

Review: István Mészáros (2001) *Socialism Or Barbarism: From The 'American Century' To The Crossroads* New York: Monthly Review Press

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The growing world movement against capitalist globalisation makes a firm grasp of the dynamics of the present epoch more important than ever. The relation between theory and practice is, once again, clear and urgent.

The movement is well served by a mushrooming literature analysing particular aspects of the destructive activities of global capitalism with regards to environmental pollution, the role of the IMF and WTO in the enslavement of poor countries, and many other topics. One thinks of Naomi Klein's brilliant [No Logo](#), David Cromwell's *Private Planet*, or the writings of radical economists like Walden Bello.

Then there is a body of more general social theory attempting to analyse the nature and dynamics of the present period, in particular the economic, social, cultural and political aspects of globalisation. Much of this literature, drawing on ideas of postmodernism and similar concepts, attempts to specify the dynamics of a "new stage" of global society which we are now entering. Currently, the most ambitious and well known example of such literature is Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's *Empire*, a work which has received a great deal of media attention.

In outlining the contours of the new "postmodern society" the assumption is usually made that even if this brave new world is recognisably a form of capitalism, it is somehow qualitatively new and, most important of all, stable. Hardt and Negri, for example, devote themselves to uncovering the types of power and control which characterise Empire as a new form of global regulation quite distinct from older varieties of imperialism. In this debate, Marxist, theories of the crisis-ridden and contradictory nature of capitalism, and the understanding that no new society can emerge without these being overcome through deliberate fundamental social and political change, become relegated to the background.

In such a context this little book by Istvan Meszaros is of crucial importance. Meszaros's *magnum opus*, *Beyond Capital* (1995) was an attempt to update—rather than revise—Marx's *Capital* to grapple with problems of capitalist development at the end of the twentieth century. *Socialism or Barbarism* is in effect a summary of some of some of the themes of the larger work, though its immediate interest lies in its focus on the dynamics of globalisation.

Meszaros's argument is that capitalism, having lasted far longer than most classical Marxists imagined possible, has developed new forms of degeneration. Starting from Marx's observation that no new form of society arises before the existing one has exhausted its potential for the development of humanity and its productive forces, Meszaros argues that capitalism has now entered the phase in which its effects are overwhelmingly destructive for human society and

indeed the planet itself, and that these effects can only be negated through the transition to a new, socialist, form of society. Globalisation in the present conjuncture reveals not the dynamics of a new society, but the prolonged death agony of the old.

From conjunctural to structural crisis

There are two dimensions along which the destructive nature of modern capitalism is revealed. The first is the changed nature of crises -- from the periodic conjunctural crises characteristic of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the deepening structural crisis evident at the present time. During the former period conjunctural crises, economic recessions or "great thunderstorms", as Marx called them, were episodic affairs and, despite the poverty and deprivation they inflicted on the masses and the class struggle that they engendered, did not prevent capitalism from fostering the "all-sided development of production" which laid down the prerequisites for a new mode of production and form of society.

Today, argues Meszaros, "it would be quite suicidal to envisage capital's destructive reality as the presupposition of the much needed new mode of reproducing the sustainable conditions of human existence" (p. 15). Capitalism, that is to say, has definitely exhausted any progressive role for humanity. While slumps and recessions are never far away, the system has entered a period of permanent structural crisis in which its normal tendencies of development are themselves wholly destructive. Meszaros in this little book restricts himself to a few illustrations—they are no more than that—such as growing global structural unemployment; the ways in which globalisation continually brings the labour conditions of the poor countries into the advanced ones rather than diffusing prosperity around the globe; the abandonment of any pretence of closing the widening global gap between rich and poor countries and social classes; or the increasing dependence of capitalist stability on massive state aid and subsidies in which armaments manufacture plays an increasingly prominent role.

Two of Meszaros's illustrations of structural crisis are especially important. The increasing production of waste and pollution shows how capital has come up against not simply the economic but the physical limits to the accumulation process and places a question mark over the survival of the earth itself. The consequences, for example, of China and India attaining North American levels of waste production and pollution mean that "modernisation" is increasingly coterminous with ecological disaster. When we understand the driving force of current United States' imperial policy as the securing of new oil supplies, e.g. in the Caspian region, we can see the ecological disaster ahead. Marx, as Meszaros points out, was fully aware of such physical consequences of capital accumulation though at the time he was writing they warranted only a passing mention.

The second illustration worth dwelling on is the effective disenfranchisement of labour and the crisis of social democracy. In almost every advanced capitalist

country the progressive abandonment by capital of socialisation—of producing a large healthy educated labour force—has led to a demolition of the welfare state; the increasing imposition of third world labour conditions through deskilling; casualisation; shifting much assembly line production to special zones in authoritarian countries (see the account by Naomi Klein in *No Logo*), which then set the standard for labour conditions in the "advanced" capitalist countries. All of this means that the epoch of social democracy is over, that there are no more reforms to be squeezed out of capital. Social democratic parties, graphically illustrated by the antics of New Labour, retreat to magical incantations of the "[Third Way](#)", and when that wears thin, to open cynicism, while they become more and more openly the allies of capitalist "restructuring". Now capital has not only to demolish the welfare state and take back the gains which made social democracy viable, but also launch a direct assault on the very trade union rights upon which social democracy was built. This is why socialist transformation is on the agenda today.

One could add many other illustrations of capital's destructive impact, contrasting with its former progressive role. The growing crisis of the city as the spatial form that historically brought labour and capital, production and consumption together would be one of these. The great urban reforms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which produced public services, health care and mass elementary education stemmed from an understanding by capital of the need to socialise the working class. The result was stable working class communities, a strong labour movement and the "all-sided development of production" that Meszaros discusses. These conditions are in crisis today. Capital is increasingly disinterested in cities, except as fortified areas and zones in which the rich can consume and communicate protected from the adjacent vast, increasingly ghettoised, fragmented, policed, unemployed masses. This *Blade Runner* nightmare is most advanced in the Third World and in areas of the United States. In the latter it has been brilliantly analysed by writers such as Mike Davis in his *City of Quartz* and subsequent writings. But its American manifestation is only the advanced form of a general tendency.

The potentially deadliest phase of imperialism

Globalisation takes place, then, in the context of a profound structural crisis. The period we are now in is not some new, stable postmodern flux but what Meszaros calls the "most dangerous phase of imperialism in all history". It is the existing system in deepening crisis appearing as something profoundly new. It is worth underlining here the contrast between Meszaros's approach and that of writers like Hardt and Negri. The latter claim that old style imperialism has been undermined by the world market which "requires a smooth space of uncoded and deterritorialized flows... The full realization of the world market is necessarily the end of imperialism" (p.333). The focus on globalisation is predominantly as a process of extending the technical speed and means of

communication including the Internet, and the global financial networks. In such accounts capital features essentially as funds, from which standpoint obstacles to its instantaneous transmission around the globe appear outdated and imperialism can be seen as "a machine of global striation, territorializing the flows of capital, blocking certain flows and facilitating others" (*ibid.*).

This leads inevitably to the ideas of "global governance" to which globalisation will eventually give rise, either to some form of global state—for liberals some sort of souped-up United Nations—or, as in Hardt and Negri's account, a new type of global regulation built into the networks and global interchanges themselves.

Meszaros, by contrast, starts from capital not just as funds but as Capital, as surplus value engaged in its own self-enlargement in which process it necessarily takes the material form of a plurality of actual capitals, engaged in an intensifying competitive struggle for profit. From here, Meszaros moves to a specification of what is deadly about the new phase of imperialism. Lenin, he argues, in his famous *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* encountered a world in which a group of powerful imperialist states acted in the interests of their large capitalist corporations to secure global sources of profitable surplus value extraction. The outcome of this intensifying competition was two world wars.

But this in turn has been superseded by the current phase, becoming clear since the 1970s, of global hegemonic imperialism combining the structural crisis of capital and the hegemony of the United States as a single imperialist power. This is the most dangerous phase of imperialism because it threatens the domination of the whole planet by one superpower which will, in attempting to resolve the irresolvable contradictions, use the most authoritarian methods, resulting in "the most extreme form of irrationality in history" (p.38).

A global state or a condition of "global governance" cannot be achieved because the attempt by the United States, as the only superpower, to aspire to universal global governance—or to become what Meszaros calls "the state of the capital system"—necessarily takes the form of the particular sectarian aim of securing the profitability of a particular group of capitals, mainly US transnational corporations, in antagonistic relation to other sections of capital.

Furthermore, under conditions of deepening structural crisis and the increasingly desperate need to secure profitability, "we have reached a point where the competitive co-existence of imperialist powers can no longer be tolerated" (p.32). The US seeks to become the global state and US capital to attain the status of "global capital" by eliminating all rivals with a new ruthlessness. This is the basis of the growing irrationality of the new world order, an irrationality which has become especially clear following 11 September and the US-led "war against terrorism". Many illustrations of the irrationalities and contradictions of US "global leadership" could be given: the attempt to exercise global leadership while walking out on the Kyoto treaty on global emissions; the refusal to sanction the world criminal court; the total inability to

come up with a consistent line on the Middle East; the attempt to build a global coalition against terrorism while slapping enormous tariffs on steel imports from "friendly" countries; the manoeuvrings against poor countries in the World Trade Organisation and the IMF; and so on. The point is not at all that these issues were not grasped prior to Meszaros's little book, but that he provides a very clear Marxist framework in which they can be located and explained.

The actuality of the socialist offensive

In the final chapter of the book Meszaros turns to discuss the historical challenge facing the socialist movement. Capitalism is redundant, it has fulfilled its historic task, described by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* of unleashing modernity on the world; it is now a positively destructive break on all further development and must be replaced. This is what Meszaros means by the actuality of the socialist offensive: its necessity.

He begins by asserting that the movement for change must, for anything significant to happen, gain strength inside the US itself. Only the American labouring classes can bring an end to imperialism, for "No political / military power on earth can accomplish from the outside what must be done from inside by a movement offering a positive alternative to the existing order in the United States" (p.57).

Until very recently this would have been regarded as a very unfashionable position, radical politics in the US being regarded as long dead. But after Seattle and subsequent developments it is less implausible. But, more important, Meszaros is not attempting, in the concluding chapter of a very small book, to give a political appraisal of the state of the new anti-globalisation and other radical social movements. Rather, he is concerned to point out that the hour for such a new movement has arrived. It is immanent in the destructive nature of capitalism and in the death of social democracy. Varying local and particular conditions will determine the viability of particular upsurges, victories and defeats for the movement. But a new movement will grow. There is no other route than social transformation.

He is also clear that the new forms of class struggle required are not just a more left wing version of the old labour movement, characterised by defensiveness and sectionalism. The traditional labour movement faces profound obstacles in throwing off its old strategies. The impossibility of the global unity of capital is mirrored in the inability of the labour movement to abandon its sectional defensiveness. We cannot rely on global capital to produce global working class unity as a simple outgrowth of economic struggles, least of all led by traditional trade union bureaucrats and socialist parties now in decline.

So therefore, a different type of radical consciousness must emerge. Meszaros makes an important distinction between the traditional industrial working class as the agent of change and Marx's concept of "proletarianisation" as a more

general one in which

"the overwhelming majority of individuals are
"proletarianized" and degraded to the condition of utter
powerlessness, as the most wretched members of society—the
"proletarians"—were at an earlier phase of development"
(p.92).

The implication is a new, pluralist, democratic non-hierarchical movement which brings together all the struggles into which people enter in response to the contradictions of capitalism, most of which struggles are not in and of themselves necessarily socialist. We can see the beginnings of such a movement for emancipation from capital, for substantive equality, at Seattle, Genoa, Porto Alegre, in the different and contradictory manifestations of the mushrooming movement against capitalist globalisation and in many other social movements and struggles.

Meszaros ends with a warning. He takes Rosa Luxemburg's famous dictum that the future facing humanity is either socialism or barbarism but adds this:

""[B]arbarism if we are lucky'. For the extermination of
humanity is the ultimate concomitant of capital's destructive
course of development. And the world of that third possibility,
beyond the alternatives of 'socialism or barbarism' would be fit
only for cockroaches, which are said to be able to endure
lethally high levels of nuclear radiation. This is the only
rational meaning of capital's third way" (p.80).

This has been, of course, less of a critical review than a summary of the gist of its arguments. I make no apologies for this. It is such an important little book, and while it is possible to be critical—some of the terminology will not be immediately obvious to anyone not familiar with Marxist classics—the basic conclusion is simple: read it!