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Letters

Is Capitalism Dead or Playing Possum?

Our March 23 issue, particularly Barbara Ehrenreich and Bill Fletcher Jr.'s forum on "Reimagining Socialism," drew much positive mail. The forum has been expanded—with entries from, among others, Mike Davis, Kim Moody, Christian Parenti and Saskia Sassen. It continues at TheNation.com. —The Editors

ANDERSON, IND.

The special issue on reimagining socialism is by far the best one this year. Seeing socialism discussed in a fashion other than as an evil is refreshing. I'm not a true socialist, but it's time the discussion about other ways to run the economy took place in the open.

KENT PORTELL

WARREN, VT.

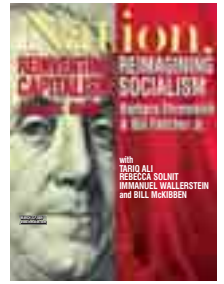
Great issue. I call myself a socialist, but I have no faith in socialism. I have ideals, however. To me, the essence of socialism lies in these two statements: 1. Give what you can; take only what you need. 2. Humanity comes before systems and economy (people before money!). I was disturbed by some in the forum who don't seem to understand that capitalism *is* the problem. It worships growth; only cancer grows itself to the death of its host.

ROBIN LEHMAN

KENT, OHIO

Given the catastrophic costs of saving conglomerates "too big to fail," surely a proper response would see that no single entity be allowed to become that big. We once recognized this threat by breaking up the likes of AT&T. Shouldn't we try to save capitalism again—at least its superiority at creating wealth—by reconceptualizing it with the goal of serving the public welfare? Where economies of scale require a "too big to fail" concentration of capital, let government take over, not just temporarily. This crisis may be a chance to change capitalism for the benefit of everyone, with a little help from socialism.

AL EDGELL



KNOXVILLE, TENN.

Socialism doesn't work unless it is democratic first, socialist second. My answer, like Roosevelt's, is regulated capitalism. The TVA area where I live is a perfect analogy for the way a wild force like a flooding river, or capitalism, can be tamed. When we get too much rain, the water is held back by dams; when we have a dry period, the dams release water. The dams on capitalism that Roosevelt put in place worked for decades, until Republicans removed them. We need to reinstate regulated capitalism.

SHIRLEY E. HASTINGS

WORCESTER, MASS.

The socialism of Marx and Engels was an economic system to displace another economic system—capitalism—bound to succumb to its internal contradictions. Like Marx and Engels, Ehrenreich and Fletcher are looking for the final economic crisis of capitalism, which will allow us to replace it with socialism. They think the current crisis may be the one. But unfortunately, according to them, it finds us without a plan for what we want to substitute for capitalism.

Rebecca Solnit, in her forum reply, understands that socialism today is quite different. What we have learned since 1848, especially in the last century, is that socialism is about politics. It is not primarily an economic system. It is about opposition to central governments, whether by a capitalist ruling class or a bureaucracy that calls itself socialist. It is not primarily about central plans.

Socialism is about the self-organization of people to solve the problems confronting them. The challenges are political. That sort of socialism does not arise from the cataclysmic collapse of a preceding system but grows slowly over long periods of time and with many efforts—successful ones and efforts that fail. That revolution has already begun, as illustrated vividly by Benjamin Dangl's "Lessons From Latin America," in the same issue.

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Church has a firm stance on abortion: any woman who has an abortion, or any doctor who aids in the procedure, is automatically excommunicated. The case of the 9-year-old girl in Recife shows that this is not an empty threat.

While each staff member at the domestic violence center is deeply invested in individual cases, as a team they've learned to take a long view and focus on crafting a model for a public institution that treats people with dignity and respect for their choices. In April, the women who worked on Adriana's case will meet with feminist leaders in two northeastern states, Rio Grande do Norte and Pernambuco, to build a regional coalition out of their many local initiatives. This follows a history of strong women's rights activism in Brazil. Brazilian women were the first in Latin America to introduce abortion information into medical school curriculums and among the first to develop underground abortion networks for poor women. In partnership with Cunnã and the government commission on women, the domestic violence center in João Pessoa used Adriana's case to hold the hospital accountable for repeated attempts to stop women from having abortions. Based on a report they submitted to the Ministry of Health about Adriana's case, the ministry removed Dr. Sergio from his position as director of the hospital; but he didn't lose

his place as an influential physician until another rape victim reported that she, too, had sought an abortion at Cândida Vargas and was turned away.

In Brazil, the public battle for abortion rights—the one that makes it into international newspapers—is a legal one. But the less visible battles are equally important. Cases like Adriana's are battles to make the law mean something to people on the ground, and the people waging them have taken on more than a single doctor who refuses to do an abortion. They also confront what Douraci calls “the inequalities, the power of machismo, the violence and the silence” that shape women's lives in João Pessoa and throughout Brazil. When I interviewed Douraci during the week that Adriana began prenatal care and newspapers reported that Congress voted against a bill to legalize abortion, she insisted that simply enacting new policies for women “does not further the debate on gender relations in those women's lives.” That debate takes place outside state legislatures: in the waiting rooms of domestic violence centers and in the hallways of public hospitals, where what the law says doesn't correspond to what the doctors do. Legal rights are put to the test in these waiting rooms and hallways, where people fight to turn rights on paper into rights in reality. ■

Letters

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If socialism today is different from that of Marx and Engels, so are its problems. They consist of obstacles to self-organization: a people that has been depoliticized by overwork; by a 24/7 barrage of propaganda insisting that we consume, consume and consume more; by conceptions of democracy that require next to nothing from citizens; by a general atmosphere of corruption that generates cynicism and despair.

RICHARD SCHMITT

ALBION, CALIF.

We need to explore economic systems to replace our form of capitalism, which depends on ever-increasing consumption, resource depletion, wealth inequality and planet warming. We must find an alternative! We need an economic system that will promote decreasing population, consumption and waste, so we can save our planet, and one that will also foster greater equality, caring, community and happiness.

TOM WODETZKI

CHICAGO

Barbara Ehrenreich and Bill Fletcher Jr.'s article, and the forum in reply, exhibit a glaring disparity between the breadth and depth of the crisis and the timidity

of response, in particular Robert Pollin's reversal of the 1960s-era slogan “Be realistic, demand the impossible!” to “Be utopian, demand the realistic” to push Obama's reforms further.

There was an earlier formulation of reality and utopia by C. Wright Mills in his 1960 “Letter to the New Left,” the injunction that any purported left “be realistic in our utopianism.” After the 1950s declaration of the “end of ideology,” Mills recognized that the only realistic possibility of political responsibility was in the “utopian” and frankly “ideological” program of socialism, which Ehrenreich and Fletcher treat as the dirty S-word.

Mills warned that socialism needed to be reinvented, on the basis of the best of the Marxist tradition. He enjoined his readers to “forget Victorian Marxism” and “re-read Lenin and Luxemburg” and recall what socialism once meant. But we now have a rehash of the worst of socialism. The global problems of capitalism will not find solutions derived from Lula's Brazil or Chávez's Venezuela, 1970s-'80s Swedish policies, takeovers of closed factories in Argentina or community gardens in Detroit's emptied lots. Mills called such perspectives the politically irresponsible combination of “liberal rhetoric and conservative default” in the ongoing absence of a true left.

While there are much worse things than living under the Swedish welfare state or eating homegrown vegetables, this is not a realistic prospect for saving the majority of the world's people, or even the majority of Americans, from the ravages of capitalism.

When Christian Parenti—who, with Liza Featherstone and Doug Henwood, wrote a fine critique of “Left anti-intellectualism” in *Action Will Be Taken*, invoking Adorno's critique of unthinking “actionism”—notes the virtue of Marxism so even a semiliterate Indian public could grasp the dynamics of international capitalism better than their US counterparts, we have arrived at the reversal of Marx's 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, that hitherto we have tried only to understand the world, while the point is to change it.

Only what the present “left” deems “utopian,” “full-throttle socialism”—starting and pursued to conclusion in the United States, the core of global capital, where the crisis and its potential solution find their nexus—has any hope of making a true diagnosis of our problems and a prognosis for overcoming them. While the revolution envisioned by Marx has never occurred, it still might and, indeed, must if we are to begin to address the manifest problems of capitalism recognized clearly so long ago.

CHRIS CUTRONE

Platypus Affiliated Society (platypus1917.com)

March 13, 2009

Dear editors of *The Nation*,

Ehrenreich and Fletcher's article "Rising to the Occasion" and the *Nation's* forum of articles in reply exhibit a glaring disparity between the breadth and depth of the crisis being depicted and a striking timidity of response: in particular, Pollin's reversal of the 1960s-era slogan, "Be realistic, demand the impossible!," that we should now instead "be utopian, demand the realistic," support and seek to push further Obama's reforms.

But there was an earlier formulation of reality and utopia by C. Wright Mills in his 1960 "Letter to the New Left," the injunction that any purported Left "be realistic in our utopianism." After the 1950s-era declaration of the "end of ideology," Mills recognized that the only realistic possibility of political responsibility was to be found in the "utopian" and frankly "ideological" program of socialism, what Ehrenreich and Fletcher treat as the dirty "S" word.

Mills warned that socialism needed to be reinvented, but could only be so on the basis of the best of the Marxist tradition. Mills enjoined his readers to "forget Victorian Marxism" but nevertheless "re-read Lenin and Luxemburg," and recall what socialism once meant, what Marxism had sought to achieve.

But what we have now is the rehash of the worst associated with socialism since the 1920s-30s and 1960-70s, the undigested Stalinism and authoritarianism of the nation-state, as well as the opportunistic compromises of the Popular Front and worshiping of the accomplished fact that didn't bring about "socialism" and actually made us forget what it meant.

For the global problems of capitalism will not find solutions derived from Lula's Brazil or Chavez's Venezuela, Swedish policies in the 1970s-80s, take-overs of closed factories in Argentina, or community gardens in Detroit's emptied lots.

Such a perspective amounts to what Mills called the politically irresponsible combination of "liberal rhetoric and conservative default" in the on-going absence of a true Left, the radical politics of a Marxian socialism.

While there are indeed much worse things than living under the Swedish welfare state or eating home-grown vegetables, this is not a realistic prospect for saving the majority of the world's people, nor even the majority of Americans, from the ravages of capitalism.

When Parenti -- who co-authored with Featherstone and Henwood a fine critique of "Left anti-intellectualism" in "Action Will Be Taken" (2002), invoking Adorno's critique of unthinking "actionism" -- now notes the virtue of Marxism so even a semi-literate Indian public could grasp the dynamics of international capitalism better than their American counterparts, we have arrived at the reversal of Marx's 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, that hitherto we have tried only to understand the world while the point is to change it. For we cannot even understand our world and its problems on the basis of such a weak political perspective for changing it.

Only what the present "Left" deems "utopian," "full-throttle socialism" and "anarchism, as in direct democracy," not only in "little bits and pieces," but "enlarged and clarified" -- but beyond anything envisioned by our authors here -- starting and pursued to conclusion in the core of global capital, such as the U.S., where the crisis and its potential solution find their nexus, has any real hope of a true diagnosis of our problems and a prognosis for overcoming them.

While the revolution envisioned by Marx and his best followers has never yet occurred, it still might and indeed must take place, if we are to begin to address the manifest problems of capitalism recognized clearly so long ago. This is our true limit and horizon, however constantly failed and betrayed, whether we recognize it or not.

Sincerely,
Chris Cutrone
for the *Platypus* Affiliated Society
www.platypus1917.com