counter the prevailing madness, develop counterproposals much more concrete than has been the case up until now, capable of becoming axes of battle on the political level. It was from Munich that this same weekend there came a first big initiative: nearly 20,000 people demonstrated on the theme "Mia ham's satt! " ["We are fed up !" in the Bavarian dialect.] against increasing concrete construction, industrial farms and the asphyxiation of transport. Activists from "Ende Gelände" and many others expressed their solidarity with the fight for the Hambach forest.

8 October 2018

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Faced with Nicaragua's social and political crisis - Solidarity with popular demands and

against Ortega repression!

29 October 2018, by **Fourth International Bureau**

The Sandinista Popular Revolution

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was born as a "vanguard organization" with an anti-imperialist and revolutionary orientation, as established in its Historic Programme (1969), "capable of taking political power (...) establishing a social system that wipes out the exploitation and poverty that our people have been subjected to in past history."

When the Somoza dictatorship was defeated in July 1979, the FSLN had the broad support of the bulk of the population and tried to lay the objective and subjective foundations of a revolutionary project of a socialist character, although there were great challenges to face in a country with a highly dependent economy and a profound social destructuring, not to mention the counterrevolution that the United States promoted in the 1980s, which was decisive in this stage of Sandinism. The Fourth International immediately celebrated the overthrow of the dictatorship and was in full solidarity with the revolutionary popular movement.

Aware that radical economic and social transformations would be gradual, the FSLN promoted a Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional where the Sandinista bloc and the bourgeoisie were represented. It was therefore proclaimed that the principles of the revolution were the mixed economy, political pluralism and non-alignment, as necessary strategies in the short term.

In the long term, the Historic Programme of the FSLN was the general framework to be developed, although it was not carried out in its entirety, leaving important deficits with respect to women's emancipation (in particular leaving untouched the

restrictive abortion laws which only permitted terminations if a woman's life was at risk) or the demands of the peasantry, as well as very serious errors such as respecting the foreign debt contracted by Somoza and the implementation of monetarist policies at the end of the 1980s. Nevertheless from 1988, the Sandinista leaders introduced a structural adjustment plan that degraded the conditions of the poor without affecting the rich. These policies very much resembled the usual conditions imposed by the IMF and World Bank while at the same time, under pressure from Washington, the two institutions had suspended their aid to the Sandinista authorities. These adjustment policies were very much criticized by certain tendencies within the FSLN because they burdened the popular classes with the adjustment effort.

However, the Programme of the FSLN did include the construction of a Revolutionary Government that allowed full participation of the whole population, both at the national and local level, respect for human rights, freedom to organize the union movement in the cities and countryside, the freedom to organize groups of peasants, youth, students, women, etc. Latifundios were expropriated, land was redistributed and trade unions and peasant associations were formed. There was also the nationalization of factories, buildings and other assets of the Somoza oligarchy.

During the following eleven years, education was generalized, the university was opened to the popular classes, social assistance programs were created and a universal health system and other basic services were set in motion, and Sandinista Defence Committees (CDS) were launched to organize the population of the neighbourhoods.

The FSLN also established a fair tax

policy, labour rights, and historic social justice for the Caribbean Coast, because of the exploitation and discrimination against native indigenous peoples. It was therefore a socialism-oriented programme that prepared the material conditions for it, with tactical and strategic approaches, which, despite the difficulties of the context and the threat of U.S. imperialism, opened new promises of rupture with the hegemonic system.

However, the agrarian reform did not go far enough: the expropriations focused mainly on the assets of Somoza and his allies, and spared the interests of major capitalist groups and powerful families whom certain Sandinista leaders wanted to turn into allies or fellow travellers. Furthermore, instead of giving priority to small and medium farms, the FSLN quickly created a State agrarian sector and cooperatives, which was not in line with the attitudes of the rural population, parts of which became attracted by the counterrevolutionary Contras.

Self-organization and workers' control were not encouraged enough. Part of the FSLN leadership was trained in Cuba in the 1960s-1970s, which, under the influence of the Stalinized Soviet Union, was then promoting popular organization within a very controlled and limited framework. As a result, the masses could not fully participate in their own emancipation.

The betrayal of the FSLN's Historic Programme and the establishment of an authoritarian

corporate regime

When the FSLN was defeated electorally in 1990, the new international situation favoured the right, capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe deprived Nicaragua of international allies. But people were also increasingly discouraged by the direction the revolutionary process was taking. In the Sandinista rank and file there was uneasiness due to the bureaucratization and verticalism of the National Directorate of the FSLN, which elected the members of the CDS, union posts, territorial cadres and intermediate commanders. Gradually, the absence of democratization in these structures led to the development of a bureaucratic Sandinista leadership that enjoyed privileges that contrasted with the reality of the great majority who were asked to make economic and social sacrifices in the name of the revolution.

When the main commanders of the National Directorate, public offices and middle management grabbed – in what is popularly known as the *piñata* – the lands, coffee plantations, mansions, haciendas, automobiles and other state properties that the revolution had taken over in the name of the vast majority, this malaise deepened. The arguments presented by the Commandantes were that this was to prevent the enemy from taking possession of what had cost so much blood, but this was not enough to explain to the population the personal enrichment of the then incipient Sandinista bourgeoisie.

Subsequently, the FSLN under Daniel Ortega adopted an attitude that swung back and forth between compromise and confrontation with the government of the National Opposition Union (UNO) of Violeta Chamorro. The National Directorate of the FSLN, controlled mostly by Daniel Ortega's Democratic Left current, on the one hand encouraged the struggles against privatizations, while on the other, in the National Assembly, it supported the Chamorro government that carried them out.

At the end of the 1990s, Ortega concluded a pact with the

Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) of Arnoldo Alemán, who had been President since 1997, in a sort of coexistence with the most conservative and corrupt right wing. These were "dangerous friendships" for a revolutionary project. However they were profitable for Daniel Ortega's FSLN and Alemán's PLC, who obtained different benefits from such pacts. This was seen with the PLC's support of Ortega faced with the denunciation of the sexual abuse of his stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narváez. And years later, when Alemán, who had been sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for the galloping corruption of his government, was allowed to serve out his sentence under house arrest thanks to the men Ortega had placed in the judicial system, until the Supreme Court quashed the conviction in 2009 during Ortega's presidency.

The reform of the Electoral Law in the year 2000, promoted by Sandinista and liberal deputies was another product of the Ortega-Alemán pact. The reform allowed the presidency and vice-presidency of the Republic to be won with a minimum of 35% and outstripping the second place candidates by a difference of five percentage points. This new Electoral Law allowed for Daniel Ortega, who had lacked enough support since 1990, to be elected in 2006 with 38.07% of the votes.

As part of the opposition, the Sandinista parliamentary group voted in 2006, in agreement with the conservative deputies, for a law that completely prohibits abortion. They did so as part of the pact with the right wing that allowed the FSLN to return to the presidency of the republic with the elections at the end of 2006. And it was under the presidency of Daniel Ortega – who refused to reverse the law – that this prohibition was included in the new penal code that came into force in 2008. This prohibition does not allow for any exceptions, even if the health or life of the pregnant woman is in danger, or the pregnancy is the result of rape.

This move accompanied the progress made in consolidating other

dangerous friendships: this time, with a former FSLN adversary, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, whom Ortega reinstated to public life as President of the Peace and Reconciliation Commission, a body set up to ensure that those demobilized from war complied with the agreements. This was the beginning of another privileged relationship between Ortega's FSLN and the *de facto* powers. In order to win the votes of the conservatives, Daniel Ortega married Rosario Murillo in church before the election of November 2006, with Cardinal Obando officiating.

It was also after Ortega's return to the government that the FSLN formalized the agreements with COSEP, establishing an alliance between these two sectors, presented as a space for tripartite agreement between the government, the private sector and the unions. However, the participation of the unions was token, since they had been co-opted by the interests of the FSLN, that is, the Ortega-Murillo tandem, as evidenced by the positions of the Central Sandinista de Trabajadores (CST) in cases of workers' struggles against large employers such as the Pellas family or the minimum wage agreements. Thus, little by little, from the formulation of laws to wage negotiations, the Nicaraguan political economy was subordinated to the interests of the big national capital. However, a pact of this nature cannot be restricted to big national capital, since its own dynamic leads to transnational capital, in particular to the extractive industry and, above all, to mining. Underlying all this is the neoliberal logic prevailing in the region: the channelling of public resources to private investments, the outsourcing and privatization of services, tax exemptions and benefits for capital, etc.

The free trade agreement with the United States was adopted in 2005. Although the FSLN parliamentary group, then in opposition, voted against its ratification in October 2005, in 2006, FSLN parliamentarians supported changes in a series of laws that allowed the conditions imposed by the US to be confirmed. Moreover, once in power from 2007, Daniel Ortega's government did not attempt

at all to repeal this free trade agreement with the US superpower. This was a further shift in the FSLN's orientation as it had previously accused the government of President Enrique

Bolaños of subjugating Nicaragua to Washington's economic interests. The approval of this treaty by the FSLN MPs was accompanied by support for changes in a whole series of laws to conform to the conditions imposed by the USA. Other free-trade treaties were approved with the FSLN's support: a treaty with Taiwan (which came into force in 2008), one concerning Central America with Mexico (2011) and another between Central America and the European Union (2012).

In 2006, Nicaragua was a beneficiary of debt relief within the framework of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative - the IMF cancelled \$206 million of Nicaragua's debt. When Ortega came back to government in 2007, the IMF programme was over and the Fund saw no necessity to sign a new one as it considered Nicaragua's debt to be sustainable. Daniel Ortega's government nevertheless insisted on implementing a new programme in order to attract foreign investors. The IMF eventually agreed, demanding from the government to deepen the neoliberal policies pursued by the Right and to apply fiscal austerity in order to have a primary fiscal surplus.

Thus the Bretton Woods institutions have no reason to reproach the Nicaraguan government. The IMF notes "Nicaragua's success in maintaining macroeconomic stability" (March 2016). During the last visit of its technical staff (February 2018), this organization has declared that "economic performance in 2017 was above expectations and the 2018 outlook is favourable". As for the World Bank, it chose the very moment in April 2018 when Ortega's government had just announced neoliberal measures concerning social security to congratulate Ortega on his sound economic policies. In other words, Nicaragua has functioned within the guidelines that these organizations impose on the region.

All this has been possible with FSLN

majority control of the Assembly. In addition, in November 2013, Ortega introduced an initiative for a Law to Reform the Constitution of the Republic, which included the proposal to elect the President with a "relative majority" of votes, independent of the percentage achieved, and to allow indefinite presidential re-election. Currently, Ortega's FSLN has absolute control of the Assembly, with 71 deputies out of a total of 92.

But there remain two great betrayals by the FSLN of its Historic Programme that cannot be left unmentioned. The first is the demobilization and destruction of the grassroots organizational fabric and of the large social movements, mostly co-opted by the regime. This takes place through control at different levels, from the legal normative, with the ban on standing in elections with independent lists, and by the control exercised through the Councils of Citizen Power (CPC), which are vertical forms of organization that pursue the control of citizens for the purposes of power of the presidential couple.

The other betrayal is of women's rights which, given the total prohibition of abortion, the reform of the law of male violence, the persecution of the feminist movement critical of the regime, impunity for years of sexual abuse of Zoilamérica, etc., challenges the entire political and social system built around *Ortegismo*. In 2012, after a major campaign by grassroots women's organizations - which started at the time of the revolution - Nicaragua introduced Law 779 against violence against women. This law removed the previous requirement for mediation in cases of abuse. This law was the result of a progressive campaign, but there was a reactionary one against it, driven by the Catholic hierarchy which labelled it as "anti-family". This resulted in the law being seriously weakened by an amendment reintroducing compulsory mediation 15 months after it was first passed, with no resistance from the FSLN.

Feminist and worker-peasant based fronts of struggle. State repression as a response.

At this point, it has been demonstrated that the Historic Programme of the FSLN, committed to rights and equality among people, is contradictory to the drift taken by *Ortegismo*. Within all the open fronts of struggle, it has been the women's movements, critical of the government, who have not given up on the denunciation of the changes to Law 779, which reduces femicide to the realm of the relations of heterosexual couples or which includes mediation with aggressors as a mechanism for conflict resolution. In other words, the law has been vilified, as are the bodies of Nicaraguan women exposed to these laws or demonstrating in the streets for their rights.

Other fronts are located in the fight against extractivism and there are different examples of conflicts between the accumulation of capital and the sustainability of life itself, derived from the incompatibility that extractivism has as an engine of development that does not benefit the great majority, nor the communities that suffer its negative effects, as was seen in Rancho Grande or Mina El Limón. In both cases, in the face of community organization and mobilization, the response has been repression. The same happens with mining, hydroelectric and agribusiness projects.

But of all these projects that are a threat to communities and the environment, there is one that has provoked an important mobilization, nationally and internationally that Ortega has not been able to hide: the projected construction of an inter-oceanic canal that proposes to split the country and the region in two, from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean, crossing Lake Nicaragua, the main freshwater reserve in Central

America. In this case, the response has been the persecution, repression and stigmatization of social movements.

Thus, the government, which serves the interests of private capital (whether owned by local "traditional" capitalists, or bureaucratic or foreign ones) not only acts to repress the people in favour of the transnationals, but is also complicit in the destruction of the environment and guilty of widespread violations of human rights.

April 2018 and the popular mobilization against the regime: Ortegismo crosses the rubicon.

Eleven years have passed since Ortega's return to government, a time in which enough social discontent has accumulated for two events to trigger the upsurge of April 2018: the government's inaction in the face of the Indio Maíz Reserve fire and the proposed reform of the Nicaraguan Social Security Institute (INSS). This reform would have cut current pension benefits by 5%, limited the indexation of the pensions over the inflation rate, and introduced cuts to future pensions for around one million wage-earners that could have been as high as 13%.

The social outburst brought the gaze of the international community onto Nicaragua and the popular discontent against the regime.

On April 18, demonstrations and protests erupted spontaneously and peacefully in important cities, such as León and Managua, and were immediately violently repelled by the government. Various human rights reports refer to organized pro-government groups or "shock forces" recruited from the Sandinista Youth, in addition to riot police. This disproportionate use of violence fed the protests and mobilizations of April

19 through the so-called "autoconvocados": that is young people, students, workers, etc., who organized takeovers of streets and cities through the "tranques". This gradually spread through the country to cities like Masaya, Granada, Matagalpa, Rivas and EstelÃ, adding to other collectives and movements. Since that day, the government of Ortega-Murillo has continued with police and military repression and, in particular, the actions of paramilitary groups, which have indiscriminately shot the population. These groups are masked, heavily armed and operate in full impunity, in the daylight and alongside police forces. This indicates that they act in full agreement with the regime.

On April 22, given the broad participation in the demonstrations, Ortega cancelled the INSS reform. On April 24, the Government agreed to initiate a National Dialogue through the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy, composed of civil society organizations, students, peasants and even the business sector, and with the Catholic Church as mediator, with the goal of resolving the conflict. At that time, the social movements already had clear demands for establishing dialogue: no negotiation without the cessation of repression, a guarantee of justice and reparation for the demonstrators killed in the previous days, and the departure of the Ortega-Murillo duo from power, as a non-negotiable objective. The demand of the social movements was thus to negotiate a post-Ortega transition. However, after insisting on these points, the government decided to suspend the dialogue. For the social mobilization, to continue negotiating in this context would have meant a reinforcement of Ortegismo and its repressive regime.

At the same time, there has been a rapid response from state institutions to legitimize repression, for example, with the enactment of the Anti-Terrorism Law, which criminalizes and persecutes specific profiles of leaders of social movements. Thousands of exiles and more than 400 dead, as well as the expulsion of national and international human rights organizations, including the UN itself, show the point of no return at which

the regime has arrived. After the massive use of terror meant to repress and intimidate the population, the government took back control of the streets by the middle of July. Since then, several hundred people, labelled as "terrorists" by the government, have been arrested and are still imprisoned, with their rights not respected - the associations of defence of human rights are not allowed to access the prisons, nor are the lawyers of some detainees. Some of them have been intimidated and tortured in order to force them to give false confessions that would support the claim that the government faces a plot to remove it by force.

As a result of the repression, sections of the population have been sufficiently intimidated that they do not take part in street protests. Nevertheless, many demonstrations have been organized, but they have not gathered as many participants as between April and July 2018. They have been organized by a diversity of movements and organizations: Articulation of Social Movements and Civil Society Organizations, Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy, Student Movements, April 19 Movements (throughout the country), community-based organizations, Mothers of April, Political Prisoners Committees, Women's Movements and feminist networks, LGBTBIQ collectives, University, unions and independent trade associations ... But there is a consensus that Ortega and Murillo must leave the government and the need to rebuild Sandinismo without Ortega.

But all these organizations are also against external interference that seeks a way out of the conflict towards an "Ortegismo sin Ortega"; that is, the maintenance of a clientelist structure that safeguards the economic interests of national and transnational capital. Hence, one of the major current challenges for the movements is the debate and consensus on that transition and roadmap and that actors such as COSEP, currently key to the exit of Ortega-Murillo, do not pose a threat to an emancipatory social and economic project.

At this point of no return, the regime is using anti-imperialist rhetoric to

portray an attempt at a "soft coup d'état" as has occurred in other countries in the region. The current orthodox anti-imperialism is reduced to a useful screen for self-legitimization on the international stage, but it reduces a conflict with deep and complex roots in the national reality to external interference. Internally, it benefits only a group of people privileged enough not to suffer the worst effects of the regime they have constructed in Nicaragua.

A section of the international left supports this view of the conflict. It considers imperialist powers – starting with the United States and their allies in the region – to be largely responsible for destabilising the country, and that a dominant sector of the protest movement is being led or manipulated by the reactionary right. This part of the international left is suspicious of reports asserting that the regime bears the main responsibility for the hundreds of deaths that resulted from these dramatic events, or even considers these as outright false claims.

Yet Ortega and his supporters cannot prove this so-called attempted coup d'état. Most demonstrators have not used terrorist methods. The government cannot prove the involvement of a single foreign mercenary. No sector of the army has been denounced by Ortega for supporting the idea of a coup, and in the last analysis the army has stayed

on the side of the regime up to now.

Faced with the facts presented here, it is simply fallacious to see soft coups d'état in the Nicaraguan case. It is equally irresponsible to argue that current mobilizations can be reduced to vandalism by some, or that human rights, and especially women's rights, are objects of negotiation or currencies of exchange for any society. This is even less the case for the society that we aspire to build as a revolutionary left. It is also fallacious to present Ortega's government as a socialist or leftist government, given the policies which have been implemented for the last eleven years in favour of capital – as is shown in the support of the IMF, the World Bank and big capital for Ortega, as well as the support from capitalist powers, including US imperialism, until the repression became too strong for them to continue supporting the regime publicly. No people has to be satisfied with less than the noblest aspirations of freedoms, democracy, social justice and human rights that it has achieved, in this case, synthesized in the Sandinista ideals. The logic of the lesser evil ends up being the shortest way to the greater evil!

For all these reasons, the Fourth International, which from the beginning built solidarity with the Sandinista Revolution, supports the leftist and democratic sectors of the resistance, rebellion and popular power against the current Ortega regime and demonstrates solidarity

with the sectors struggling to refound a Sandinismo that is anti-capitalist, democratic and respectful of human rights, and that is capable of getting rid of the neoliberal and repressive despotism that is crushing the Nicaraguan popular classes.

Stop the repression of Nicaraguan popular movements! Immediate liberation of all political prisoners!

For women's rights! Legalize abortion now!

Down with the criminal neoliberal regime of Ortega-Murillo!

Against any kind of imperialist interference in Nicaragua's internal affairs! For the right of the people in Nicaragua, in Central America and beyond to take their fate into their own hands!

For the Sandinista refoundation! Towards an ecosocialist alternative to the extractivist export-oriented model and to the capitalist system, which implies a break that needs the highest level of democracy and self-organisation!

We will articulate these demands in a campaign of internationalist solidarity with the victims of the repression in Nicaragua.

Executive Bureau of the Fourth International

Amsterdam 28 October 2018

Murder Most Foul: Accomplices After the Fact

28 October 2018, by David Finkel

They didn't anticipate that Khashoggi's fiancé would be waiting outside the consulate with instructions to sound the alarm if he didn't emerge within two hours. (Khashoggi evidently suspected he might be detained, even possibly kidnapped,

although he never expected to be murdered on site.) They forgot that that he'd be seen on surveillance video entering the building, but not leaving. And they didn't know that Turkish intelligence, having bugged the premises, would have audio tapes of

the killing and that the Erdogan regime would selectively leak information for its own complicated reasons.

The killers and those who sent them figured that their allies, first and

foremost the U.S. administration, would be willing accomplices after the fact - that Trump and company would profess to have no knowledge of what had happened to Khashoggi. They weren't far wrong about that: Trump made every attempt to give the Saudi rulers the "benefit of the doubt" with Secretary of State Pompeo allowing them time "to complete their investigation" (coverup) and the appalling Treasury Secretary Mnuchin saying he still planned to attend MBS's showcase "Davos in the Desert" investment conference.

Gangster to gangster, Trump made clear that the profits from arms sales to Saudi Arabia are paramount, not mentioning the kingdom's past rescue of his failing real estate empire. The genocidal impact of those weapons on the people of Yemen was supposed to remain mostly hidden.

The arrangement came apart only when the series of blatant lies coming from Riyadh collapsed, with each new version exposing the fraud of the previous one. It's not that anyone actually believed, or was even expected to believe, that Khashoggi had left the embassy, or had been accidentally killed in a "fistfight"

during some kind of "rogue operation" - rather, governments and media outlets were expected to *pretend* to believe it. The bumbling character of the coverup by a regime that's not accustomed to having its word questioned, whether internally or in the outside world, made the pretense unsustainable.

One member of the hit team has already been rubbed out, in proper gangland style, in a convenient "traffic accident" shortly after returning home. The rest, we're told, have been fired or arrested. They'll take the fall. Some may be quietly reassigned, others may even wind up permanently disappeared like Jamal Khashoggi. Whether such measures will salvage MBS's international stature as a "modernizing reformer" remains to be worked out inside the kingdom's factional knife wars, and in consultations among global capital's corporate and government mafia dons.

Without trying to unravel the geopolitics of all this, we do need to put MBS in a certain historical context. He's another in a considerable line of figures lauded in the West as promising reformers, or modernizers, or moderate bulwarks

against "extremism." It may be hard to remember now, but Bashar al-Asad was one. Saddam Hussein was another. For a time, Moammar Qaddafi was a third. The brutal Egyptian dictator al-Sisi has that status even now...and Turkey's autocratic strongman Erdogan is rehabilitating his own tattered image in the wake of the Khashoggi murder.

One way or another, these so-called reformers often outlive their usefulness and become disposable. Whether that happens to MBS himself is not certain, given Saudi Arabia's oil, its massive international investment and financial reach, and its strategic centrality in the war drive against Iran.

We shall see about the ultimate fallout. But we need to recognize that in their embrace of MBS and others like him, Western powers and U.S. imperialism above all make themselves willing accomplices - actually partners - in horrific repression and murder before, during and after the fact.

[Solidarity](#)

October 23, 2018

Bolsonaro's Most Dangerous Supporters

27 October 2018, by Aldo Cordeiro Sauda, Benjamin Fogel

The first round of Brazil's elections saw the neo-fascist candidate Jair Bolsonaro come within four points of victory. Between Bolsonaro and victory however stands The Workers Party's (PT) candidate Fernando Haddad. [20] He has less than two weeks to stop Bolsonaro, after coming second with only 29 percent of the vote. Moreover Bolsonaro's Social Liberal Party (PSL) went from political irrelevance to become the second-largest party in Brazil overnight. It is no exaggeration to say that Brazilian democracy itself is at stake.

Even if Haddad manages to pull off a last-minute victory, in the polarized climate of Brazilian politics there could still be a hard military coup to follow the soft congressional coup that removed Dilma Rousseff in 2016. Bolsonaro has the backing of significant sectors within the military hostile to the PT.

These sectors, along with many on the Brazilian right, claim the PT is trying to enact "a silent revolution" with the goal of turning Brazil into a communist dictatorship. In order to understand both Bolsonaro's rise and

the danger to democracy he poses, it is vital to examine the anti-PT faction in the military.

Bolsonaro's running mate General Ant nio Mour o was the face of public opposition among senior officers in the armed forces to Dilma Rousseff's Truth Commission. The Commission was given the mission of shining light on crimes committed by the military during the 1964-1985 dictatorship.

Truth Commission

While the military has been more or less hostile to the PT since it was formed, the more virulent and mobilized anti-PT sentiment can be traced to the start of Brazil's Truth Commission in 2012. The commission was carefully constructed by the PT as a decidedly non-partisan affair led mainly by figures of the judiciary rather than civil society. The word "justice" was avoided, so as not to scare the generals.

It was backed by opposition parties -- including conservative ex-presidents José Sarney, Fernando Collor, and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who all later backed Dilma's impeachment. However, there remains little analysis either in English or Portuguese from the left regarding political divisions within the military and how this influences Brazilian politics. Establishment media like the *Economist* continue to hold delusions that the military has no desire to take power, and would moderate a future Bolsonaro government.

This is profoundly mistaken. The Brazilian military not only represents a threat to Brazilian democracy; it is the location of one of the most powerful far-right factions backing Bolsonaro's rise to power.

The PT and the Military

There is a lingering hatred for Lula and the PT among the military's top brass. An internal faction is openly conspiring to keep any left-leaning government out of power by all means possible. This same faction will play a major role in a future Bolsonaro government. This opposition festers despite the fact that Lula's government heavily increased military spending and expanded its role overseas.

Lula's strategy of appeasement, which mirrored the PT's orientation to Brazil's plutocratic media and big capital, failed. Both retired and active members of the armed forces -- many of whom are today top figures in

the Bolsonaro camp -- publicly came out against the commission and denied torture under the military regime. At the same time, given that the commission wasn't supposed to punish anyone, it ended up strengthening and bringing together anti-PT networks in the armed forces.

The Brazilian military dictatorship, unlike its counterpart in Argentina, was not removed from power through political defeat. Instead, facing increased political opposition, corruption scandals, and economic crisis in the mid-1980s, dictatorship forces opted to carefully manage Brazil's transition to democracy. This ensured that their allies were well positioned within Brazil's new political system and the constitution would protect them from repercussions for the dictatorship's brutal crimes.

To this day, the military has maintained a certain reputation. First, as an independent actor who only intervenes in politics to protect the national interest. Second, among a section of the population, the dictatorship is remembered as a crime- and corruption-free golden age where family values were respected and everyone had a job.

Several high-ranking military officers such as General Sérgio Etchegoyen or General Joaquim Luna e Silva already occupy cabinet positions in Michel Temer's current government. The generals have been using their growing space in the media, especially in Brazil's largest media company Globo, to voice alarmingly anti-democratic sentiments.

For instance General Luiz Rocha Paiva openly called for a coup on Globonews, in order to thwart the PT's "silent revolution." [21] In a disturbing display of naked paranoia, the general spoke about the dangers of a PT electoral victory turning Brazil into a communist country.

Mourão -- who was removed from his post as the head of the Military Command of the South for openly clashing with Rousseff over the truth commission's work -- later took part in a bizarre episode during the 2016 impeachment, in which he appeared on a Youtube clip made by a Masonic

Lodge in Brasília announcing his willingness to support military intervention in order to "maintain stability." [22]

The degree of opposition within the military to the PT has only become clear this year. For instance, the day before the Supreme Court cleared the path for Lula's arrest, army head General Vilas-Boas took to twitter to publicly pressure the judiciary to arrest the former president.

Following his tweets, almost all of Brazil's high military command went online to celebrate the PT's defeat. [23] At the time they were only timidly criticized by a lone justice on the Supreme Court. But the issue has returned to the headlines during the electoral campaign, with the three candidates of the Left -- Fernando Haddad, Ciro Gomes of the PDT, and PSOL's Guilherme Boulos -- denouncing military meddling in civilian affairs.

Lava Jato and the Army

The far right also seems to have closer relations with the Lava Jato investigation than many imagined. In the lead up to the first round of the elections, Judge Sergio Moro, the man who sent Lula to prison, released damaging testimony of a close Lula ally collected months ago in a move clearly designed to enact maximum damage on the PT's election prospects.

Bolsonaro has openly talked about elevating Moro to Brazil's Supreme Court and key Lava Jato judges like Marcelo Bretas even endorsed Bolsonaro openly. Bolsonaro will likely strengthen Lava Jato if elected and use it as a means to criminalize the Left.

Thompson Flores, head of the Southern federal court of appeals responsible for overseeing Lava-Jato anti-corruption operations, was invited by General Mourão to give a lecture at Rio de Janeiro's Military Club. [24] The invite came soon after Flores made headlines for ignoring legal procedures to personally block an

order” issued by a dissenting judge in the court Flores leads” to free Lula. Mourão and Flores claimed during a press conference that the meeting had nothing to do with Lula’s arrest, instead citing what they described as their long-term friendship.

Currently presided over by Mourão, the Military Club was one of the centers of the conspiracy that toppled Brazilian democracy in 1964. In 2014, the day after the truth commission published its report, the club placed an advertisement in Rio de Janeiro’s main paper defending the military dictatorship.

Haiti

Mourão, together with General Augusto Heleno, were Brazil’s top military commanders in its disastrous intervention in Haiti. According to international observers and human rights organizations, they are responsible for massacring dozens of civilians in the slums of Port au Prince in 2006. Now, they stand close to the highest political office in Brazil.

Haiti was thrown into turmoil by Western states in 2004 after the United States, Canada, and France supported the overthrow of Jean Bertrand Aristide’s mildly social-democratic government. After losing the countryside to an insurgency based in neighboring Dominican Republic, Aristide was forced on February 29 into an unmarked plain by American marines. They took over Port au Prince’s international airport and sent Aristide to the Central African Republic against his will. Eventually he was granted exile in South Africa.

Instead of offering solidarity to the deposed leader, Brazil’s left government supported the coup against Haiti’s popularly elected government. The PT government effectively volunteered to occupy Haiti. They were moved in part by the illusion that Brazilian military involvement in United Nations peacekeeping missions would elevate the country to the Security Council. The results were disastrous for both Haiti and Brazilian democracy.

Heleno was met with immediate hostility from Haitians after assuming control of military operations in the island by mid-2004. Pro-Aristide supporters, based in the peripheries of Cite Soleil and Belair, clashed with UN blue helmets in the capital, Port au Prince. The biggest slum in the country, Cite Soleil, was also Aristide’s main power base and the home of his party Fanmi Lavalas. In an attempt to eliminate opposition to the intervention, on July 5 Heleno ordered the execution of the slum’s pro-Aristide community leader Emmanuel “Dread” Wilme. Tens of mostly women and children were killed in the operation.

Video footage of the massacre, collected by human rights observers from the San Francisco Labor Council, which was later aired on Democracy Now!, showed gruesome images of dead Haitians killed under Heleno’s command. According to Seth Donnelly, who went to Cite Soleil the following day and witnessed Dread Wilme’s funeral, the event was widely attended by the traumatized community. [25]

“We found homes, which when we say homes, we are talking basically shacks of wood and tin, in many cases, riddled with machine gun blasts as well as tank fire,” said Donnelly. “The holes in a lot of these homes were too large just to be bullets. They must have been tank-type shells penetrating the homes. We saw a church and a school completely riddled with machine gun blasts.”

The massacre fell very much in line with the Brazilian political discourse of law and order. When asked about the raid, General Heleno, says Donnelly, “initially challenged us, our delegation, as to why were we concerned about the rights of the ‘outlaws,’ the term that he used, and not the ‘legal force.’ He seemed to write off community testimony as being part of community hostility and part of these ‘gang attacks’ on UN forces.”

Estimates say at least twenty-seven Haitians were killed in the raid, mostly young women. Heleno’s response mirrors the Brazilian right’s championing of mass murder in the peripheries as a valid security policy,

claiming that the only good bandit is a dead bandit.

Pressured by the Haitian solidarity movement in the United States, change in MINUSTAH leadership later that month sacked General Heleno. [26] However following a sinister chain of events, his successor, General Urano Bacelar, was found dead three months after substituting Bolsonaro’s current chief adviser in Port Au Prince. While the Brazilian army described it as a “suicide” and avoided an official investigation, Wikileaks cables reveal skepticism towards the hypotheses, possibly linking his death to different conflicts involving the United Nations. [27]

Brazil’s presence on the island was also partially responsible for spreading a cholera epidemic that killed thirty thousand people. Additionally, there were over two thousand accusations of rape leveled against Brazilian soldiers. Racist to its core, the operation was cheered on by the media as an opportunity for the Brazilian army to practice its future occupations of Rio’s favelas, with black Haitians serving as guinea pigs. Out of all the PT’s mistakes that strengthened anti-democratic elements in Brazilian society, Haiti was one of its most disastrous ones.

What’s at Stake

Brazil’s democracy hangs in the balance. Bolsonaro’s candidacy if successful will likely result in bloodshed, mass violence against the Left, and the destruction of what remains of workers’ rights.

Bolsonaro and his allies in the military are openly hostile to democracy. This ugly coalition has concluded that Brazil is impossible to govern democratically and only an authoritarian solution based on a new constitution will be able to return the country to stability.

Bolsonaro seeks to channel popular anger against Brazil’s political system and corrupt political class against democracy itself. While this anti-democratic sentiment has crystallized around opposition to the PT, one of the errors of the PT’s time in

government was its failure to curtail the power of the military.

Bolsonaro's response to Brazil's social and security crisis is open violence. Like Duterte in the Philippines or Sisi in Egypt he promotes a politics that can be reduced to shooting your way

through the country's crisis. In a country where police mass murder is already business as usual, if elected Bolsonaro and his friends in the military coul

d unleash a historic slaughter, the

victims of which won't only be poor black youth in the favelas. It will also include land activists, trade unions, socialists, and LGBT people. In this the murder of Marielle Franco serves as an example of a nightmarish future.

[Jacobin](#)

The scandalous position of the São Paulo forum on Nicaragua

26 October 2018, by **Ernesto Herrera**

More than 400 delegates, guests and observers from 53 countries filled the Palace of Conventions. They were representatives of parties and fronts, many parliamentarians, civil servants, administrators, experts, beneficiaries of a "culture of government".

Tributes were made to Fidel and Chávez, "fathers of Latin American independence and leaders of the progressive currents of the region". There were demands for the freedom for former Brazilian President Lula, a prisoner in Curitiba. And congratulations were given to Andrés Manuel López Obrador's victory in Mexico.

In an energetic tone, Cuba's President-designate, Díaz Canel, warned: "The rise of the right makes it necessary to return to Fidel's ideal". The Brazilian president (overthrown by a coup d'état), Dilma Rousseff, highlighted this legacy: "Fidel watched over his people and, at the same time, he was concerned about the fate of other nations" [28].

Venezuelan President and successor President Nicolás Maduro recited the script: "As long as there is imperialism in the United States, although it is in decline, there will be conspiracy and intrigue against progressive governments." His Bolivian colleague, President Evo Morales, highlighted the main enemy: Donald Trump. The Sahrawi ambassador to Nicaragua, Suleiman Tayeb Ahmed Salem,

proclaimed: "Here we ask for support and we channel the global solidarity of the left."

Meanwhile, far from the amenities of the Palace, the popular insurrection persists in Nicaragua. Students, workers, peasants, intellectuals, doctors, journalists, communities risk their lives without carrying offensive weapons in defence of freedom. The roadblocks, civic strikes and mass demonstrations reaffirm the democratic courage of the people of Sandino.

They are facing the Ortega-Murillo regime. The explosion of terror does not make them kneel. Nor do the paramilitary squadrons. Nor do the hundreds of murders, disappearances, political prisoners. Nor do the invasion of universities and hospitals. Nor do the massacres in Managua, Masaya, León and other cities. Nor does the persecution of former anti-Somozist fighters and guerrilla commanders, founders of the FSLN.

This did not distract Forum delegates. It is only one reactionary operation among many others. They continued to deliberate. Finally, they approved by "consensus" the proposal of the working group. [29]

The delegates accept this outrageous position. The Havana Declaration does not admit any nuances: "We vigorously reject the interventionist policy of the United States in the

internal affairs of Sandinista Nicaragua, a country in which the formula that has been applied by U.S. imperialism to countries that do not respond to its hegemonic interests is being implemented, causing violence, destruction and death through the manipulation and destabilizing action of the terrorist groups of the *golpista* right, which is indispensable for the continuation of the process of social transformations promoted by the FSLN from the government presided over by Commander Daniel Ortega and which has notably reduced poverty and social inequality in that sister country." (Translated by *International Viewpoint* from the site of the [São Paulo Forum](#).)

In one paragraph the "reasons of state" of the progressive camp. Like the armour of a friendly regime. This is called "internal affairs". The political and economic causes of the "current crisis" are irrelevant. Even less so its consequences: the degradation of freedoms and social destruction.

"Reasons of state" is the excuse of accomplices. It legitimizes the criminal squadrons of the dictatorship. In fact it endorses the extra-judicial death penalty as a systematic method of political and social repression. It disregards the many democratic breaches behind the popular rebellion.

In Havana, the convergence of bureaucracies and political

opportunisms has crossed a red line. The “ideological affinities” of the counter-revolutionary side once again bury the values of humanism in solidarity, internationalism and socialism. No confusion.

As the central force of the Foro de São Paulo, as the “historical reference of anti-imperialism”, the Castro leadership bears the greatest responsibility for this by once again imposing its “revolutionary authority” within the perimeter of their “partner forces”. This time it is to align them with state terrorism in Nicaragua. But when it comes to making strategic decisions (political, economic, diplomatic) that suit the particular “geopolitical” interests of the State Party, it forgets its “partner forces”.

Curious. Actually, indecent. Because the majority of parties and fronts represented at the Foro de São Paulo in their own countries operate a multi-party system, a pattern of elections, separation of powers, institutionalized governability, freedom of the press and respect for human rights. In other words, they strictly adhere to the basic rules of bourgeois “formal democracy”.

A clear expression of progressive double talk. Indefensible

July 1992, Managua

Third meeting of the São Paulo Forum. The FSLN was in opposition, Violeta Chamorro president.

Among the main guests was Ernest Mandel. The Sandinista press commented on his intervention: “In front of representatives of the various Latin American and European political parties, Mandel raised issues that did not seem to be on the agenda. By recommending “untying the political knots that tie ideas, the testimony of one of the most famous Marxists of the 20th century” served “to open a little the curtains of uncertainty, so that the sun enters, perhaps for the first time, the Latin American left.” [30]

In two paragraphs he summarized revolutionary principles, socialist

ideas, a “programme” of struggle:

“The principal task of socialist and communists is to try to restore the credibility of socialism in the consciousness of millions of men and women. This will only be possible if our starting point is the immediate needs and concerns of these masses. Any alternative model of political economy must include these proposals.”

“Such proposals must give the most concrete and efficient aid to the masses to fight successfully for their needs. We can formulate these in near biblical terms: eliminate hunger, clothe the naked, give a dignified life to everyone, save the lives of those who die for lack of proper medical attention, generalize free access to culture including the elimination of illiteracy, universalize democratic freedoms, human rights and eliminate repressive violence in all its forms.”

(Ernest Mandel “Socialism and the Future” *International Viewpoint* No 234, 14 September 1992.)

One thing is obvious. The “ideas” presented by Mandel were not “off the agenda”. They proposed actions from an anti-capitalist perspective; which was no longer the concern of the then united left.

The curtains remained closed and the sun did not shine through. Strategic uncertainty paved the way for “political realism”.

Ten years later, Roberto Regalado, a member of the working group and leader of the Communist Party of Cuba, described the 1992 Managua meeting as the maximum expression of a “childhood crisis”. The turning point, from which the definitions of “anti-imperialist” and “anti-neoliberal” would be imposed. Without the pretention of being a new International with a socialist agenda but on the contrary, a pluralist forum, with its head anchored in the management of the state. [78]

But it is unlikely that this phenomenon will take shape, for reasons of cost and productivity: “Faced with wage increases, companies based in China can automate their production lines

(as subcontractors Foxcon do) and those considering leaving coastal areas have a wide range of choices: Western China, Southeast Asia, Bangladesh and India are all possible destinations. A comparison by the World Bank shows that, with the exception of Ethiopia, African countries have lower productivity than China and Vietnam in labour-intensive production. An assessment of unit labour costs concludes that they are higher in Africa than in Indonesia, Bangladesh and Vietnam. “À» [79]

Particularly as Chinese companies are far from being an example in the preservation of the environment or compliance with legislation. There are regular reports of violations of laws, and some companies are involved in smuggling on an industrial scale, particularly for logs. Chinese companies can easily compete with the Western multinationals Shell, Areva and Trafigura, which, in a few years, have managed to transform entire regions into industrial waste bins.

Debt Made in China

China continues to boast of its contribution to the development of infrastructure in African countries. These infrastructures are above all an opportunity for African elites to enrich themselves and do not necessarily correspond to the economic and social needs of the populations, particularly when it comes to building stadiums, conference centres or presidential palaces as in Burundi, Mauritania, Sudan or Mozambique. Above all, however, these investments considerably increase the debts of African countries. In most cases, they are secured by the country’s assets, which may be mines, ports, mining productions or oil concessions. The recent falls in commodity prices have therefore automatically increased the debt burden of African countries.

The result: *The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that five sub-Saharan African countries are over-indebted and that nine others may soon join them. Kenya’s debt has recently passed the 5 trillion shillings*

mark[43 billion euros] and 72% of this amount is owed to China. This spring, Moody's downgraded Kenya's rating. The situation is also critical in Djibouti. Its debt is equivalent to 84% of its GDP and Beijing holds 82%. Zambia and Congo-Brazzaville, for their part, have taken out opaque loans from Chinese companies, the details of which have not yet been disclosed. [...]

Angola's debt to China is \$25 billion. The country's oil resources are used as a guarantee. In 2008, China granted a \$6 billion loan to the Democratic Republic of Congo in exchange for the right to operate several copper and cobalt mines. In Guinea, Beijing provided a \$20 billion credit line to the government, which enabled it to obtain aluminium concessions. [81] Africa's place in this system is essentially as a port and particularly concentrated on the East coast, hence the importance of Djibouti's role.

Djibouti occupies a key position in the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, a real crossroads between the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Middle East and Africa, turning its strategic position into a real trade. This small state now

has five military bases: the oldest is the French base, which hosts Spanish and German troops; Italy, Japan and the United States each have one; and the latest is China, which can accommodate nearly 10,000 troops. This base, presented by China as its contribution to the fight against piracy off the Somali coast, plays a key role in securing one of the most important shipping routes for the Chinese economy. A road that should become even more important in the future.

China's military policy in Africa is not limited to Djibouti, as evidenced by the first "China-Africa Forum on Defence and Security" which, according to Ministry of Defence spokesman Ren Guoqiang, aims to "promote the building of a common destiny for China and Africa and to meet the needs of Africa's new security situations and China-Africa defence cooperation." [82]

Beijing is already the second largest contributor, after the United States, to "peacekeeping" operations, an essentially financial contribution, even though China has recently set up an 8,000-strong regiment capable of intervening quickly under UN auspices.

Talking about the military also means talking about arms sales and, in this sector, Chinese policy remains as harmful as that of the Western powers. Indeed, the middle empire does not hesitate to sell its weapons, especially small arms (those that cause the most casualties), to all governments that request it, flooding Africa with cheap assault rifles that only prolong wars, and make them much more costly in human lives.

The policies of Western powers, such as those of China or other emerging countries such as the In de, do not differ fundamentally from each other. China's history, which has not had a history of slavery and colonialism, and the fact that it shares with Africa the vicissitudes of poor countries, make the discourse of Chinese officials attractive. But China has come to be a leading imperialist power and now what Chinese leaders have in common with most African leaders is authoritarian and corrupt governance, exploitation and oppression of populations and destruction of the environment. o

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Strength and Contradictions of the Chinese Economy

22 October 2018, by **Au Loong-Yu**

Juan Ferre: The U.S. government has repeatedly threatened China with a trade war and has implemented tariffs on Chinese products. What impact has this had?

Au Loong Yu: Since the trade war has just begun, it is difficult to evaluate its full impact, although the affected sectors now see the damage. There are already reports about ships carrying U.S. soybeans roaming in the open sea because they can no longer sell the products to their Chinese

importers, thanks to the rising U.S. tariffs. The mayor of Los Angeles has warned that the trade war may result in a 20% drop in trade volumes. However, we in Hong Kong are enjoying cheap cherries from the United States, since these products have been diverted to Hong Kong after Trump's declaration of the trade war.

While Trump chiefly targets China's industrial and technological products, China mainly targets the United States' agricultural products. Since the two sides are escalating the war,

previously unaffected products are now suddenly falling onto the list for retaliation. Previously, for instance, Apple was not affected by Trump's list of targets. But the latest list now includes Chinese semiconductors, and so in the end Apple may be affected, even if the iPhone remains unaffected.

Considering the size of the trade war, it will be quite scary if Trump continues to implement his plan. It reminds us of the United States' escalation of tariffs in 1930, which triggered a tariff war and in turn

made world trade shrink by more than 60%. The rest of the story is common knowledge. Although we are always skeptical of so-called free trade, replacing it with a trade war like this is even more problematic.

But a far-right populist such as Trump is unpredictable. He may change course later. Surely there is also a fair chance that he may not. On top of this is the fact that he has multiple intentions and goals and it is unclear which is his top priority.

Trump's administration may have two aims: To drastically cut the trade deficit and to block the Made in China 2025 strategy [to increase substantially the production of high-tech commodities]. The former aim is hard to achieve if the United States remains a country with very low savings. Even if Trump succeeds in cutting the deficit with China, it only means other countries will move in to fill the gap and the trade deficit will remain. Saving jobs is an even harder goal to achieve. When trade shrinks, the first thing to go will be jobs. Perhaps in the end jobs are not Trump's priority at all. Trump is clear about bringing down China's plan to further modernize its technology. But using such an all-out general offensive such as a trade war to achieve such a specific target may be a wasteful means of attack. Not long ago, Trump's direct crack down on ZTE Corporation proved much more effective.

If they launch a trade war against each other, it is like a two-headed snake fighting itself: Neither head can hide from the other side's attack.

Perhaps Trump favors a high-profile and grand attack. Yet this kind of trade war is going to hurt both sides. Some time ago, Handel Jones wrote a book entitled *Chinamerica* to depict the close economic relations between the two countries. If they launch a trade war against each other, it is like a two-headed snake fighting itself: Neither head can hide from the other side's attack. GM cars, for instance, sold more in China than in the United States. According to a 2015 JP Morgan report, technology companies on the S&P 500, particularly component makers, heavily depend on China for

their revenue.

What is more dangerous is the nationalism and xenophobia trumped up by Trump. Trump makes a big fuss over the trade deficit with China. It is laughable to talk about "national economy" now without heavy qualification. In actuality, half of China's exports come from foreign companies investing in China. A trade war of this scale is going to hurt a lot of Western companies as well. Twenty-first-century capitalism has not only a global market but also a global assembly line, at least for many goods. Whereas before a telephone was made domestically, wholly in a national economy, nowadays an iPhone is not made in China but assembled there. According to one report, an iPhone that is assembled in China and costs US\$179 actually consists of US\$172 of components imported from outside China.

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What is going to happen depends largely on what Trump most wants. There are reports about differences within the White House. While U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin seeks to cut the trade deficit with China, the hawkish trade representative, Robert Lighthizer, wants a structural policy change on the side of China. This confusion surely adds to the great uncertainties that both countries and the whole world now face.

If in the end stopping China's rise is the priority, then it is a historic rupture with previous U.S. China policy, and surely even more scary, although from this perspective the trade war may make sense "to ignite a huge economic crisis in China."

In recent decades, China has struggled to foster a domestic market and, thereby, reduce its dependency on exports. Has there been any progress so far in this regard? And how does this rebalancing effort relate to the piling up of debt?

The Chinese stock market's sharp fall in 2015 could have triggered an economic crisis had the state failed to come to its rescue, again (the last huge rescue was during the 2008-9 crisis). Yet the basic problems of these crises have not been fixed at all. We mean the long-term economic imbalances brought about by the particular growth strategy of devoting an incredibly high portion of national income to capital investment while suppressing consumption. If we look at the share of final consumption in China's GDP, it is now a bit higher than in previous years following the government's attempt to stimulate domestic demand, but it still stood at only 39% in 2016.

This is not only much lower than the world average (and much lower than low-income countries), but is also significantly lower than its own previous record of 48% back in 1960. Hence, China suffers from a typical economic imbalance of overaccumulation and overproduction. More than 10 years ago, government officials already frankly admitted that this was compelling them to seek overseas investment to solve such an imbalance.

As for exports, according to a World Bank report in 2018, the contribution of net exports to GDP growth was negative in both 2015 and 2016. In 2017, it turned positive but still only reached 0.6% while real GDP growth was 6.7%. Its projection for this and the next year is 0.1%, and it is 0% for 2020. With the trade war now underway, one may doubt if the projection needs even more downward adjustment. With net exports declining, so is trade surplus.

But there is no efficient income-generating engine to replace the falling contribution from net exports.

GDP growth is now only half of what it was a dozen years ago. And GDP growth itself might be deceptive because it records all investment, yet not all investment will generate income in the end amid general overaccumulation. The ghost town is a typical example of ineffective investment, which in the end only brings in more debt that cannot be paid without government bailouts.

This has resulted in ever-growing total debt. The situation is becoming more dangerous.

The IMF published a report in December 2017 [83] and identified three “major tensions” in China’s financial system that could derail the economy, and debt is one of them. This was followed by a report from the Bank of International Settlements in March [84] warning that China’s debt now surpasses an amount that could lead to a system fallout [85].

It put China’s total debt at 256% of GDP. This is comparable to developed countries but exceptionally high for a developing country like China. Also, the structure of debt is different because China’s debt is mostly owed by state-owned enterprises and local government. The upside is that foreign debt remains small, although one must immediately add that there are always hidden foreign debts, and no one knows how much it is until the crisis breaks out.

China’s bureaucratic capitalism necessarily carries with it a global expansionist logic, firstly in economic terms and then increasingly also in political and military terms.

Other sources put the total debt as high as 342%. This seems to include debts between banks, while the former figure excludes them. Also, if one factors in the deficit in the social security fund, then it makes the total sum of debts bigger. The strong state control does allow the party to contain sharp crisis by throwing money from helicopters, but this only lays the ground for more debt, and debt must be paid in the end. When the time of reckoning comes, the party state will have to once again dispossess even more people to find money for the debt. But the inconvenient fact is that this also serves the purpose of further antagonizing the people who today are still largely apolitical.

In your book *China’s Rise: Strength and Fragility*, you give an account of the impressive growth of Chinese transnational corporations up to 2007. In the 10 years since, the pace of Chinese foreign investment in Latin America, in Africa and elsewhere

has increased even more. Can we speak of China as a new imperialism? If so, does it have specific characteristics? How does the One Belt One Road initiative fit into this project?

When China became the second-largest source of outbound FDI in the world in 2016, this also meant that China had significant overseas interests to defend, particularly so since its investment emphasis was on infrastructure, which takes a long time to generate profits.

To achieve the goal, the government necessarily ignores its officially stated policy of noninterference in other countries’ internal affairs so that it can effectively promote its share in the world market while raising its status in the global value chain. The increasing tension between the United States and China while the latter is emerging as a major global power must also be considered. This tension compels China to strengthen its ties with other countries, especially its neighbors, hence the BRI (Brazil, Russia and India). Surely, the narrowing of the domestic market and the excess of idle capital also compels the bureaucracy to export capital through the BRI projects.

China’s bureaucratic capitalism necessarily carries with it a global expansionist logic, first in economic terms and then increasingly also in political and military terms. If one measures the degree of monopoly and the fusion between financial and industrial capital—made possible through bureaucratic capitalism, and also the degree of outward investment—then surely China already carries strong elements of modern imperialism, that is, a kind of imperialism that, with the backing of military power and surplus capital, seeks to dominate weaker countries but does not necessarily seek direct political domination over them as it did before.

This also explains the change of foreign policy from Deng Xiaoping’s *tao guang yang hui* (meaning “not to show off one’s capability but to keep a low profile”) to Xi Jinping’s more assertive stand in relation to the United States and Japan, known as *fen*

fa you wei (meaning “striving for achievement”).

But it is important to identify the actual stage China is now passing through. If we are simply satisfied with putting name tags on a complicated and crazily rapid-changing country with such a long history and then putting it on par with all the other imperialist countries, then one may make a big mistake. There are two factors we must consider. First, it is the colonial legacy that still weighs heavily on the party state.

If we say China is imperialist, then it is the first imperialist country that is formerly semicolonial, and one that has been repeatedly invaded by multiple great powers many times throughout a century. This necessarily makes Chinese people particularly sensitive to national self-defense. One must differentiate this legitimate concern from the party’s aggressive expansionism.

If we say China is imperialist, then it is the first imperialist country that is formerly semi-colonial, and one which has been repeatedly invaded by multiple great powers many times throughout a century.

Another facet of this colonial legacy is the Taiwan and Hong Kong issue. The United States sees Taiwan as its protectorate. I do not support the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) stance on Taiwan, since we believe in the latter’s right to self-determination, which the CCP denies. However, even the United States acknowledges that Taiwan is part of “China” while recognizing the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as China’s sole legitimate government. The United States thus more or less acknowledges the legitimacy of China’s agenda of national unification.

Although Taiwan’s status as a U.S. protectorate protects it from the CCP’s aggression, it also constitutes a foreign threat, on top of the fact that many Chinese see this as an obstacle for China’s reunification with Taiwan—which in itself is not an illegitimate aspiration. It only becomes illegitimate when it is forced on the Taiwanese people. There are

also many Chinese and a minority section of Taiwanese who oppose the CCP's position of seeing unification through war as an option, but who support unification through equal bilateral talks. We need to differentiate all these legitimate concerns from the CCP's ruling interest. Although many oppose the CCP's aggression toward Taiwan, it is important that they not be seen as welcoming a U.S. intervention.

A second colonial legacy is Hong Kong. Although it has already been returned to the PRC for 20 years, a significant part of its population—especially its middle class—is still more pro-West than pro-PRC. Not only that, but there is also the more problematic influence enjoyed by international capital and Western hegemonic powers over the city.

In comparison, all other imperialist countries are free of a colonial legacy but rather benefit from their imperialist past (contributing to both their sharp and soft power). China's rise is still burdened by its colonial legacy, which acts against its interest. This asymmetry defines our choices of different tactics when dealing with the U.S.-China rivalry.

Surely China is an accomplice with imperialist countries over the management of the global value chain, but it is still a minor player in comparison.

China's expansion is increasingly imperialistic, but we also need to take into account the fact that China is deeply contradictory, possessing a logic of expansion but itself being checked by its dependent accumulation—both dependent on the West's market but also its technology, hence it must accept a low-value-added status in the global value chain. Surely, China is an accomplice with imperialist countries over the management of the global value chain, but it is still a minor player in comparison. This asymmetry needs to be considered as well if we want to develop a wise enough tactic for dealing with Taiwan issue.

To what degree has private capital grown in the Chinese economy?

In terms of GDP share, and of the share of fixed asset investments and tax payments, the private sector today accounts for 50% to 60% of the national total. But it is difficult to know the details, which are confusing. The category of "shareholding companies," for instance, has witnessed a huge growth both in terms of assets and GDP share. This is because many state-owned enterprises have been quietly privatized by party officials since the 1990s and turned into "shareholding companies."

These kind of companies have very complicated ownership, including both private and public shareholders, and the secrets are carefully guarded. Adding to the confusion is the fact that the category of "sole proprietor" actually includes a lot of small capitalists, since the law allows sole proprietors to hire not more than seven employees. A few years ago, the liberals warned of the new trend of *guojinmintui*, or the state sector squeezing out the private sector.

This is a heated debate, and since there are different kinds and levels of measurement, there is no simple answer.

In terms of the share of GDP, and of the share of fixed asset investments and tax payments, the private sector today accounts for between 50% to 60% of the national total.

But one must be aware that behind the figures, there is also the issue of which sector carries more real weight in the economy. The state sector controls all the commanding heights of the economy and also all urban land, which gives it much more power than its nominal figure of GDP share may suggest. For instance, the state sector is more likely to be price setter than price taker.

You have characterized the Chinese class and political system as "bureaucratic capitalism," meaning that the Communist Party bureaucracy uses its position in government to obtain economic profits through capitalist means. Do you see a deepening of this pattern under the rule of Xi Jinping? Do the many contradictions in the short and

mid-term add some uncertainty to this definition?

By "bureaucratic capitalism," I don't just mean that the "bureaucracy uses its position to obtain profits through capitalist means." To be more precise, I would rather say that China is a kind of state-capitalist system in which the bureaucracy fuses the state's power of coercion and the power of capital in its hands. In many countries in the world, a lot of government officials are corrupt, and in countries like Pakistan and Egypt, one sees the military-run companies as the Chinese do. However, I argue that only China can reach such a level of fusion, from top to bottom, and from medical care to education and to all other sectors.

China is a kind of state capitalist system in which the bureaucracy fuses the state's power of coercion and the power of capital in its hands.

This unique situation is the result of a unique trajectory since China's 1949 revolution. Bureaucratic capitalism has actually strengthened under Xi, and the risk of economic and political crisis seems to be growing. This is also why the liberals have been sounding the alarm about *guojinmintui*. Probably the argument is not that correct, but it does reflect one important economic watershed: Previously, when the market was big enough and when the party was quickly privatizing the state sector, the private bourgeoisie enjoyed the best of their time. Now, however, with the saturation of the market and the completion of privatization, they find that they have a much smaller space to make money, and may even be squeezed by the state sector. Hence their discontent. Today, small and medium-size private business is in bad shape, especially because the state banks continue to deny them loans while continuing to throw money at the state sector.

Let's now talk about the situation in mainland China. After the 2008 global financial crisis, there was an uptick in labor conflicts, with some landmark struggles like the Tonghua anti-privatization struggle in 2009 and the Honda strike in Guangdong in 2010. The government has responded with

increased repression. Was it able to quell the labor unrest? Are there any limits to what this state repression can accomplish?

For many years there has been no labor movement, only labor actions. Many of these were spontaneous strikes. I don't think the authorities can do away with spontaneous strikes. They know it is quite impossible when one considers two things: First, although working conditions have improved over time, they are still very harsh, and this necessarily breeds

revolt. Second, now the second and third generations of migrant workers themselves are more aware of their rights and have higher expectations, which necessarily drives them to action from time to time. Yet most of the strikes do not lead to any form of organization, not only because of the repression but also because the migrant workers are not yet ready.

The authorities today can be harsher on spontaneous strikes, but their main agenda, rather than aiming to eradicate all strikes, is to make sure that the workers remain unorganized,

hence the crackdown on labor NGOs. This is something they can easily achieve. But the unstoppable spontaneous strikes, even if they are unlikely to lead to organization, are still a good thing in themselves, since they may raise workers' awareness and self-confidence.

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Chinese geopolitics: continuities, inflections, uncertainties

22 October 2018, by Pierre Rousset

The conflict between the United States, the established power, and China, a rising power, today largely structures world geopolitics. The deployment of Chinese power operates in three distinct and interdependent historical and geostrategic spaces:

The Far East/North Pacific. A privileged area for the imperial ambitions of the United States in the nineteenth century, against Japan. The present Korean conflict is part of this historical space with, in particular, two major changes: the effacement of European powers; China's own role.

"The March to the West". Initiated by Xi Jinping and embodied by the new "Silk Roads", it covers the whole of Eurasia, the Middle and Near East, North-East and North Africa. Symbolically, the new Chinese imperialism is pursuing in reverse the paths of the initial expansion, within the "Old World", of the traditional European imperialisms.

The global space. Capitalist China has become in recent years a major player on all continents and in (almost) all fields, diplomatic and economic. The ambition that is

affirmed is global, including the influence of the political and cultural model of which China is, in the eyes of Xi Jinping, the bearer.

Seen from China, the era in which the European powers shaped the planet was only a short parenthesis before history returned to its "normal" course - namely, the centrality of China. This Sinocentric vision which prevails in China provides a solid cultural base for the expansionism of the new Chinese imperialism - in the same way as the Eurocentric vision did for the conquering imperialisms two centuries ago. It is a question of "projecting" "Chinese civilization", as was done yesterday with "European civilization".

For Xi Jinping, the twenty-first century will become the "Chinese Century."

I. The geopolitics of East Asia

As soon as he came to power, Xi Jinping's main objective was to assert Chinese hegemony in East Asia, in every sphere: economic and financial, diplomatic and political, military. No

international expansion without consolidation of its regional power.

Chinese influence can assert itself at its northern borders (Mongolia), but it is limited by Russian power (Siberia), while it is challenged, to the west, by India, the competition in the sub-continent being stiff (especially in Sri Lanka).

Xi Jinping has abandoned the defensive strategic conceptions that prevailed during the Maoist era: any invader would face a people's war in the vastness of China; at the time the land army and the capacity for popular mobilization were key. The strategic conceptions are now offensive: to ensure the expansion of the new imperialism, the sea and the navy have become key - both for general reasons (every great power must ensure its maritime presence in the world) and specific ones: China has an immense coastline and must ensure secure access to the Pacific and Indian Oceans. This is not the case today. From the Korean Peninsula to the Malaysian Peninsula, a series of archipelagos (Japanese, Filipino, Indonesian) block the way. The straits that lead to the open sea are under

close US surveillance.

The maritime space that is called the China Sea (a term that the other coastal countries reject) is from this point of view vital for Beijing. One of Xi Jinping's first strategic decisions was to take military control of its southern part, decreeing that it was a "domestic sea" under Chinese authority.

Three phases can be distinguished in the battle for control of the China Sea.

The conquering phase. Beijing benefited from the temporary paralysis of Washington. Obama wanted to refocus US power by making Asia-Pacific his "pillar," but he remained a prisoner of the Middle Eastern quagmire. Shortly after Trump's election, Washington withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a multilateral agreement in formation, leaving the field even more free for Chinese ambitions.

Under these conditions, Beijing was able to use all the levers at its disposal to attach to itself and/or neutralize the countries bordering the South China Sea: overwhelming military power, objective economic dependence, financial incentives, political influence (the model of dirigiste and authoritarian capitalist development is considered appropriate by various regimes of the region) ...

Beijing has built from scratch seven artificial islands that today house important facilities (airstrips, ground-to-air and anti-ship missile batteries, fortified hangars, radar, communications jamming systems...). Together they constitute a coherent complex, controlling the approaches from all the cardinal points. H-6K strategic bombers (with nuclear capability) have already landed there, a political gesture with the B-52s of the United States in mind.

The militarization of the South China Sea is effective, to the benefit of China. Certainly, Beijing cannot oppose the passage of the US Seventh Fleet and block international transit, but Washington cannot "push back" the Chinese presence without incurring a conflict at a very high

level.

Beijing has not stopped there. The regime has claimed "historical" possessions further north, actively challenging Japan's control over the uninhabited Senkaku/Diaoyu micro-archipelago (dispatching warships and planes to the area, creating aerial exclusion zones...), testing both Tokyo's means and US determination.

The counter-offensive of the United States. Trump finally picked up the gauntlet in the military field, using the North Korean question for this purpose: the threat of intervention (including nuclear), the installation of THAAD anti-missile batteries in South Korea (which neutralize most of the nuclear arsenal deployed in mainland China), strengthening the Seventh Fleet and use of the Jeju base in the south of the peninsula ... China has been effectively pushed back militarily from this part of the North Pacific. It has long remained politically and diplomatically marginalized in relation to the Korean crisis that has been played out between Washington, Pyongyang and Seoul.

The new configuration of the regional conflict. Washington wants today to pursue its advantage. For Defence Secretary Jim Mattis, the conflict is crystallized around three issues: Taiwan, the South China Sea and trade. In talking about trade, he is sending a message to the countries of the region (from the Philippines to Thailand): Washington will not leave unanswered Beijing's desire for regional economic and financial hegemony; but with what means can he "push back" this hegemony? The USA has been ceaselessly repeating that the South China Sea is an international waterway, sending the Seventh Fleet to sail up close to zones that are considered by Beijing to be particularly sensitive; but what more can they do in the present context?

Beijing's ambassador to the United Kingdom, Liu Xiaoming, has just recalled the position of his government. [86]. To enter the South China Sea is, except around the edges, to enter Chinese territorial waters. Ships that do so must follow the Law of the Sea (a UN convention) and the

corresponding Chinese laws - to announce in advance their "innocent" passage or to obtain permission. On the international level, however, the South China Sea is not considered in that way. Passage is free and does not depend on the good will of Xi Jinping.

Besides this question, it seems likely that the next part of the China/United States match in East Asia will be played out on the Taiwan question.

Why Taiwan?

International diplomacy is still governed by the One China principle. When Taipei (capital of the Republic of China, Taiwan) sat on the UN Security Council, it represented all of China (including the mainland). When it was replaced by Beijing in 1971, this principle was maintained. Taiwan is supposed to be just a Chinese province.

In reality, the Taiwan question is complex. The retreat to Taiwan (formerly known as Formosa) of the Guomindang (GMD) troops fleeing the Red Army in 1949 was experienced as an invasion by the population of the island (which had undergone Japanese colonization). The dictatorship of Chiang Kai-shek was exercised against it, for the benefit of the mainlanders. And then, a lot of water has passed under the bridges.

The regime of the People's Republic has become a particular form of bureaucratic capitalism, which was already the case of the Republic of China. The CCP and the GMD (Mao and Chiang having died) began to work closely together, which allowed Beijing to profoundly influence the political processes in Taiwan - and which sparked off a conflagration, triggering the "Sunflower" student and civic movement and leading to the election, in January 2016, of a president with well-known independentist convictions, Tsai Ing-wen. For Beijing, the principle of "One China" is being questioned, despite the caution of the new president.

Trump immediately telephoned Tsai to congratulate her on her election - which China denounced as a provocation. Washington had broken

off official diplomatic relations with Taipei in the early 1970s, but has nonetheless developed informal relations, endorsed as early as 1979 in the Taiwan Relations Act. However, to the fury of Beijing, after adoption by the US Congress, a new law came into effect on March 16th, 2018: the Taiwan Travel Act. It authorizes unprecedented levels of exchanges between members of the two governments and contains obligations, including US military support for the island. Just to rub a bit more salt in Xi Jinping's wounds, the hawk Mike Pompeo, former director of the CIA, very favourable to Taiwan, was appointed US Secretary of State (equivalent to a Minister of Foreign Affairs).

The government is conducting a sustained campaign to isolate Taipei diplomatically, using carrots (promise of investments) and sticks (threats of economic retaliation). Recently, Burkina Faso and the Dominican Republic announced that they were breaking off diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Swaziland remains the only African country to maintain them - there are only 18 states left in the world which do so, including the Vatican, Pacific and Latin American nations (Honduras, Guatemala, Kiribati). In addition, 31 measures were announced by Beijing in March to give Taiwanese settling in China a status and benefits similar to Chinese living on the mainland. This initiative provoked strong reactions in Taipei, where the government is studying its own countermeasures to limit the brain drain.

Xi Jinping is today taking unprecedented action against Taipei. For example, airlines that indicate Taiwan as a country on the map of their destinations are threatened with being banned from China (the Australian airline Qantas gave in to the pressure). On April 23rd, China conducted the largest naval manoeuvres in its history - 48 ships, 76 aircraft and more than 10,000 soldiers - with the *Liaoning*, its second aircraft carrier (the first one built in China), in the Taiwan Strait, a spectacular gesture "to protect the sovereignty and the territorial integrity" of the motherland.

Taiwan also conducted its own military exercises on its east coast, during which President Tsai Ing-wen was present: "We have every confidence and determination to defend our country and our democracy," she tweeted, while taking pains to make clear to journalists that this should not be seen as a response to the PRC's manoeuvres.

Washington envisages doing the same, thus ensuring the Republic of China of its protection. If it turns words into action, this zone will become a source of permanent military tension between the two powers, with all the dangers that implies. Unlike the Korean crisis, the stand-off here is direct. However, Xi Jinping cannot compromise on this issue. The ideological cement of his power is great power nationalism, including the invocation of the sacredness of the territorial integrity of "One China" - not to mention the fact that the island is located at the heart of the strategic maritime space whose control appears to him to be vital.

Hong Kong

Taiwan is a *de facto* independent country, Hong Kong is not - yet the "One China" principle is one of the aspects of the crisis the territory is going through. A former British colony, it was "given back" to China by the United Kingdom in 1997. It has become (like Macao) a Special Administrative Region (SAR). The joint declaration made at the time provided that for at least 50 years it would enjoy a special status under the formula "one country, two systems".

According to the joint declaration, Hong Kong could not have an independent defence and diplomatic policy, but the economic and legal system should remain unchanged, as well as a thousand peculiarities: left-hand drive, international sports team, internet domain, etc. Deng Xiaoping probably thought that in 50 years "at least" the "two systems" would merge smoothly together, the People's Republic having completed its capitalist mutation. The problem is that Xi-style capitalism is not the one imagined by Deng.

On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the handover, Xi Jinping indicated, via the Chinese Foreign Ministry, that the Sino-British Declaration of 1984, laying the foundations for the 1997 handover, was "no longer relevant". Beijing sees it as only a "historical document" that "has no concrete meaning" and is "not at all binding". [87] At the whim of Xi, Chinese laws will apply to Hong Kong in the future.

This is a perspective that is coming up against a lot of resistance in the population of Hong Kong, whose civil and political rights (multi-party system, freedom of international ties, independence of the judiciary and of trade unions...) are threatened. These resistances can be considered as being on the left, but also on the right (xenophobia against "Chinese immigration" coming from the continent).

Xi Jinping has warned against "unacceptable" interference with his authority and evoked national security: "Any attempt to undermine the sovereignty and security of China, to challenge the power of the central government and the authority of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, or to use Hong Kong to carry out infiltration and sabotage activities against the mainland represents an act that crosses the red line", sharp terms that he had never up to then utilised [88]. Accusations of "infiltration" and "sabotage" are also being brandished against Taiwan.

In Hong Kong there are associations which defend workers' rights and conditions - in the territory as well as on the continent - as well as the headquarters of networks that carry out regional solidarity activities. However, political repression is being felt. Twenty-seven-year-old Edward Leung, a figurehead of the independence movement (a position that is highly disputed on the left), has just been sentenced to six years in prison. "One China" here means that neither the idea of independence nor the previous state of autonomy will be tolerated. Many freedoms are being suspended - without the business community and the multinationals established in the territory feeling

concerned, of course.

Beijing and the Korean crisis

From a general point of view, South Korea is much more important than the North for China; on the economic level obviously, but beyond that. However, the fate of the North Korean regime will have considerable implications. If it collapses, the US military could camp on the Chinese border - a perspective that is obviously unacceptable for Beijing. The outcome of the negotiations launched on June 12th, 2018 in Singapore will have strategic implications for Beijing. At the height of the crisis, in 2016-2017, the Xi leadership was not able to take significant initiatives, although it has always been able to "modulate" according to its interests the UN sanctions against Pyongyang (for which it voted), which is not a negligible consideration.

There were three players in the game: the two Koreas and the United States - without China, Russia and Japan. Since January 2018, Pyongyang and Seoul have been taking the initiative, more than Washington. The contents of the Kim-Trump communique of June 12th, 2018 testifies to this. The hawks of the US government wanted a quick and unconditional surrender. The negotiation process initiated in Singapore promises to be long, which is what Pyongyang wanted, with on the horizon a peace agreement and no longer a brutal "regime change".

The future of the talks depends on a multitude of factors and is unpredictable, but it is not a remake of previous negotiations. [90] .

The first step is to develop a coherent set of infrastructures, to increase investments, to offer outlets to industrial sectors suffering from national overproduction (cement, steel) and to employ a "surplus" workforce (used on construction sites around the world); to open up and improve communication routes, but also to strengthen the political and cultural influence of the Chinese state (including by developing the social aspect: construction of hospitals and

schools). Ultimately, the ambition is to help make China an alternative global "civilizational" reference point to the United States.

Geo-economic and geostrategic considerations are at the heart of this policy of multidimensional expansion. For Beijing it is a question of securing supplies of raw materials and reducing transport costs, as illustrated, in relation to Middle East oil products, the construction of the giant Chinese-Pakistani port of Gwadar; of better penetrating markets that are dominated, depending on the case, by Japan or South Korea, Russia or the United States; Of multiplying the routes that make it possible to bypass the Strait of Malacca, likely to be blocked in a situation of acute crisis with Washington, via Bangladesh, Burma or Pakistan ...

Investments cover all sectors (from tourism to mining, electronics to solar energy), the creation of industrial sites and port areas, major works (railways, bridges, tunnels, dams) and energy (oil and gas pipelines, power plants, wind farms...).

Financially, the project would require 800 billion euros, to be obtained through the creation of the New Development Bank, the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). China is digging deep to fund the project, but other countries are invited to invest in it. Despite the declared opposition of the United States, Germany, Australia, France and the United Kingdom have responded to the call. Rich countries do not want to be left out of such a big project - and poor countries cannot, seeing it as a unique opportunity to launch their development (even at the risk of subordination).

With the help of the "corridors", some 70 countries in all are concerned by this project! After having invested left, right and centre, Beijing is seeking today - especially in view of rising tensions with the United States - to consolidate its priority in its Asian periphery, devoting to this area half of its loans granted in the framework of the new silk routes. China is the largest trading partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Its influence is

dominant in Laos and Cambodia, considerable in the Mekong basin, including Thailand, reinforced by the construction of the railway linking Kunming (in Yunnan) to Singapore. It effectively controls a growing number of ports in Burma, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Maldives, Oman...

Beyond this, the new silk routes are to reach Venice and Rotterdam in Western Europe; acquisitions and implantations operate as far as France, Britain, Switzerland, Italy, Portugal and Greece (the port of Piraeus!) ... A freight train from Yiwu, located south of Shanghai, runs for more than 12,000 kilometres to directly connect China to 32 European cities, including London, Madrid, Kouvola (Finland), Duisburg (Germany), Lyons (France). It is cheaper than the plane and faster than the boat...

Large investments have already been made or are under negotiation in most Eastern European countries. In Central Asia, the land route passes through Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan. A "partnership", initiated in 2012, continues to grow: the "16 + 1" format between China and 16 countries of Central and Eastern Europe: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the Belt leads to Djibouti, Ethiopia, Egypt, Algeria and Morocco; strengthened agreements are at present being negotiated with Iran, which is facing the US embargo.

In November 2017, an agreement was signed between China and Panama, the latter joining the Silk Roads project, formally becoming the third maritime branch of this initiative.

Such a global expansion effort focused on such a limited period of time is unprecedented. Its social, cultural and ecological costs will, it is feared, be considerable - as well as the economic and financial risks, reinforced by the political risks: possible reversals of alliances by national governments,

operations undertaken in conflict zones such as the Himalayan border region (from Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh) and the Middle East, counter-offensives of competing powers (as in Burma). The case of the port of Gwadar is emblematic. It is located on the coast of Baluchistan, in the southwest of Pakistan, where a struggle for independence continues and where many countries interfere (India, Afghanistan...). The Pakistani army is unable to effectively protect its own barracks from Taliban attacks; even although its influence is becoming preponderant in Pakistan, Beijing cannot place its trust in a failed state to guarantee the security of its strategic investments...

III. World power

The Chinese army is considered to be the second largest in the world, even though this judgment is largely quantitative. The combat experience of its personnel and its equipment remains very limited. Minor imperialisms, such as France, can possess know-how (operations of infiltration and commandos) or advanced technologies (such as the Mistral class projection and command building - BPC) that it does not have. It is largely supplanted by Russia in terms of a strategic ocean submarine fleet (which it is not easy to build up).

The military deployment

Nevertheless, starting from nothing, China's international military system is progressing rapidly. Its naval capacity is growing steadily. Beijing is multiplying agreements that allow its warships to anchor in foreign ports (for supplies, repairs...). It is a major participant in UN "peacekeeping" operations with 35,000 troops (2015 figure), a soft way to deploy. It conducts its own manoeuvres to extract its citizens in crisis zones (as in Yemen).

The highpoint of this military expansion is obviously the base of Djibouti, designed to accommodate 10,000 soldiers. Beijing won this contract by financing the construction

of an industrial free zone and a railway line connecting the international port of Doraleh to Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital.

The strategic importance of Djibouti is considerable (that is why this territory also shelters American and French bases). It borders one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. It is a commercial hub to promote penetration by Chinese products in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa.

The establishment of eighteen military bases on the international level is apparently planned.

Conflicts of influence

China's global expansion places it in direct competition, in their traditional zones of influence, with all the existing powers: Russia in Central Asia and Belarus, India in South Asia, the United States in Latin America, the Europeans in their own countries, everyone in Africa.

Arctic. China is looking for ways to participate in the opening of polar routes, made possible by global warming, and the exploitation of resources previously inaccessible.

Africa. China has taken the lead in the general competition for the control of African wealth (especially in the Congo) to the point that we speak today of Chinafrica as we do about *Françafrique* - but with a very important difference: its influence is not limited to a traditional zone of influence, as is the case with France.

Central Asia. Moscow and Beijing can stand together against the United States or the European Union. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in 2001, provides a permanent alliance framework as regards security, influential in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. A summit was thus recently held on June 8th between Moscow, Beijing and Tehran. However, the more Chinese penetration develops on the Russian periphery, the more the latent conflict becomes structural. It is being

crystallized especially today on the construction of oil and gas pipelines - and thus on the control of the oil wealth of the region.

Indo-Pacific region. New alliances are emerging to counter the rise of China, such as Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) initiated in November 2017 by the United States, Australia, Japan and India in an Indo-Pacific theatre of operation (in addition to the North Pacific Theatre of Operations).

Latin America. China is probably not aiming to win in Latin America a hegemony similar to that to which it aspires in Africa and in a large part of Asia. Nevertheless, since the mid-2000s, it has pursued very important objectives of the order of the:

• Political: consolidate its global influence, be an alternative recourse (with offers of funding) against US hegemonism, isolate Taiwan diplomatically, integrate into multilateral organizations - China has (like many other countries) a status of observer at the Organization of American States (OAS) and is a member of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)...

• Geo-economic: expand its global control of mineral, energy and agricultural resources, find new markets for manufactured products, invest in infrastructure... The case of Bolivia is illustrative: China has recently installed a hydroelectric plant in the province of Cochabamba. It is involved in the construction of sugar, potassium and steel plants and roads, as well as an upgrade of the public security and telecommunications systems. It has its eyes on one of the largest reserves of lithium in the world.

• Geostrategic: When the opportunity arises, China "shows the flag" in this continent too, as it did by sending a contingent to Haiti in the framework of UN operations. It has acquired an extra-territorialized base in Patagonia (Argentina) which has the official (and real) aim of preparing the sending of a vessel to land on the hidden side of the moon - run by the army, it above all enables Beijing to

survey the Southern Hemisphere, a precious first.

China is now the largest trading partner of the largest economies in South America: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Venezuela. These countries mainly export raw materials to China, such as oil, copper, iron ore, soya oil. It often gives them almost unlimited credit for importing Chinese goods.

One of the largest projects in progress (US \$50 billion) is the construction in Nicaragua by a Chinese company of a new inter-oceanic canal that is in direct competition with that of Panama - around which many US companies have invested (port, infrastructure, etc.).

In a sign of the times, in February 2018 US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson advised in Latin American countries not to rely too much on trade relations with China, saying that the region did not need to jump into the arms of a new empire (as if the US empire was on the other hand "self-evident"!).

Chinese strengths in the economic war

Trump prefers bilateralism (which, he hopes, gives the advantage to the United States every time) to multilateralism (which involves the negotiation of common rules between powerful states). He can empty inter-imperialist frameworks of collectivization of their content, or reduce their effectiveness. He can engage in trials of strength, even trade wars, take protectionist measures and provoke others in return (from the European Union or China). He nevertheless comes up against a major problem: capitalist globalization, the global organization of production and value chains and financialization are a state of affairs, not just a policy. A state of affairs into which a large part of the US economy is integrated.

China has its own contradictions, but in this context, it benefits in particular

from two assets: its "old-style" mode of international expansion, piloted by the state, and the major importance for the others of its economy. To close the doors of the new Middle Kingdom has implacable consequences - and Xi Jinping can actually close them.

China is nonetheless immersed in the really existing capitalist world, and Chinese fortunes have cheerfully tasted the delights of speculation and tax havens; many families of high standing have settled in Western countries (including by acquiring nationality - not exactly an example of patriotism!). Xi Jinping responds to these "slippages" by strengthening his control over all the levers that he possesses, including the determination of the exchange rate of the yuan and the establishment of a system of social surveillance and control on a mass scale, which concerns foreign companies and not only nationals... Beijing has therefore serious means of response in the ongoing trade disputes.

The first round of the Trump/Xi commercial match in May seems to have turned to the advantage of China, Chinese concessions remaining very modest. [91] Since then, Beijing has ostensibly only responded in equal measure to the measures taken by Washington - and made use of its relations, even in the electoral bases of the President of the United States. Xi has, for example, forged personal ties with soybean producers in Iowa whose exports are affected by Chinese retaliation.

The European Union is also seeking to establish "trade defence instruments" to counter the dumping of Chinese products.

China remains dependent on its massive imports of electronic components. The telephone company ZTE had to suspend the manufacture of product lines after being sanctioned by Washington for circumventing the embargos against Iran and North Korea. However, Beijing is getting supplies of "chips" from Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, and not only from the United States. The Xi leadership plans to pull all the stops out to catch up with its persistent retard in hi-tech (how successfully?). Twenty leading

sectors have been declared strategic, starting with artificial intelligence and semiconductors, but also including robotics, advanced materials and pharmaceuticals. The number of international patents filed by China continues to grow. The competition on this terrain will probably be more decisive than the manipulation of customs tariffs.

Uncertainties, financial and political risks: a phase of consolidation?

After a period of phenomenal, across the board deployment of Chinese capitalism, the Xi Jinping leadership seems to feel the need to take stock and redefine priorities. The bulimic acquisition of foreign companies has covered operations of financial speculation. In order to secure preferential loans, investors have improperly enrolled in the Silk Roads Program (a theme park in Indonesia, a brewery in the Czech Republic, etc.). Administrative decision centres have become autonomous. Financial risks have too often not been seriously evaluated. But the international situation is changing rapidly - and the "Trump factor" is increasing uncertainty. In the face of Chinese control, social and political resistance is manifesting itself in a growing number of countries.

Venezuela offers an example of the dangers that Beijing may face. [92] Relations between the two countries developed rapidly during the Chavez era, with Chinese investments and loans becoming the largest in Latin America. These agreements were largely focused on and guaranteed by oil production. While freeing itself from the US, Venezuela has become massively indebted to China. Then came the fall in the price of oil, the crisis of the Venezuelan regime and the threat of default on the debt.

The Sino-Venezuelan agreements have never been "win-win", but they can become "lose-lose". Beijing has

stopped major investments, reduced its loans, and many Chinese workers are returning to their country (there were 400,000 of them). As the main creditor, far ahead of Russia, China may one day demand to take control of oil production. If it has not done so, it is probably for political reasons: it is very risky in the event of an overthrow of the regime. It has been less patient with other countries.

In Sri Lanka, in 2017, China obtained a 99-year lease on Hambantota Port after the debtor country defaulted on a USD 1 billion loan - which is perceived by the population as a real erosion of national sovereignty.

Ninety-nine-year leases are becoming a very sensitive political issue.

This is the case in Nicaragua, where the concession granted to China for the construction of the interoceanic canal at an exorbitant economic and social cost is contributing to the vast popular mobilization against the

Ortega regime. This project augurs the destruction of many rural communities; here too it is perceived as an abandonment of territorial sovereignty.

On 9th-10th June, major demonstrations took place in Vietnam against two government projects: a draconian law on cybersecurity; and the creation of a special economic zone for the benefit of China. Among the main slogans: "No land rented to China, not even for a day." [93]

There has already been a lot of popular mobilization in Asia against the dumping of Chinese products (in Thailand among other countries), the buying up of land and mines, the expropriation of peasants for the benefit of industrial zones or mountain populations in favour of forest and mining lobbies (the Philippines in particular). What will be the political impact of these mobilizations in the face of regimes favourable to Beijing (the Thai military junta, Philippine President Duterte, the Hun Sen

dictatorship in Cambodia...)?

Beijing is probably not too worried about it today (except perhaps in Nicaragua where the future of the regime is in question). This is not the case with geopolitical uncertainty or loopholes in the national economy, such as the incredible housing bubble, a roller coaster stock market, and a rapidly growing parallel banking sector. The social situation in China remains under control, despite the development of wage and local disputes. The hyper-centralized governance of the Xi leadership is today an asset, but it can become a handicap tomorrow.

The accession of China to the rank of second world power is a fait accompli. However, we cannot just project recent trends into the future. Chinese geopolitics is in an uncertain phase of adaptation and not simply consolidation and linear expansion.

2 July 2018

EU And East-Europeans. Czech Republic As An Example

21 October 2018, by **Viera Hudešková**

There is an interesting development of the attitude of Czech citizens towards EU which might be described using a quotation: In the 1990 we have been a poor country with hope, currently we are relative rich country without hope.

Before elaborating more on this, I would like to explain the position of Czech leftist political party I represent as well as our position on this matter. Party of Democratic Socialism (SDS) is a founding member of the European Left, and has a generally positive relationship towards the European integration, despite our criticism of the recent EU and the way it operates. During the accession period the SDS, acted in favour of European project and of the Czech Republic (CZ) joining

the EU. Together with a group of Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (CPBM) Members, we founded the Society for European Dialogue (SPED) to promote the European project among political Left, we also organized meetings and other activities in the time preceding the accession referendum.

The Czech Republic became a member of the EU on 1st of May 2004, when 77% of the population agreed to our membership in the referendum. This support has gradually fallen, onset on the crisis in 2008 was it only 40%. On the other hand, when discussing the result of the 2004 referendum, one should add that the participation in the vote was only slightly over 55% of

voters - thus only some 43% of eligible voters expressed their explicit consent with the membership of CZ in the EU.

Why is the support for EU in the Czech Republic only so "lukewarm" at best?

One can consider this a bit surprising. As in the others Central and Eastern European Countries (CEE), before 1989 many people were "dreaming of Europe", in general, the dissent was strongly pro-European (pro-Western). Consequently, in early 90', a very eurooptimistic positions dominated the society in the Czech Republic, represented mainly by Vaclav Havel and his liberal political wing. This was accompanying some idealisation of the so called First Czechoslovak Republic

(1918-1938) with main slogans like "Back to Europe!". Even V. Klaus, the leading euroscepticist of today, was initially in favour of "coming back to Europe". This turned out to be based largely on illusions.

Currently the inhabitants of the Czech Republic are among the most eurosceptic EU-citizens (Figure 2 - see enclosure) and after Brexit, some started to talk about "Czexit".

There are several reasons for this decline:

- citizen's expectations regarding the positive benefits of the EU accession gradually failed to materialize, in particular in the sphere of everyday life and family budget;
- increasingly, our citizens started to feel to be not adequately represented, and with little influence on the decision-making processes in the EU;
- we may even spot some "semi-colonial" feelings, with sharp criticism against the "West", i.e. in particular the EU-core, for the dismantling of the Czech industry, banking sector etc.

This situation was reflected also by appearance and rise of "euro-sceptic politicians" and parties, who campaigned for "NO" in the referendum. An example of this is V. Klaus (much less his original ODS-Civic Democratic forum), which considers the EU a "socialist project" limiting our sovereignty. Very anti-European were in the time of referendum Republicans, the first right-wing party in CZ, and the CPBM oscillating between "hard" and "soft" criticism (finally expressing their position as "weak NO").

This scepticism does not apply only to our current position of CZ, but also to the possible splitting into "two-speed EU". According to a recent opinion poll, only 19% of CZ citizens see our appropriate place in the "core" compared to 58% in Poland (some 42% see it in "periphery" and about 23% support the CZ leaving the EU).

Interestingly, there is almost stable level of support and refusal of EU during the last 15 years that is since the 2004 referendum. The above (Figure 3 - see enclosure) opinion poll

was taken in the time of the British referendum. As we see, about one third supports the idea of "Czexit" and some 49% are still supporting EU. This brings a question: Why there is little success in convincing the society about benefits of the EU? One may speculate about both the domestic politics and "Brussels" as being guilty. Definitely, there are known failures of the EU structures to contribute to this.

We may say that the causes are almost certainly not in the overall economic development. So far, Czechia is a "net consumer" of EU support, with a considerable positive balance (Figure 4 - see enclosure). According to the predictive models, the Czech Republic grew at least 1.1% faster thanks to the EU and gained about 13 billion EUR. If the Czech Republic had not been a member of the EU, GDP would be some 12% lower.

The GDP growth is among the highest of all EU countries (Figure 5 - see enclosure), exceeding 5% in the last year. In the period between 2006 and 2017, the Czech Republic reached the highest growth rate among the "new EU countries", although it is still below the EU average on long term (Figure 6 - see enclosure).

The good performance of the CZ economy is a result of the close connection between Czech and German economy, and it is accompanied by a decrease in unemployment. Recently, it is just 3,5% - which puts us on the top of EU. Anyway, there were about 264 thousand unemployed, but almost 240 thousand positions in March 2018. Despite these - somewhat impressive - macroeconomic numbers, situation is less positive in everyday living standards.

One of the expectations of joining the EU was that the standard of living will increase, which will bring it closer to the EU15. Such change did not happen in the CZ so far. Between 1995 and 2012, the convergence in household income to the EU15 was only 0.1%, one of the lowest among CEE countries. And domestic politicians are successful in shifting the blame for this to Brussels, or to EU15.

There are some professions where salary differences amount to seven times. We may see this also on the example to teachers' salaries (Figure 7 - see enclosure).

For example, a teacher in Slovakia has an annual income in equivalent of 19,000 USD, teachers in Bulgaria or Romania are even worse, but a teacher in Germany earns 89,000 USD and in Luxembourg the salary reaches even an equivalent of 138,000 USD. In the Czech Republic, only 53% of teachers believe that the teaching profession benefits clearly outweigh its disadvantages, compared with 77% in the international average, and 88% of teachers think that the society does not appreciate the teaching profession, as compared to 69% of the international average.

A strong feeling of CZ being a "second order country" increases the negative position towards Brussels and the West in general.

All Czech banks and savings banks were sold to foreign investors already in early 1990s, bank charges are increasing and the huge profits, hundreds of millions of euro are moved abroad to Germany, Austria, France, etc. We see that it is a substantial share of our GDP, which is flowing abroad as revenue of foreign companies (Figure 8 - see enclosure).

Similarly, practically all large factories were sold out to foreign investors - to be closed as their unwanted competitors in many cases. Salaries are still far lower than in similar businesses in the West. This is causing a disillusion even among the EU supporters, as we can see in the next graph (Figure 9 - see enclosure) which gives us an interesting comparison of the positions of EU-supporters and opponents. As we see, those who would have voted for withdrawal from the EU, and those in favour of remaining in the EU have similar illusion or prejudices. Of course, the yes/no position influences the TOTAL percentage, but it is the distribution, which matters here. One can easily feel that for most people the realities "do not matter", that is, their positions are determined largely emotionally. A similar conclusion might be drawn from comparison of most pertinent

“public issues” in 1995 and 2018:



If we compare the problems or “problems”, often rather curious and seemingly minor issues, discussed in

the Czech society in 1995 and in 2018, we see that “under the surface” there are actually much the same. That is, little has been solved during last 20 years by the Czech elites or in some cases, these “elites” are creating and “inflating” some of the issues psychologically. This, in our opinion,

presents a challenge and opportunity for the Czech and European left. The weakening, or even the collapse of the euro and the European Union, would not help anyone. We need to look for ways to improve the EU.

[Transform](#)

Puerto Rico's year of recovery and resistance

20 October 2018, by **Monique Dols**

Puerto Rico was pummeled by Hurricane María on September 20, 2017.

In the year since, that devastating injury has been followed by insult after insult to the island's people — from their initial abandonment in the weeks after the devastation of Hurricanes Irma and María, to the subsequent pillaging of public resources by disaster capitalists and their backers in the Puerto Rican and U.S. governments.

The latest insult came last month when Donald Trump continued to boast about his “fantastic job” in helping Puerto Ricans after the storms — and then discounted the reassessment of the storm's official death toll to nearly 3,000 victims as fake news “done by the Democrats in order to make me look as bad as possible.” [94] [95]

However, the 150th anniversary of the Grito de Lares uprising against Spanish colonial rule is also an important reminder that the people of Puerto Rico have a long and rich history of resistance, and that tradition has also been in evidence over the past year. [96]

The U.S. government's handling of Puerto Rico's recovery from the hurricanes has shown the toxic results when disaster capitalism meets colonial inequality.

A colony of the U.S. since 1917, Puerto Rico in recent years has been shackled with a crippling, unpayable

and illegal debt, which has been overseen by a dictatorial oversight board that imposed brutal spending cuts which made the country far more vulnerable to the ravages of the storms. [97] [98]

The now infamously defunct electrical and hospital systems, for example, were not simply wiped out by the winds. They were wiped out in the preceding years by a neoliberal storm that saw the closing of many clinics and the loss of 30 percent of the power authority's workforce. [99]

These unjust colonial structures made it even easier for disaster capitalists to further destroy Puerto Rico's infrastructure when they swooped into the island after the storm looking to make a quick profit. [100]

It is worth looking back at the events of the past year to understand that author and activist Naomi Klein wasn't exaggerating last June when she told Democracy Now! that the death toll in Puerto Rico wasn't just a tragedy, but “state-sponsored mass killing.” [101]

Long before the government of Puerto Rico was forced by public outrage and pressure to admit that the death toll was many times more than the official original number, activists, advocates and journalists had been sounding alarm bells — since as early as mid-October of last year.

What you can do

Find out how you can support Red de Apoyo Mutuo de Puerto Rico (Mutual Support Network of Puerto Rico). [102]

Donate to the Defense of Public Education in Puerto Rico fund set up by the Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico Teachers' Union) [103]

They saw that the combination of a dangerously dilapidated hospital system, widespread lack of electricity, fuel and communication, sporadic garbage collection and a poorly coordinated food and water distribution system had Puerto Rico on the brink of what was — and in many ways still is — a widespread public health emergency.

They saw supplies stockpiled in the ports, while people who had lost everything were desperate for basic goods like water and food. They saw an outbreak of leptospirosis, a highly preventable disease spread through contact with floodwaters, while people without access to water were forced to bathe and drink out of untreated natural springs, streams and lakes. [104]

At this point, just a few weeks after the storm, the death toll was estimated to be about 500, and it wasn't too late for the federal government to wield its vast resources to address Puerto Rico's historic crisis. [105]

Instead, the Trump administration continued its policy of malign neglect, with devastating consequences, and the human toll was massive and devastating. [106]

In the months to follow, victorious pronouncements of the local and federal governments continued to rub against daily realities on the island. People adjusted to a deteriorated new normal, including the constant sounds and smell of the portable generators that were now people's only reliable source of electricity. [107]

The government completely bungled the rebuilding of the electrical system and the reopening of schools. [108] This was a product of both complete incompetence and an unwillingness to get the needed resources to the people who were capable of rebuilding "from active and retired electrical workers to teachers and community members.

The other factor was the government's lack of interest in maintaining public utilities and services, and its intention to instead use the storm as an excuse to privatize electricity, education and other public resources.

In late January, Puerto Rico's Gov. Ricardo Rosselló announced the privatization of the electrical system, as well as the privatization of the education system through the opening of charter schools and the use of the voucher system. [109] [110]

Popular frustrations in the year since the storm are captured by the refrain of a plena song adapted by anti-austerity activists in Puerto Rico: "Vagones por aquí, vagones por allá" ("Trailers, here, there and everywhere"). *Vagones* are shipping containers that have become the symbol of government neglect in Puerto Rico.

Throughout the summer of 2018, a number of revelations showed that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had widely mismanaged the distribution of goods, as containers full of spoiled supplies

and water were found in various locations around the island.

When the under-resourced Department of Forensic Sciences of Puerto Rico simply couldn't handle the quantity of dead bodies after Hurricane María, they were stored in refrigerated trailers (which didn't stay refrigerated all the time).

And when the island's Secretary of Education Julia Keleher closed more than 200 schools, she overcrowded the remaining schools, forcing "excess" children to now attend class in trailers, while their original schools sit empty.

But the year since María is also a story of ordinary Puerto Ricans coming together to help one another and push back against their government's attacks.

As it quickly became clear in the aftermath of the storm that nobody was coming to save Puerto Rico, *auto-gestion*, or self-organization, quickly became the norm on the island. People banded together to help each other, their family members, neighbors and friends. [111]

These initiatives helped many people to overcome the growing desperation and depression on the island and replace these feelings with solidarity and community. At a moment when suicides were on the rise and food was difficult to come by, community centers and schools were a lifeline of support.

In the absence of any kind of real relief effort on the part of the local or federal governments, these initiatives quickly took on a political character and spread all over the island, developing into a mutual aid network. [112]

Reporters at the Center for Investigative Journalism in Puerto Rico played a central role in collecting and telling the stories of the deceased, while government officials continued to put their head in the sand. In early June, the Center won a court order for

the government to release María-related statistics to the media. [113]

When a Harvard-based study estimated 4,645 "excess deaths" due to the hurricane, activists in San Juan called for people to memorialize their deceased loved ones by bringing their shoes to the marble plaza in front of the Capitol. The resulting memorial, known as Proyecto 4,645, helped to put names to the faces of the dead in Puerto Rico and beyond. [114]

The frontal attack on the public school system has also spurred a resistance in the schools, led by the same educators, families and students who took it upon themselves to rehabilitate the schools that the widely reviled Keleher refused to reopen after the storm. [115]

In what was the first large show of protest in Puerto Rico after the storm, some 16,000 educators walked out of schools on March 19 to protest the draconian anti-union legislation that promised to break up the public school system.

The following month, police used pepper gas against educators protesting the announcement of the Fiscal Oversight Board's plan to close 283 more schools in Puerto Rico.

This repression was followed by a coordinated attack against May Day protests in San Juan, in which dozens of protesters were brutalized, students were chased by police into private homes, and an immense campaign of intimidation and demonization of protesters took place. [116]

Heading into a second year since the hurricane, it's become clear to more people on the island who is and isn't on their side. Solidarity activists in the U.S. need to make sure we don't let Trump's growing list of disasters take away our focus from continuing to support recovery and resistance in Puerto Rico.

September 25, 2018

Socialistworker.org

Steps forward in free access to public transport

19 October 2018, by **Łukasz Ługowski**

When in 2012 the Free Trade Union "August 80" (WZZ "Sierpień 80") started the campaign for free public transport in Poland, to fight against the increasingly frequent and high ticket price increases throughout the country, public transport was free in only two cities. Today there are 44 Polish cities that practice it, from the small town of Swieradow-Zdroj [117] - 5,000 inhabitants, but invaded by tourists and their cars in high season, whose free public transport is common with the Czech city Nove Mesto pod Smrkem [118] - to the canton of Lubin with a total population of 106,000. . [119]

Many other cities are considering establishing free public transport and it may be that next year the city of Czesochowa will be part of the lot - it is a larger city than Dunkirk in France and it would be the third largest European city with free public transport.

At first, mayors in many cities considered the idea of free public transport absurd and the media treated our initiatives as a curiosity, if they ever mentioned them. We cannot therefore fail to ask the question: why is Poland now ahead of the curve in this area? It is not easy to answer them, as free transport is introduced for many reasons.

In some cities, the decision is taken during the reconstruction of roads and bridges, as is currently the case in Konin, a city in west-central Poland with a population of 75,000. Often, once the work is finished, public transport remains free. Elsewhere, it is the citizens themselves who adopt a civic budget. The campaign led by "August 80" gave ideas to managers in many other cities. This was the case, for example, in Lubin, the largest Polish conurbation where this idea

was implemented. Sometimes it is the budgetary reasons that decide: for example at Żbiki - a city of 35,000 inhabitants located near Warsaw - the right to free transport is limited to those who pay their taxes in the city. Free public transport is introduced both by more or less on the leftwing local government and by those on the far right. Some local politicians promised it during the 2014 municipal campaign and those who were elected have generally fulfilled this promise. Finally, in Poland, as in the other countries of the former Eastern bloc, free public transport for some parts of the population has often been preserved, which simplifies the issue by simply extending it.

Perhaps we will witness the creation of regional networks of free public transport, similar to the one that operates in the canton of Lubin. In this part of the Lower Silesia region, free transport also exists in Polkowice, an industrial city of 22,000 inhabitants in the Lower Silesia region, and in some agglomerations of its canton, in Lubin and throughout its canton and in some agglomerations of the canton of Legnica, an industrial city (copper smelter) with 100,000 inhabitants in Lower Silesia, which between 1945 and 1993 was the headquarters of the Northern Group of the Soviet Army (occupying one third of the city). One can only wish for the creation of an inter-cantonal union of free public transport, an idea already under discussion. In the very near future, we could therefore see a large region with free transport.

Debates on free access

In Poland, the city of Żory in Upper Silesia is best known for its free public

transport.[ory (62,000 inhabitants) in Upper Silesia, was an essentially mining town until the restructuring of the mines in 2003.] It was one of the first cities to make this decision, when our campaign for free public transport had grown. The issue was then discussed in almost all departments - in town halls, local media and on the streets.

"You see, they are still increasing ticket prices and it will turn out that their resources will decrease again, while they could lower prices or introduce free tickets," said an old man in front of the newsstand in Katowice, before the introduction of free tickets at Żory, reacting to the price increase of KZK GOP, the local public transport operator, then in the Upper Silesian metropolitan area, now in the Silesian Metropolis-Zagłębie. [120]

In these discussions we could also hear: "But I don't agree, because then homeless people will travel on buses", often accompanied by "and they will stink". Many people reacted in this way, from members of ultraliberal parties to civil servants in charge of public transport. This is an absurd argument, which has nothing to do with free public transport and only emphasises the need to solve the problem of homelessness, and therefore access to housing.

Today, in local government there are not many people left to propose increases in ticket prices. Instead, they are reduced and the demand for free transport for schoolchildren is present in each urban area. In recent years, Poland has become the world leader in providing free municipal public transport. In addition, in several dozen other cities, free travel has been partially introduced, for schoolchildren, the unemployed,

motorists (e. g. in Zakopane), in city centres (e. g. in Kielce) or for everyone but only during weekends, on selected routes. It is also planned to introduce it this year only during the tourist season (in Szczyrk, Silesia). [121]

Rather, we hear that it is a good idea, but difficult to realize, because the city does not have the means... Yet, the truth is that all cities have the means. It is only a question of budgetary choice.

The effects of free access

It should also be taken into account that free public transport at Łódź has proved to be less expensive than when it was paid for. Because it is an investment that pays off in the form of reduced road accidents, cleaner air, reduced noise, faster arrival of medical emergencies (due to the de-cluttering of streets), the abolition of ticket infrastructure costs, and also in the form of increased activity for older people, which is so important for disease prevention.

In almost all cities, since the introduction of free public transport, there has been an increase in the number of passengers and a reduction in car traffic. In Lubin, the number of passengers increased immediately by 50% and, one year later, by 100%! At Łódź it has been multiplied by 3! Difficulties in finding parking spaces in the city centre have also disappeared in many of the cities concerned, whereas before it was impossible to park there. Everyone is pleased about this, from town halls that have decided to launch into it, to passengers and former motorists, to scientists. Kazimierz Kłosek, a professor at the Silesian Polytechnic School, one of the most favourable scientists for this project, concluded an interview: "I can't find any weak points there." [122] The stubbornness of the officials involved in organising public transport who are fighting against this idea - not only in Poland, but throughout Europe - is all the more surprising.

Mobility and access to parking spaces

are not the only improvements due to free public transport. The most important effect, often forgotten in debates on this subject, is first and foremost the opening up of access to transport for the poorest - both young people and employees, and especially the elderly.

Nowhere in the world is public transport financed by ticket prices alone. It is always subsidized. In Poland almost everywhere more than half of this budget comes from taxes. In other words, travellers without tickets, treated like criminals, arrested and taken to police stations when they refuse to pay the fine immediately, have already paid for their trip... by paying their taxes. The poor, who travel without tickets, are simply treated as criminals because they are poor. This is because the law protects the interests of car manufacturers and motorists, not those of public transport passengers. By parking a car without immediately paying the price, you usually have two weeks to pay the fine, because you take into account that the driver may lack resources. But caught without a ticket on a bus, you have to pay the fine immediately, often more expensive than the one for parking and without the two-week deadline. Otherwise we're being sued by a bailiff.

In Lubin it was noted that the courts freed up when they no longer had to deal with passengers without tickets. "It is estimated that we have already saved around one million zlotys" because the courts are working, explains Lubin Mayor Robert Raczko. [123] The total cost of public transport in Lubin is 14 million zlotys. Before free tickets covered only 5 million, so a saving of one million is a significant part of what the city's budget had to add to make public transport free.

Both in Lubin and at Łódź, it has been noted that, since public transport became free, older people, who until then had remained at home, are moving around the city and can take care of what they were previously postponing, unable to pay for tickets. Many of them now take the bus to the city centre to do their shopping, whereas before they didn't. Traders, cinemas, bars and restaurants confirm

this remark: their sales have increased... as have the taxes paid into the municipal coffers. In Lubin, the elderly have started to frequent allotments again, often bringing back new plants. What better way to spend a warm weekend than in the working-class garden, which can be accessed free of charge.

Free public transport in Estonia....

From 9 to 12 May 2018, an international conference on free public transport was held in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. Mayors, presidents and activists from all over the world shared their experiences and knowledge in the field of free public transport and the results of its introduction. As the initiators of this project in Poland, the activists of the free trade union "August 80" participated in this conference.

Together with Estonia, Poland is now an example in this field. And other Eastern European countries may soon follow in our footsteps. However, the paradox is that while more and more Polish mayors are deciding to introduce free public transport, many cantons and rural villages remain without access to public transport, cut off from the rest of the country. From this point of view, Poland is a country of extreme inequality: some already have free transport, while others have no access at all to public transport and if they do not have a car or driving licence, are condemned to stay at home.

It seems that Estonia will soon take another step forward. This country - the first where it has become possible to take the bus, tramway, trolley and train for free in the capital - wants to introduce free buses throughout its territory. If it does, it will become the first country in the world where public transport service from the rural village to the capital will be a right and not a commodity.

"The Minister of Economy and the Minister of Infrastructure have promised free public transport for all

from 1 July 2018," Allan Alaküla from Tallinn when we interviewed him in Tallinn during the conference. Until then, only those who paid their taxes in Tallinn could travel to the city for free. Free public transport was introduced on 1 January 2013 and since then there has been an increase in the number of passengers and a reduction in car traffic. I must say that while I was there for the conference, I didn't see any traffic jams...

When hearing about free travel in Tallinn, many neoliberals argued that the means of transport in the Estonian capital were old and in poor condition. As if it depended on whether we have tickets or not! When public transport was charged for in Tallinn, its rolling stock was already old. This accusation was supposed to call into question the idea of free public transport... Today, however, the same people no longer say anything. Why? Why? Because the world capital of free public transport - the name claimed by Tallinn - has already changed almost all of its trams: 60 are new out of 85 on wheels and the others are in the process of being completely renovated. There are also new buses and trolleybuses (partly imported from Poland). The same applies to railway rolling stock, which has also been replaced - and in Tallinn the trains are also free of charge! It is in these trains that the increase in the number of passengers has been the most significant: their number has been multiplied by 8! Tallinn is also investing in the development of its public transport network. Tram lines are now going to previously unserved neighbourhoods and suburbs. It is therefore wrong to say that free transport means non-renewal, it is the opposite, according to the experiences of the cities that have carried it out...

Tallinn, the first capital in the world to offer free public transport, has been promoting this idea for several years. Not only are the results very satisfactory, but the city has also made itself known - an unexpected tourist promotion effect. It is really a remarkable city, because not only is it the first capital to introduce such a solution, but it will also be the first country to introduce free buses throughout its territory. The Estonians have taken an important decision, they

have taken a giant step forward in making public transport free of charge.

...and in Dunkirk, Tübingen, Avesta

In the north of France, the Dunkirk conurbation, which has more than 200,000 inhabitants, will have free public transport from 1 September this year. It will therefore be the largest city in France implementing this solution. For the moment, transport is free on weekends. It was a test for this type of public transport. The results indicate that the idea was excellent and that it should be generalized to everyone throughout the week, as traffic has decreased and the number of passengers has increased. Dunkirk has the same experience as Polish cities in activating older people. Now they attend cinemas, parks and restaurants instead of staying in front of the television. The results of free access throughout the week can only be even better, but we have to wait another year to confirm this.

Tübingen is a city of 90,000 inhabitants in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, which is starting to introduce free public transport, first on Saturdays. The authorities have prepared themselves very professionally for this, carrying out a study to find out how many additional buses will be needed, how many more passengers will be needed and how many more will need to be added by investing in its development. It will be the largest German city introducing free public service.

Avesta, a small Swedish industrial town (23,500 inhabitants), 150 km northwest of Stockholm, introduced free public transport in 2012. The city was depopulated before the introduction of free public transport, but since then it has had 2,000 more inhabitants, which is a significant increase. As in the cases mentioned above, the number of bus passengers has increased... multiplied by 5. Similarly, car traffic has decreased and the number of pedestrians has also increased. But the most interesting thing is that paid transport

cost the city 23.6 million Swedish crowns. If free access had been introduced only for children and schoolchildren, the cost would have been \$31.8 million. But the decision to make it free has been made and today it costs... only 23.7 million crowns!

Projects in Bucharest, Vilnius, Sophia, Bratislava and... Paris!

The small town of Lugoj (38,000 inhabitants) was the first city in Romania to introduce free public transport in 2013. Since then, initiatives spreading this idea have multiplied and the number of cities where public transport is even partially free has increased. The 2016 municipal elections in Bucharest - the capital of Romania with a population of 2.5 million - were won by Gabriela Firea, whose main slogan was free public transport.

In Vilnius (Lithuania, 550,000 inhabitants) this will be the main electoral argument of one of the mayoral candidates, who is likely to win. In Slovakia's capital, Bratislava (450,000 inhabitants), free public transport was at the centre of the election campaign. And in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia (1.3 million inhabitants), activists are continuing to spread the idea.

The biggest surprise at this conference came from Paris. The municipality commissioned an in-depth analysis with a view to the possible introduction of free public transport in 2020. [124] If Paris, one of Europe's largest cities, decided to offer free public transport, it would also be the first city to have a free metro... if Bucharest does not get ahead of it.

Free public transport is on the rise all over the world, not only in Europe. In China too, in Chengdu (14 million inhabitants), public transport is free of charge during peak hours. In Brazil, you can travel free of charge to 12 cities, the largest of which, Maricá, covers 362 km² and has 153,000

inhabitants. It is also a country where protests against the increase in ticket prices have mobilized hundreds of thousands of demonstrators and

where the demand for free public transport is very strong.

Like health and education services, public transport service must be a right and not a commodity - a good idea that is spreading!

#Nothim #Neverhim: Brazilian women against fascism

18 October 2018, by **Cheron Moretti**

In the area of political representation, Republican President Donald Trump in the United States is an expression of the advance of conservatism and all forms of hatred against humanity. In Brazil, the candidacy of Jair Bolsonaro, from the Liberal Social Party, for the presidency of the Republic is the Brazilian version of the racist, macho and homophobic politician. Trump reached 53% rejection among the US electorate on the eve of the US elections.

Bolsonaro achieved 46% vote rejection one week before the Brazilian elections. The fact is that unlike Trump, Bolsonaro will have more difficulty getting elected, because in our electoral system "will defeat the one who wins more votes". The Brazilian ultra-right candidate will have to face, above all, the anger of Brazilian women who have organized themselves on a large scale in social networks. On Saturday 29, the #womenagainstbolsonaro movement or the #nothim movement, gathered 4 million people in the main streets of Brazilian cities and the interior of the country and in more than 30 demonstrations convened, on 4 continents, to shout #nothim #neverhim.

If the public manifestations of hatred by this candidate and anti-PTism win supporters, on the other hand, the number of those who refuse his hate speech against the majority of Brazilians (women, blacks, LGBTs, the poor) is also increasing. Since the huge mobilizations of June 2013, we have not seen such massive demonstrations in defence of

democracy, the expression of the crisis of Brazilian political representation, with a decisive role for youth and women, reinforced by the coup d'état that brought down President Dilma Rousseff of the Workers' Party.

Brazilian women have demonstrated solidarity and political understanding, linked to the demands of the current economic situation. They have built a front characterized by the support of women's groups increasingly able to join the call #not him! The format and methods of last Saturday's mobilizations demonstrated the power of horizontality and immediate engagement without "dirigisms", without instrumentalizing the common struggle, the unity of women against fascism.

The diversity of trajectories and positions of social movements, political parties and presidential candidates were visible in the mobilizations with their colours, flags. At the heart of the election campaign, women managed to bring together millions of Brazilians without transforming their struggle against oppression into a major electoral rally. Our unitary line was summed up as chasing Bolsonaro and everything he represents.

Bolsonaro supporters tried to mobilize propaganda actions the next day in response to the "women against Bolsonaro." The result was a resounding failure, followed by a host of misogynistic, homophobic and anti-working class statements by one of the main leaders of his campaign, his son

Eduardo Bolsonaro. "Women on the right are more beautiful than those on the left; they do not expose their breasts in the street and do not defecate to protest," says this mediocre character childishly. And he adds: "women on the right are more hygienic than women on the left" statements that contrast with "we are women, resistance for a Brazil without fascism and without horror", sung with strength by all of us the day before.

There are some lessons to be learned from this Saturday: women have developed the ability to dream and restore hope in Brazil. Resignation and hate vote will have to face a campaign of "Women United Against Bolsonaro" in this final phase of the Brazilian elections: any hesitation, blank or null vote, will be a challenge for the choice of any candidate except Bolsonaro. All our efforts are focused on confirming the trends of the pre-election polls: Bolsonaro loses against any candidate in the second round.

On Sunday, October 7, Brazilian men and women will have to vote for the next president. A new national convocation will announce new mobilizations throughout the country, alongside all expressions of international solidarity with the Brazilian people. It will be broadcast, it will call on the people to defeat Bolsonaro in the second round, removing the threat to the lives of women, indigenous peoples, homosexuals, blacks and blacks, the roofless, the landless, the unemployed, youth, workers. If elections depend on women in the polls: #EleNÃO

RiMaflow, an exemplary workers' struggle of the 21st century

17 October 2018, by **Nadia De Mond**

History

Maflow, an automotive components company employing 330 people, went into a crisis due to the fraudulent bankruptcy of the industrial group – and not due to a lack of work or orders, particularly from the giant BMW. Despite a combative union struggle that lasted two years, the only alternative "solution" to the closure was to sell the plant, at a discount, to a new contractor, Boryszew SA, which promised the government to immediately hire 80 workers by promising a global recovery that would gradually rehire the remaining 250 workers. But the day after the two-year deadline (minimum time required by the Prodi-bis law for compliance with the agreements) it began to relocate the plant to Poland.

Then a small group of workers decided not to passively accept to unemployment and to take charge of what was left of the company – the workshops – to start a new productive activity, under self-management, in harmony with the needs of the population and the territory. This group occupied the factory and formed a cooperative.

Taking as an example the network of Argentinian roccupied factories – with which RiMaflow has been collaborating since then – workers have gradually invented various production and service activities, mainly in the field of recycling and ecology, which could generate income and create new jobs inside abandoned workshops. From the flea market to the repair of electrical and electronic equipment, from the popular canteen

to the repair of bicycles, from the manufacture of "Rimoncello" liqueur (with lemons from the Italian/Immigrant solidarity project, SOS Rosarno) to the promotion of culture within everyone's reach, based on the "open factory" model.

This policy of opening up to the territory – free use of premises for associations, neighbourhood festivals and trade union activities, space for theatre and music groups, information and debate evenings, reception of refugees, relations with farmers in the South Milanese Agricultural Park and critical consumer groups, with Caritas, etc – has so far made it possible to resist attacks by local authorities and attempts by the owners, UniCredit Bank, to take over the buildings.

Building an alternative

From the beginning, this extraordinary experience of workers' self-management took place in a context of anti-capitalist and ecological struggle, based on the very concrete needs of defending employment and creating an income for dismissed workers, summarized in the slogans posted at the entrance of the factory: reuse, recycling, reappropriation, income, debt revolt, revolution ... [125]

What is in question is the private ownership of the plant, the type of production chosen by the bosses according to profit and not according to the satisfaction of social needs, its harmful nature for the environment. This is an open challenge, not only to

the former owner, to the bank, but to the system as a whole, by affirming in practice that the workers, who have worked for 20 years in this factory, know how to do better for themselves and for society. At the same time, it is an example for the workers of dozens of companies that are closing and for their unions, who abandon the fight as soon as no new buyers appear, imagining nothing other than a negotiation on the number of workers to be rehired.

The basic idea is to broaden the concept of class and trade union struggle, no longer only defensive against bosses in crisis, but positive by building bastions of resistance, which are at the same time embryos of economy and alternative society, based on solidarity and workers' creativity, in relation to the surrounding population and socio-political local networks.

In this sense RiMaflow is at the heart of the Fuorimercato network (outside the market) associating food and other producers, who oppose the logic of productivism, the destructive mass distribution of the environment and who exploit to the bone workers, immigrants and Italians. This link with the realities of sustainable agriculture and critical consumer groups, which defend the idea of food sovereignty, has brought RiMaflow closer to the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST) – whose slogan "occupy, resist and produce" it shares – and the Union of Agricultural Workers (SOC), which is part of the Andalusian Trade Union of Workers (SAT), as well as the militant international peasant network Via Campesina, of which MST and SOC are part.

The specific form of struggle, occupation of the factory and self-managed operation immediately created fraternal links with other self-managed companies, in Europe as well as in Latin America and the rest of the world, organised in the international network of recovered companies (whose next European meeting will take place precisely in RiMaflow in spring 2019).

RiMaflow's activities have expanded. Little by little, dozens of small craftsmen (often workers who have lost their jobs or small self-employed people affected by the crisis) have settled in the abandoned areas while in workshop C has started experimenting with wallpaper recycling, with the introduction of a prototype machine that separates plastic from paper (which RiMaflow also hopes to produce).

Between the cooperative, composed of about twenty people, and the craftsmen, also organized in association, there are now more than one hundred people who have found a job and an income within RiMaflow.

Opponents

What is at issue is the idea that abandoned places and property (public or private property) can be converted into common property, used by the organized population in collectives of workers and users. This idea is obviously contested, not only by the right but also by the centre-left and in particular by the Democratic Party (PD, ex-PCI), which manages the

municipality of Trezzano sul Naviglio and has constantly obstructed RiMaflow's economic activities, claiming technical and administrative defects. Thus, despite the cooperative's desire to comply with security and other measures, and by making significant financial efforts, we were forced to move the flea market out of the plant and limit high-impact cultural activities.

However, negotiations are ongoing - and have been ongoing for years without reaching a conclusion - with the owner, UniCredit, to whom RiMaflow has made several proposals for the use and preservation of the building.

However, the survival of the cooperative and the fighting network that supports it is still an exercise in balancing.

Ignoble attack

In mid-summer 2018, at the end of July, the police arrived at the factory with an order to freeze the computers and the bank account, to immediately close the C workshop while the president of the cooperative, our comrade Massimo Lettieri, was arrested, at his parents' house in Calabria (south of Italy) where he was on holiday, on the absurd and ignominious charge of illegal trafficking in waste and criminal association of a mafia type. Since then, our comrade has been in prison and the cooperative has been struggling to survive.

The legal investigation concerns about

ten companies suspected of illegal waste trafficking, with which RiMaflow was unfairly associated. The trial, which has not yet begun, is likely to last several months and during this time our comrade Massimo remains in prison while the cooperative's work is largely blocked.

This situation is totally unfair and unbearable. A major solidarity campaign has been set up to mobilize all the people, collectives and associations that have been able to connect with this unique experience, both locally and internationally. We need all the support we can get to deal with the significant costs of legal defence and to fill the gap created in the co-op's account by the court receiver.

A large assembly took place on the weekend of 15-16 September inside the factory, where dozens of movements - from social centres to Caritas, critical consumer groups and trade unions - showed their political and material support for RiMaflow's cause. An international call is circulating and has already gathered dozens of signatures from representatives of well-known movements, intellectuals and artists. [126] Dozens of solidarity initiatives will be organised in the coming weeks from north to south Italy.

This is a battle that concerns us all.

RiMaflow will live! Immediate release of Massimo Lettieri!

Milan, 19 September 2018

Sulawesi, East of Java

17 October 2018, by Krithika Varagur

Last year, Nomoni was met with heavy rain and floods - a bad omen, but nothing compared to what happened this year, when the city was pulverised by a magnitude 7.5 earthquake and the tsunami that followed it. They

struck at around 6 p.m., when Muslims were performing the last of their day's prayers and Nomoni festivalgoers were taking sunset selfies. The ground beneath their feet liquefied. The death toll is 2000 and

rising.

Some people in Palu, without better explanations or serviceable aid, see the disaster as 'punishment' for the animist festival, a harder warning than

last year. ‘They think the mayor was trying to invoke demons,’ according Ronny Buol, a photographer from the North Sulawesi city of Manado, who has been volunteering in Palu for the last ten days. Someone put up a hand-painted plywood sign: ‘The victims of the Palu tsunami are a result of the Palu Nomoni making Palu cry.’

The mayor and other regional officials quickly absconded after the quake. ‘In the first day or two after the crisis there were corpses scattered everywhere, right in the middle of the city, and they were just left there,’ Adriany Badrah, a resident of Palu, told the Indonesia at Melbourne blog. ‘Families were left to try to identify the dead themselves.’ [127] Some people escaped to the more populous islands of Java or Borneo; the governor of Sulawesi angrily told them not to bother coming back. [128] The federal government announced this week that it would stop looking for people on 11 October. At least 5000 are still missing and more than 70,000 have been displaced. The international news cycle is moving on.

It’s hard to shake the feeling that name recognition (or a lack of it) is a factor in the chaotic response. When Mount Agung on Bali started smoking last year, it made world headlines for months; Mount Sinabung, in a less-visited part of Sumatra, erupting continuously since 2013, has created a semi-permanent settlement of volcano refugees who are unlikely to receive further aid. Most well-meaning observers of need to ask where Sulawesi is: east of Borneo, I usually say, south of the Philippines, quite far from nearly anywhere else in Asia that comes to mind. Indonesia is also wider than the continental United States, and Sulawesi is a long way from Java, the nation’s centre of government and resources.

Still, did it have to be this bad? Indonesia seemed to be caught

completely off-guard by the quake, but it is one of the most seismically active countries on earth. Five days after the tsunami, a volcano erupted on another part of Sulawesi. A quake is not an epoch-marking event; it’s a leitmotif of ordinary life. President Joko Widodo only reluctantly agreed to accept foreign aid several days after the event, hesitantly for the first time since the catastrophic 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. Meanwhile, the early warning systems installed after that tsunami had fallen into disrepair; Indonesia’s Disaster Management Agency admitted that the buoys meant to record changes in sea level have been defunct since 2012. The annual disaster monitoring budget has fallen by 65 per cent over the same periods. But there are alternatives to expensive technology, such as education.

Adam Switzer researches tsunamis at the Earth Observatory of Singapore. ‘I was astonished to see people still standing at the coast when the tsunami arrived,’ he told me. ‘Every Indonesian child needs to learn about natural hazards’ and ‘anyone living at the coast should know the first thing to do when they feel an earthquake’: find a safe spot to wait out the tremors, then move inland or to higher ground for several hours.

The exact details of last month’s seismic event are still unclear; Switzer described it as a complex ‘earthquake with coincident tsunamis, landslides; liquefaction and slumps’ that will take months to unravel. The elongated shape of Palu Bay magnified the effects of the quake, which would not ordinarily have produced such strong waves.

Rather than an isolated tragedy, the Palu tsunami should be seen as part of a recurring phenomenon, one that wasn’t always so devastating in the region. The historical record on Indonesian tsunamis is thin because they weren’t always understood as

seismic events so much as ‘freak waves or floods’, according to the historian Anthony Reid. [129] All the same, traditional Sumatran and Javanese architecture was relatively earthquake-proof: often built of wood, bamboo and thatch, and using no arches, pillars or halls. ‘Before 20th-century changes in urbanisation and building styles,’ Reid writes,

Indonesians themselves were little affected by earthquakes, and appear to have avoided settling in large numbers on the coasts of Nias, western Sumatra and southern Java which were exposed to tsunamis. The people of Nias, probably the most vulnerable to tsunamis of all complex Indonesian societies, spurned their coasts completely before sea-based Dutch infrastructure arrived in the second half of the 19th century.

Most large port cities make little sense in Indonesia, given its geography, but they suited the needs of maritime European traders and colonists. Palu became a maritime port for the Dutch East India Company around 1700 and came under direct Dutch rule in 1905. The colonial legacy means that Indonesia is full of time bombs, precarious coastal cities susceptible to seismic events, including Jakarta. While a degree of physical destruction may be inevitable, the loss of human life can be minimised, particularly with education.

Simeulue, an Acehnese fishing island, survived the 2004 tsunami with remarkably few casualties – just seven out of 86,735 residents – thanks to its indigenous tradition of songs, poems and folktales that explain how when the ground starts to tremble, you should wait out the tremors, then move inland or to higher ground. [130] Many lives were saved on Simeulue not by buoys, text alerts, government aid or luck, but by stories.

LRB

The inter-Korean summit and the situation in North-East Asia

16 October 2018, by **Pierre Rousset**

In a very volatile situation, the Korean leaders have taken the initiative skilfully, as they have periodically done throughout the year, but Russia and China have also shown themselves dramatically with the major Vostok ("East") 2018 military exercises in Siberia and the Okhotsk Sea off Japan.

Keep the momentum. The media coverage of the Pyongyang summit was highly political. More than ever, they played up the personal proximity of Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un, to the point of creating irritation in South Korea. The objective was to show their common willingness to keep the initiative on the burning issue of the Korean crisis in the face of all the powers operating in the region.

The rapprochement between the two Koreas continues, on a tight schedule. An agreement has been signed in the military field to reduce the risk of confrontation. Forward posts in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) will be abolished by December. Buffer zones will be established along the DMZ and maritime borders. The "Common Safety Zone" at Panmunjom will be cleared of mines by October. The North Korean tourist site of Mount Kumgang is to be reactivated (visits were suspended after a South Korean tourist was shot dead by North soldiers in 2008). Reunification of families separated by the Korean War (1950-1953) must increase. Humanitarian aid to the population of the North must be increased. Economic exchanges must be developed and rail or road networks between the two countries must be connected before the end of the year. In addition, Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un are considering the presentation of a joint bid to host the Summer Olympic Games in 2032.

On the nuclear issue, Kim Jong-un

took another "small step forward", announcing the closure of the Tongchang-ri missile launch site and the promise to suspend the Yongbyon facilities under the condition (important precision) of American "reciprocity". The denuclearization and de-escalation policy concerns the entire peninsula and not just North Korea. So the ball is back in Donald Trump's court.

Already on 9 September, during the parade celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Pyongyang had shown its goodwill: no intercontinental missiles had been exhibited, all references to nuclear weapons had disappeared.

Donald Trump was caught off guard. He had rudely cancelled a visit to Pyongyang by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and had denounced China as "complicating things" with North Korea. Today, he must welcome the renewal of Kim Jong-un's commitments, but there is no clear direction: the main presidential advisers are tearing each other apart over Korean politics, while the geostrategic situation is getting more complicated.

Where can North Korea go?

Among the question marks that make any forecast perilous are of course the uncertainties of Trump's and the United States' foreign policy, but also the developments in North Korea. This does not concern Kim Jong-un's objectives, which seem quite clear, but rather their implementation. After having made a considerable effort to develop the regime's nuclear capacity (warheads and missiles) and to obtain

some form of international diplomatic recognition, economic development is declared the priority of priorities, in a context marked by the formation of a broadened consumer-oriented social elite and a tolerated market economy, intertwined with the state sector.

The dynamics seem to be similar to the one previously known in China, a capitalist transition. However, North Korea does not have the assets of its neighbour or even those of Vietnam. A large part of the rural population still lives in extreme poverty, to such an extent that it would be difficult to extract from the rural world the funding necessary to modernize industry. Under these conditions, in the event of an opening, companies would be unable to compete with foreign firms, particularly Chinese and South Korean ones.

At the Pyongyang summit, President Moon Jae-in was accompanied by the leaders of the main chaebols (South Korean conglomerates) such as Hyundai, Samsung, LG, SK. In their view, the opening of North Korea would make it possible to exploit a very cheap labour force, to appropriate untapped natural resources and to create new channels to the Chinese market. However, these prospects are still blocked by the continuation of UN sanctions that economically isolate North Korea. In addition, many political considerations will have to be taken into account by the conglomerate management, which is used to working with the Moon presidency.

There is no guarantee that the North Korean regime will be able to manage the upheavals caused by the shocks of a capitalist transition without entering a crisis, with unpredictable consequences.

Russian-Chinese rapprochement

Russia and China tend to stand together against the United States, which has been evident in the North Pacific.

Moscow organised Operation Vostok 2018 in Siberia from 11 to 15 September, the largest military exercise since the end of the USSR, with Beijing's cooperation. Some 300,000 military personnel were reportedly mobilized (official figures are controversial), 1,000 aircraft, helicopters and drones, 36,000 tanks, armoured tanks and artillery vehicles, as well as 80 ships. China was involved, providing 3,200 soldiers.

Some of the operations took place off the Japanese coast, in the Okhotsk Sea, quite far from the Korean peninsula. China and Russia share the continental border with North Korea and reaffirmed their commitment to defend their strategic interests in the North Pacific; sending a message to Tokyo and Washington.

In 2015, Xi Jinping attended the military parade in Moscow in May and Putin attended the Beijing parade in September. Since then, relations have regularized, with Russia deciding, after hesitating, to sell Sukhoi 35 fighters to China in 2017 and equipment associated with the S-400 ground-to-air anti-aircraft defence systems in 2018. This has led to a new escalation in tension with Washington. Trump announced sanctions against the Chinese Ministry of Defence's arms procurement unit on 20 September. The latter will no longer be able to apply for export licences or

integrate into the US financial system, being added to the list of entities with which Americans are not allowed to do business.

This seems to be the first time a country has been punished for buying weapons from Russia. One more step is taken in the escalation of tension. The trade war seems to be spreading to the very lucrative global arms market from which Trump would like to oust Moscow.

The takeoff of the Chinese naval forces

Although these latest events concern the sale of Russian arms, China's military preponderance over its ally is rapidly increasing. The Chinese army's budget, excluding spending on research and development, is four times higher than Russia's: \$228.2 billion compared to \$55.3 billion according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

In terms of military equipment, the Chinese navy outperforms Russia in all areas except strategic submarines and nuclear missiles. Since 2010, it has grown dramatically both quantitatively and qualitatively. It now has two aircraft carriers (one of which is entirely Chinese built), a third is under construction and two others are planned. China could gain control of "the catapult", a complex technology currently controlled by the United States.

As far as warships - destroyers, frigates - are concerned, China is getting closer to the Western level.

Yesterday confined to the South China Sea, Chinese naval forces are now deploying in the Pacific and asserting their presence in all maritime theatres. Its weakest point is its lack of experience in combat, as well as in the coordination of large-scale manoeuvres.

Beijing was militarily ousted by Trump from the maritime space between Korea and Japan, with tensions crystallizing over Taiwan and the South China Sea. It can now take the initiative in the region by bypassing the Korean padlock and leaning against Russian Siberia.

Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinto remains marginalized in this great geopolitical game. The Russians and the Chinese taunted him by conducting naval manoeuvres in the Okhotsk Sea. The United States does not care about its demands. The "North Korean threat" was used to justify his militaristic and ultra-nationalist policy and Kim is no longer sending missiles to the archipelago!

The Korean crisis is at the heart of a series of tensions between powers. Less than ever before, it is cannot be reduced to a face-to-face meeting between Pyongyang and Washington. It is one of the crystallisation points of the China-USA, Russia-USA, China-Japan, South Korea-Japan conflicts, which are rooted in the present, but which also have a never-ending past (Japanese colonisation and invasion, legacy of the Cold War).

25 september 2018

28 abortion rights successes in 2018

16 October 2018, by **Marge Berer, Nandini Archer**

This year marks the 29th time our movement has celebrated 28 September as an international day for safe abortion. It has been a busy year for abortion rights campaigning, and a good one in many countries.

Much of the mainstream media reported on the Irish abortion referendum and the almost successful Argentinian law reform, but action has been taking place all over the world, inside and outside government, on the streets and in the media, from South Korea to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). [131]

Focusing on the increasingly organised and sometimes violent backlash against women's rights globally, and the myriad challenges we face, we sometimes lose sight of the many positive strides forward. This list celebrates these, and all the people who have worked tirelessly to make them possible. [132]

1. El Salvador commutes two women's prison sentences

In February, Teodora del Carmen Vásquez regained her freedom after serving 11 years in prison for aggravated homicide under El Salvador's extreme anti-abortion laws. [133] One month later, Maira Verónica Figueroa Marroquán was released after her own 30-year homicide sentence was commuted. "I am happy to be with my family," she said. "I want to study law to understand what happened to me and help other women." [134]

2. New Zealand's prime minister announces intended legal reform

Also in February, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced her decision to launch a reform of New Zealand's abortion law. [135] The country's current law permits abortion when a woman faces danger to her life, physical or mental health, or in cases of fetal anomaly.

3. Macedonia also announces its intention to reform legislation

On International Women's Day, 8 March, recently appointed Health Minister of Macedonia, Venko Filipce, announced that he would start working to amend the abortion law to

protect women's health. [136] The current 2013 law is extremely restrictive and sparked widespread criticism from women's and human rights activists when it was adopted. [137]

4. The DRC publishes the Maputo Protocol in its legal gazette

Article 14 of the protocol requires that signatory states protect women's reproductive rights, including legal access to abortion. [138] The DRC's constitution states that ratified international treaties shall supersede national laws once published in the legal gazette. A coalition of national and local NGOs is now working to raise awareness of this change.

5. Chilean feminists defend their new abortion law

In March, feminists mobilised in Santiago to protect their new abortion law. [139] [140] Last year, the right to abortion on three grounds was won in Chile. [141] Although the new conservative government sought to restrict the law, it has so far been unsuccessful. In August, opposition MPs presented a bill to further legalise abortion, inspired by Argentina.

6. Cyprus reforms its abortion law

Also in March, after years of discussion and three years of inaction on a bill tabled in 2015, parliament reformed its law to allow abortion up to 12 weeks of pregnancy without having to prove risks to the woman's health and up to 19 weeks in case of rape. [142] The vote in support of the bill was 33 in favour, with eight against and five abstentions. [143]

7. Abortion clinic buffer zones established in Canada and London, UK

In April, Ealing Council in west London unanimously voted to implement a 100 metre buffer zone around a clinic to stop harassment of women and staff, though in September the Home Secretary refused to make the buffer zones national. [144] No-go zones for protestors were also established in Alberta, following several other Canadian provinces. [145]

8. French Equality Council proposes new constitutional rights

Also in April, the French High Council for Equality Between Women and Men published a call to modernise France's constitution to include rights to contraception and abortion, as a crucial way to guarantee gender equality. [146]

9. Women in government speak out in Zimbabwe for abortion law reform

In May, there were fresh calls for Zimbabwe's abortion law to be reformed, including from women in the health ministry and the Parliamentary Committee on Gender and Youth Affairs. MP Jessie Majome also argued that although abortion in cases of rape is legal, the red tape women have to go through makes it almost inaccessible. [147]

10. Mexican Supreme Court confirms right to abortion in two rape cases

On 15 and 18 May, the court ruled that two women had their rights violated when they were denied abortions after having been raped. Abortion is legal in cases of rape, but the women had to wait years for their appeals to be heard. [148] [149]

11. Ireland votes to repeal its constitution's eighth amendment

On 25 May, the country voted in a historic referendum to repeal the amendment which had given a fetus equal rights to those of a pregnant woman. Two-thirds of voters said 'yes' to the repeal motion, which passed in all but one of 40 local constituencies.

12. Action in Northern Ireland is also sparked by Ireland's referendum

There was an immediate call for Northern Ireland to be next, including from the regional director of the Royal College of Midwives, the Unite trade union, and more than 150 British MPs. [150] The Irish Prime Minister said he couldn't see why women from Northern Ireland couldn't have abortions in the Republic, once procedures were legalised there.

13. A motion tabled in Jamaica calls for debate on abortion law reform

A group of experts on human rights in patient care urged legislators in April to repeal sections of the 1864 Offences Against the Person Act which prevent Jamaican women from legally terminating pregnancies. [151] On 5 June, a motion was tabled in parliament calling for debate on the law that criminalises abortion with life imprisonment. [152]

14. Ireland finally grants justice for Ms Y

A young woman, 'Ms Y,' sought refugee status in Ireland in 2014 after being kidnapped, beaten and raped by the head of a paramilitary organisation in her home country. She discovered she was pregnant, was denied an abortion even after threatening suicide, and was detained in hospital until told (falsely) that it was too late. [153] In June, Ireland's Health and Safety Executive acknowledged liability and offered her compensation.

15. Argentina's House votes to reform its abortion law, but Senate votes it down

In June, the House of Deputies voted to reform the abortion law by 131 to 123 votes. However, the Senate then voted against the reform in August, while hundreds of thousands of people, mostly women, demonstrated outside in the pouring rain. There were 66 solidarity events in 35 countries across four continents. [154]

16. A medical college in Ethiopia opens a new clinic

Also in June, a new clinic was opened at a hospital and medical college in Adama, Ethiopia. [155] On average, the clinic sees 100-120 girls and women every day. Teams of nurses and midwives provide contraception, counselling and abortion services. The clinic is a model of integrated sexual reproductive health services.

17. A public meeting in Madagascar discusses abortion law reform

On 1 July, a panel including the

presidents of the National Association of Physicians and the Independent National Human Rights Commission discussed decriminalising abortion. Panellists highlighted the weight of the church in opposition and talked about unsafe abortion as a major public health concern. [156] [157]

18. Polish feminists stop debate on yet another anti-abortion bill

Also in July, Polish feminists managed to prevent the latest repressive abortion bill. [158] It aimed to criminalise abortion in cases of fetal impairment, which under the existing restrictive law make up 95% of legal abortions carried out in Polish hospitals. [159] Women had protested against the proposed bill throughout the year.

19. South Korean doctors demand legal reform

In August, the Health Ministry issued regulations which would have enabled authorities to suspend licenses of doctors providing abortions. In protest, nearly 2,500 members of the Korean College of Obstetrics & Gynaecology went on strike. The ministry rescinded the order, but the doctors have demanded a more fundamental solution.

20. The Isle of Man successfully reforms their abortion law

On 6 July, the legislative council approved their abortion reform bill in full. [160] One council member, a bishop, proposed 71 amendments (which all failed). [161] Now abortion is permitted on request up to 14 weeks and in some circumstances up to 24 weeks.

21. Amnesty International adopts a new policy on abortion

A July members' meeting in Poland called on states not just to decriminalise but also to guarantee access to safe and legal abortion. [162] In August, Amnesty took up the case of a 15-year-old girl locked up in Indonesia for having an abortion after being raped by her brother. She was released following international protests. [163]

22. Full text of draft bill to reform

abortion law in C te d'Ivoire is published

In July, a news source published the text of a draft bill which would broaden the legal grounds for abortion, which is currently prohibited except to save the life of the woman. [164] The draft bill would allow abortion, on the approval of at least three doctors, in cases of rape, incest, serious fetal malformations, and where the woman's health is at risk.

23. South Africa holds 'unfinished business' reproductive justice conference

Rhodes University and partners hosted the Abortion & Reproductive Justice III: Unfinished Business conference in Makhanda, South Africa, in July. It attracted significant positive media attention and brought together researchers, activists, policy makers, and healthcare professionals from 30 countries.

24. Newly-elected Mexican government supports abortion law reform

It was also announced in July that the new government-in-waiting of Andr s Manuel L pez Obrador will seek to decriminalise abortion throughout Mexico. [165] The future Interior Minister, Olga S nchez Cordero, explained in a radio interview that she supports abortion up to 12 weeks because women "should not be deprived of their freedom". [166]

25. More than 100 groups march for abortion rights in the Dominican Republic

On 15 July, thousands of people participated in the "March for Life, Health and Dignity of Dominican Women". [167] They called for the decriminalisation of abortion when the life of the woman is at risk, in cases of rape or incest, and when the fetus is not viable. Placards carried messages such as: "The rich abort, the poor die". [168]

26. US survey shows strong voter support for constitutional right to abortion

More than 75% of respondents to an

online survey (from across the political spectrum) said that any new Supreme Court justice should uphold women's right to abortion. The majority also said they believe that the right to abortion in the US is currently at risk.

27. Brazil's Supreme Court holds public hearing on criminalised abortion

A public hearing was in August held

on the constitutionality of a 1940 law criminalising abortion. [169] It was convened amid a case filed last year calling for decriminalisation of abortion on request in the first 12 weeks. [170] The case argues that criminalisation violates women's constitutional rights including those to life, dignity and equality. [171]

28. International abortion rights advocates gather in Lisbon,

Portugal

More than 100 participants from 58 countries met in September and discussed topics from medical abortion to decriminalisation campaigns at a three-day forum to "develop an advocacy agenda for abortion in the 21st century and make change happen."

[Open Democracy](#)

The Bolsonaro Effect

15 October 2018, by Lucia Mury Scalco, Rosana Pinheiro-Machado

Bolsonaro's political language is hatred. He often calls for the annihilation of the Left. A few days after talking about shooting PT supporters with a machine gun at a campaign rally, a man stabbed him in the stomach. [172] [173] As the situation in Brazil escalates, and the possibility of Bolsonaro becoming president increases, it's important to understand more about the far-right candidate.

The "Protest Vote"

Jair Bolsonaro is a former military officer from the small Social Liberal Party (PSL) and now serves as a federal congressman. He is a far-right politician who combines liberal economic positions with inflammatory declarations against human rights. He is an anticommunist and an apologist for the dictatorship's use of torture. His public security motto is "a good criminal is a dead criminal." When it comes to economics, he defers to neoliberal economist Paulo Guedes, who he's tapped to head economic policy in a Bolsonaro government. [174]

Although the stereotypical Bolsonaro voter is sexist, racist, and aligned with far-right politics, this is not always the case. For many, voting for Bolsonaro

means a renewal of hope and political energy. Some even call it a "revolutionary" or "protest vote." Our research shows a surprising diversity of people and ideology among his voter base.

Just recently, we were discussing politics with a group of young men in a restaurant in the impoverished periphery of Porto Alegre, in the south of Brazil. Two waiters interrupted the conversation to spontaneously declare their vote for Bolsonaro. Two other men from the next table then jumped into the conversation to proudly yell "me too!" In a matter of seconds, others were chiming in, enthusiastically saying that for the first time they could support a candidate's campaign based on "faith," "love," and "hope," rather than in exchange for money or jobs — a standard practice in the clientelist politics still prevalent in many parts of Brazil.

U.S. voters are by now familiar with the reasons that make politicians like Bolsonaro a phenomenon. Like Donald Trump, he employs hatred as a political mobilizer and even incites violence directly against his political competitors. He also, like Trump, is adroit at posing as an anti-establishment outsider.

Yet Bolsonaro is by no means new to

the political scene. He has been a congressman since 1991, along with his brother and sons. Most of his political career was spent in the Progressive Party (PP), of which the imprisoned former São Paulo governor Paulo Maluf was a key figure. Maluf is the archetype of the corrupt Brazilian politician, embodying the famous slogan "*rouba mas faz*" — that is, "he steals but he gets things done."

In spite of his history and associations, Bolsonaro has been widely viewed as a novelty in this election, a candidate synonymous with renewal and honesty. Although he has accumulated political privileges and has taken advantage of them, there are still no significant corruption scandals hanging over him. His military background and the promise of discipline and order is appealing amid the chaotic political climate. And after the soft coup that removed PT president Dilma Rousseff from power, his calls for military intervention are no longer taboo.

The Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) used to enjoy hegemony on the Right as the Workers' Party's main opposition. The PSDB has tried to slow Bolsonaro's ascent by claiming to be the real guarantor of efficiency and the corporate class's wellbeing. Yet its candidate, Geraldo Alckmin, continues

to lag behind his far-right counterpart. [175]

Bolsonaro's far-right character is most evident when he's agitating against basic human rights. When he voted in favor of Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016, he did so in honor of the memory of General Carlos Brilhante Ustra. Ustra is known as one of the cruelest torturers of the dictatorship era in Brazil. He ordered Dilma Rousseff's torture when she was imprisoned as an anti-dictatorship militant in her youth.

Such controversies are part of Bolsonaro's strategy for staying in the spotlight. When a journalist confronted him about his inflammatory views, he simply laughed it off. "The point is to forget these little slip ups from the past and focus on the future," he said in the well-known talk show *Roda Viva*. In one strike, he can attack the mainstream media and say something meaningful to Brazilians desperate for a change of course.

Bolsonaro knows how to take advantage of social media and its capacity to spread misinformation. He has accumulated 6.6 million followers on Facebook (one million just in the last three weeks), compared to Lula's 3.5 million and Haddad's six hundred thousand. He is seen as "funny," "authentic," and is admired for "saying what he thinks," encouraging others to voice their prejudices as well. His online campaign is a machine of fake news, rumors, and defamation. Recent analysis provided by Political Debate Monitor shows that 80 percent of his online content is focused on attacking the left wing, feminism, and the massive TV conglomerate Globo. [176]

Whatever he says is made into viral memes. Yet Bolsonaro is not just an Internet phenomenon. In fact, without Lula in the race, he has steadily occupied first place in all presidential polls with as much as 31 percent of voter intentions according to the latest Ibope poll. Lula is now imprisoned and unable to run, with his successor Fernando Haddad taking his place as PT candidate. More important than the polls, however, is the legion of fans Bolsonaro has accumulated, who

crowd airports, chant, and cry when he lands in any city.

Bolsonaro's hateful and misogynist narrative is mostly succeeding in attracting men, who make up two-thirds of his potential voters. This strategy, however, has led to his overwhelming rejection among women. Recent polls suggest that around 50 percent of women "would never vote for him." It is the fiercest gender discrepancy in the last 24 years of Brazilian democracy. Our research also identified a strong affinity for Bolsonaro among young voters.

From Hope to Hate

Bolsonaro gained a lot of traction by discussing urban violence. In the outskirts of Brazil's big cities, collective spaces where people could discuss communal problems are absent. People know that, regardless of whether they represent the left or right of the spectrum, politicians will only show up in their communities during elections, offering around twenty dollars for people to distribute pamphlets.

Bolsonaro has rapidly gained popularity in the midst of this democratic vacuum by offering punitive solutions, shamelessly embracing the popular saying that "a good bandit is a dead bandit." He promises simplistic solutions for complex problems, such as adopting policies that allow the arming of the general populace, raising penalties in the criminal code, and chemically castrating rapists.

Bolsonarism is also part of a broader social backlash against women's rights. Bolsonarism is also part of a broader social backlash against women's rights. The mass demonstrations of June 2013 constituted a milestone in Brazilian politics, marked by the emergence and proliferation of autonomist feminist, queer, and antiracist groups, especially among young people. [177] In 2016, low-income teenagers occupied public high schools nationwide. Teenage girls were the main protagonists of this movement, giving rise to the now-famous slogan

lute como uma garota ("fight like a girl"). [178]

On the other hand, young boys who look up to Bolsonaro call him a "*mito*," or "legend." He has become a symbol of male authority.

This scenario has led many, including the Left, to identify all Bolsonaro supporters as ultra-conservative men. However, based on our research, apart from the fact that most of his supporters are indeed men, we have yet to identify any other discernible pattern. There are young and old people, formal and informal workers, funk singers, protestants, Catholics, and so on. All in all, they are not the "fascists" that the social media portrayals have made them out to be.

Of course, the stereotypical racist, misogynist, homophobic, and angry white man appears among Bolsonaro's ranks. But he is by no means the rule. Many supporters find Bolsonaro too extreme or too misogynistic, yet they are convinced that there is no other alternative. We have even encountered people who would vote for Lula if he were free, but turn to Bolsonaro as their plan B. In both cases, these voters aren't necessarily judging candidates by how right or left-wing they are. Instead, they're looking for a national savior.

Many Bolsonaro supporters are undeniably driven by gender, sexual, and racial prejudices. But we can't discount the heavy weight of economic stability as a factor driving his popularity. Brazilian economic growth plunged from 7.5 percent in 2010 to -3.77 percent in 2015, exacerbating a political and institutional crisis that culminated in the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016.

Michel Temer's administration set up an intense neoliberal austerity agenda, prioritizing cuts in public education and health. This scenario creates a complex, though still unclear, blend of economic, political, and social factors that drive the Bolsonaro effect.

Over the past ten years, Brazil has gone through a cycle that we have dubbed "from hope to hate." 2010 was the peak of *Lulismo*, marked by

economic growth largely based on domestic consumption and financial inclusion. Cash transfer policies, such as Bolsa Família, fostered consumption and a sense of individual self-worth among the very poor. [179]

While Lulismo brought about dramatic social improvements, it also systematically demobilized its base in order to sustain the political contradictions of its time in government. The PT paid a high price for this. Starting in 2014, the economy worsened, and the population has become increasingly indebted as unemployment grows and public goods and services are attacked. Under Temer's cuts to the social safety net, quality of living has dramatically decreased.

The protests of June 2013 inaugurated a period of political instability, which combined with economic crisis to open the window to the Right's offensive on the PT. That process ended in Rousseff's impeachment a few years later. Since then, the political and legal systems have gone rogue, and people's everyday life has deteriorated.

The common sense response, thanks to deep distrust of politicians, has been to blame corruption, rather than neoliberal economics or Brazil's underdeveloped economy. Bolsonaro and his authoritarian narrative gained space precisely amidst this national limbo and sense of chaos. Surveys show that since the impeachment and the corruption scandal that affected former PSDB candidate Aécio Neves in May 2017, Bolsonaro's vote intentions jumped from 8 percent to 31 percent. He gained ground with some people disappointed with the PT. But mainly the increase was found among right-wing voters who shifted their party loyalties. The Bolsonaro effect is the reorganization and radicalization of the ideological poles in Brazilian society.

By often employing the expression "*isso é uma pouca vergonha*" (meaning, "this is absurd!"), Bolsonaro poses himself as an honest man who is eager to solve, through military discipline, all these complex structural national issues. This line of thinking drove the protests against Dilma

Rousseff in 2015-16, helping to polarize those enraged by the corruption scandals behind Bolsonaro and against the Left.

Reorganizing the Left

The phenomenon of Bolsonarism goes beyond a single candidate: it represents the rise of a conservative zeitgeist in a time of profound social, political, and economic transformation. All analyses today predict that the second round of the presidential race will be a highly polarized one, with both Bolsonaro and Haddad facing high rates of rejection. Regardless of the result, Brazil will experience some more years of political instability.

The challenges for the Left are enormous. First and foremost, it needs to admit the problems with the Lulista development model, which resulted in the demobilization of the PT's popular base and shifted the Left's emphasis from collective social rights to individual financial inclusion.

It is also crucial to reevaluate the political alliances that were forged by Lula and Rousseff in the name of governability. Lula's popularity reflects his individual charisma, and his association with good economic times, more than it does widespread loyalty to the PT or the Left.

The Left, already fragmented in Brazil, suffered great losses after Rousseff's impeachment in June 2016. Most organizations have failed to produce credible new leaders, and the PT has focused almost exclusively on denouncing the soft coup and the growth of fascism. This antifascist stance is, of course, crucial. Yet the lack of a positive program risks creating a political vacuum. The Left needs first to build a new and radical political agenda that enables a dialogue with people and their concerns, and second to be able to approach and to mobilize the popular base.

Regarding the first issue, the rise of Bolsonarism has made it clear that a lack of security in urban areas and

corruption are key issues to be addressed in the political agenda. This requires simple, yet not simplistic, language that reaches ordinary citizens. Major left-wing parties, paralyzed by the polarization defining Brazilian social networks, have neglected these subjects, allowing the Right to cynically appropriate them.

The second issue is slightly more complex as it requires the abandonment of an outdated hierarchical mode of doing politics, embracing new, sometimes unpredictable political actors. This is the case of the new youth movements that demand decentralized politics and social diversity at times when leftist political meetings anachronistically remain the domain of white men.

This is also the case regarding the new precariat mobilizations, which function in an ambiguous way, sometimes denouncing the political system, sometimes asking for military intervention. In the recent strike by truck drivers that brought the country to a standstill, the reaction of the PT was to criticize the movement as a lockout led by authoritarian groups. [180] In times of *uberization* and automatization, this stance is highly risky. Bolsonaro, on the other hand, visited the strike and declared his support for the drivers. His attitude provided a basic lesson to the Left: workers must be supported, since class consciousness demands political investment.

Bolsonarism shows us how radical frustration over the system can be harnessed for political gain. Since 2013, what we have seen is a paralyzed left that rejects all the groups that it can neither understand nor deal with. This is a strategic mistake. Bolsonarism shows us how radical frustration over the system can be harnessed for political gain. Left-wing activists must understand and embrace this dissatisfaction by acting through the gaps of capitalism's contradictions, while offering an alternative radical agenda that makes sense for ordinary citizens.

Amid this pessimistic scenario, it seems that the radical reorganization of the Left may emerge from the feminist movement. [181] It was

women's organizing efforts that helped remove Eduardo Cunha, the corrupt president of the Chamber of Deputies who orchestrated the impeachment. Feminist militants are also the leaders behind the #elenãfo (#nohim) movement pushing for a national alliance against Bolsonaro. They are managing to foment an anti-

fascist front in Brazil in ways that the leftist parties talked about but were unable to produce. Last Saturday, millions of women and other minorities took the streets and marched against fascism. This unprecedented and extraordinary grassroots movement, spread all over

the social fabric, online and offline, transcends the Left's fragmentation and has the potential to reorganize the field in the turbulent few years ahead.

October 4, 2018

[Nacla](#) in collaboration with [Jacobin Magazine](#).

Beyond the rejection of the law for the legalization of abortion in Argentina: a fourth feminist wave?

13 October 2018, by Bettina Ghio, Fanny Gallot

Introduction

On 8 August 2018, the Senate finally rejected the proposed law for the legalization of abortion in Argentina proposed by the [Campaign for the Right to Free and Safe Legal Abortion](#). To believe that the hundreds of thousands of women who mobilized have lost would be reductive. As feminist activist Dolores Fenoy said just before the vote, "The movement will continue no matter what. We will surely be sad, we will have less energy, but never, never, will we be demoralized or even less demobilized. And since the vote, many texts circulate on social networks stating that "we won". [182]

In fact, it is a feminist tidal wave that is submerging the country; moreover, several Argentinian editorialists have spoken of a "girls' revolution" - since

girls from 13 to 20 years old are a driving force in this movement: "girls who occupy, for the most part, the streets, colleges, subways, buses, squares, family meals, social networks, are under 25 years old". [183] On 13 June there were a million of them keeping watch in front of the Congress when MPs had to vote on the bill. On 1 August they organized for example Operation Spider in the subway in Buenos Aires and every line evoked an essential aspect of the mobilization: "Line A was centred on the demand for the law from a perspective of human rights, demanding the right to decide for our own bodies "; "Line D demanded comprehensive sex education. [184] in order to discover both the contraceptive pill to take advantage of it, and legal abortion to decide freely and to make a world habitable for everyone."

This massive mobilization comes after

the one launched by "Ni una menos" ("Not one less") - a collective of journalists and intellectuals - that had mobilized about 300,000 Argentines in the streets on June 3, 2015 to denounce machist violence, after a wave of femicides in early 2015. It is also the continuation of a process over several decades, marked by the National Meetings of Women who meet each year in a different city of the country and each time bring together more participants: they were 100,000 in Rosario in 2016, for example.

Finally, this Argentinian feminist wave is not isolated, because it has lit a flame across the continent, and beyond: Chile has also been the scene of very big demonstrations, with regular exchanges of activists between the two countries; groups of women activists are also forming in Mexico [