Socialist Internationalism and Capitalist Globalization


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Abstract:

Socialists shouldn’t be for anti-globalization. They have always thought globally and promoted internationalism. Internationalism is more necessary today and made possible more readily.

With some allusions to early socialists, especially Marx, I argue that globalization has changed and calls for new forms of internationalism. I try to build on the history of socialist activism internationally, on ideas from socialist fundamentals, and on contemporary international organizations to draw some lessons about what socialist internationalism should be at the dawn of the 21st century.

I will consider some new and better forms of socialist internationalism against capitalist globalization.

“The world desperately needs the socialist tradition to revive. The odds that it will are good. The conditions that brought the historical Left into being persist; if anything, they have intensified and expanded on a global scale.” Andrew Levine, A Future for Marxism: Althusser, The Analytical Turn and the Revival of Socialist Theory (London: Pluto, 2003), p. 167.

The world is changing. It always has, and it always will. Part of the change is the way globalization has been changing. Our social world is out of control. Those who are at the controls are driving the world in directions that it may never recover from. The world is changing in the wrong ways; the point is to change the world in ways that come from the people being in control. That would be socialism, which we need now more than ever before.

Socialists are naturally internationalists. Their concerns are global concerns—as well as local concerns. They aren’t against globalization. They are against capitalist globalization. The clarion call of the Communist Manifesto is: “[Proletarians] of all countries, unite.”(CW6, 519) Socialists have called for socialist globalization rather than socialism in one country.

And it was Marx and Engels who noted in the middle of the 19th century the great development of globalization. “The need”, they said in the Communist Manifesto, “of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe.” (CW6, 487) They go on to say that “through its exploitation of the world market [it has] given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country … [and has created a] universal inter-dependence of all nations.” With cheap prices, “it batters down all Chinese walls.” (CW6, 488)

Later, Lenin, in the early 20th century, described the latest stage of capitalist imperialism as a case of the world having been completely divided up into markets for the competing capitalist nations. One might think that globalization rose with the feverish drive of 19th century capitalism and was soon to reach its culmination. Both thoughts are wrong. Often it is also concluded that the world proletariat at the beginning of the 20th century was in a position to unite and create a new world. In the 21st century, the situation is more complicated.

Globalization has a long history, perhaps even from the European ‘discovery’ of North America in its search for the riches and markets of China. The important question is the way globalization has
changed rather than how much it has expanded. It is a question of structure and quality rather than quantity.

By the early 17th century, the drive for satisfying the whims and desires of the bourgeoisie had reached an intense level. Ships were returning to Europe with delicacies (spices and tea from India), finery (pelts for hats from Canada), exotica (porcelain from China), and other luxuries (for example, tobacco and silver from the ‘new world’. Descartes described Amsterdam (in 1631) as “an inventory of the possible.” “What place on earth,’ he asked, ‘could one choose where all the commodities and all the curiosities one could wish for were as easy to find as in this city?’”

Over two hundred years before the Communist Manifesto, fleets of ships were plying the seas to bring back all sorts of products from new lands for the home market. By the time of the Communist Manifesto, those new lands were fast becoming saturated markets. The bourgeoisie created wants in its colonies where it hawked its products. It appeared that it had stretched its markets to every corner of the globe.

But things have changed significantly since Marx’s time. The tables have been turned, and the lands of the bourgeoisie have become the markets for cheap products, especially from the land of the Great Wall. China now feeds those who are addicted to consumerism in the homelands of capitalism. And the Great Wall still stands--and profits by selling junk food to those who flit around the globe. Whole factories are now sent to all parts of the globe, especially China, to exploit workers elsewhere and to further exploit the ‘needs’ of consumers at home. More and more people are caught in the contradictions of contemporary globalization as industries are closed in the centres of capitalism, livelihoods are decimated or squeezed, and environments are destroyed.

Globalization has changed with new complexities. Marx would now stand in wonder and horror in learning about export processing zones, structural adjustment, and public-private partnerships. Marx and Engels predicted change in relations and what capitalism calls civilization, but little did they know how different globalization would become 160 years later. Now capitalism uses free trade, regarded by them with such contempt, to move whole factories of computerized machines to other countries with cheap labor or to move vast armies of cheap labor to new industries.

Still further changes in globalization seem to be in process in the 21st century. It is now clear that free trade is more about unfettered investment rather than expanded markets. As Samir Amin argues, the end “of the postwar systems has reversed the balance of forces to the direct advantage of capital, and high finance has found itself capable of seizing the command posts.” Globalization is now financialization with “a significant levy on the surplus … to the benefit of high finance.” Finance capital has gained hegemony in directing capitalism.

Marx and Engels who marveled at the wonders of capitalism like “railways [and] electric telegraphs” (CW6, 489) would have been impressed by light bulbs, radios, trucks, and anesthetics. They would see our contemporary world with supersonic jets, international space stations, digital information, satellite communication, MRIs, etc. as a fantasy world beyond belief. After a short period of adjusting from the time, and technology, gap, they would also see it as twisted.

World trade and globalization has changed in important structural ways with even more complexities across the globe. Marx found it impossible in his day to even start his projected work on world trade. It would be beyond his wildest dreams now, but he would embark with vigour and excitement together with others to try to understand what is happening on a global scale. And his point would still be to
change the world.

“The world desperately needs the socialist tradition to revive.” As globalization has changed, so might the ways that people respond in order to establish truly human societies across the globe. If the world is differently globalized, then the people may be differently mobilized and organized.

For Marx and Engels, the workers of the world should unite, and in various ways the socialist movements have searched for the vanguard for winning a new world of socialism. With Marx, and for many years after him, the principal concern was with revolutionary leaders and well-trained vanguards.

Because of the successes of the leaders, or sometimes their failures, whole nations have been set up as models of socialism. Enough history is behind us to see the error in our ways. As the world is globalized and the capitalist pressures and the virus of neoliberalism from capital spread, we do not have socialism in any country that can serve as a model for another country. No longer can we unite around a home of socialism with a hope of spreading its image across the globe.

Disappointments have also grown around attempts to understand who will unite to change the world. Socialists have gone from the proletariat as a whole (Marx) to the workingclass vanguard (Lenin) to the new working class (Mallet) to the contradictory class (Wright) to no proletarian class (Levine), with many taking these positions and other variations. According to some, it is not just that the world no longer has a proletariat of the sort that the early socialists counted on. It is not clear who will act to win a new world.

Twenty five years after the publication of the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels abandoned their revolutionary measures of 1848. Otherwise, they said, the Manifesto stands as it was, except for a few details here and there. They retained their call on the proletarians of the world to unite. It is difficult not to agree with this clarion call, but I think closer attention reveals that the rhetorical flourish hides the need for new approaches to contemporary conditions.

One hundred and sixty years later, there are, I believe, some details to rework. There have been changes in globalization, and we have seen a diversity of countries that have tried to move forward, and others that have failed to move forward. We need to refocus our attention and develop new paths to a new world. Socialist internationalism, especially at this stage of capitalist globalization, needs to be reworked.

I turn now to shifts in attention and changes of detail that I think would be helpful. First, I think it is important to realize that there is no one world to win and that there is no one path to any world we are winning. Diversity is desirable and even more so for the future. It gives everyone and every society options to choose and to struggle for. With this in mind, let’s rework some details of the call for proletarians of the world to unite.

1) We shouldn’t overfocus on proletarians. It is important to emphasize class divisions, but it is distracting and misleading to fixate on precise class lines. There are structural problems that are created by the global power of finance capital (with the help of others in alliance) which are against the interests of the rest of humankind. This creates a division with a multiplicity of conflicts for different groups of people and different societies.

2) As we see now (and Marx and Engels noted in the Manifesto), different countries are struggling against the grip of capitalism in a variety of ways. This suggests another detail. It is not just individual proletarians that need to be mobilized and supported. There are also the many countries, and at least as importantly, the many different groups, movements, organizations, NGOs, parties, etc. that are
important in what is to be done. It is not just individuals uniting or working together, but the groups, organizations, and structures that are created for political work.

3) That means that we don’t have to think of the world—or globe—as a whole. Globalization does not in fact cover the whole globe, only those parts that are important for dominance in the case of capitalism and security and mutual aid in the case of socialism. We can act globally, but also locally—and provincially and regionally and continentally, etc. We need to focus attention to find pressure points and act practically. This is not a matter of everyone doing everything everywhere, but most engaged somewhere on some things.

4) This brings me to a shift from the goal of unity to the goal of solidarity—and working together. We do not have to be united into one through consensus or some kind of agreement. We can work together in movements and organizations that work together. Still, each group can go different ways and still all move forward.

5) There is no one way to succeed. We do not have to have one international party, not even one international organization, nor one movement, nor even one network. Diversity is allowed—and desirable—everywhere. Countries and nations are more diverse than Marx ever thought, and so they should be. With socialist globalization, people and nations should have the freedom to pursue their own diverse cultures and ways. With socialist globalization we can expect more diversity, and socialist internationalism can reflect this and strive for it. Socialists will shatter the images of the bourgeoisie and create new scenes of their own devising.

Here is my view. Everyone and every group should work in different places as well as the globe as a whole, together in solidarity. This, in my view, is closer to what should be done even if it does not have the same clarity and force as the call: proletarians of all countries, unite.

This is only the beginning. Much more needs to be said about how socialists can answer this call. Most importantly, however, if we are socialists we will fight for another world.

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Timothy Brook, Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World (Toronto: Viking, 2008), p. 8. This is a fascinating study of that early global trade.


Amin, p. 55


These leaders include, of course, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Josip Bros Tito, Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Enver Hoxha, and Kim Il Sung.

I followed that concern. I was impressed, with some disappointment, when I first saw the Soviet Union in the early sixties. Later I visited and studied democratic socialism in Yugoslavia, which still strikes me as a positive development that was torn apart by western countries. I briefly saw encouraging but
conflicted developments in Zimbabwe, which has now fallen into disgrace. For thirty years I have seen interesting developments in China, despite disappointments that loom larger for others than for me. I know Cuba less well, but I admire its persistence in maintaining a kind of socialism. I know even less well Venezuela, where many see more hope than I do.

Here I agree with the ideas of Amin, pp. 60f. on the “solidarity of all the workers [non-capitalists] of the planet.”

Some important reflections on what needs to be done are found in Susan George, Another World Is Possible If … London: Verso, 2004.