

Capitalism Has Won A Game, But Not The Championship

by Mario Benedetti "CLARIDAD-EnRejo" 8-14 June 1990

The velocity of changes in the countries of the East has made everyone uncomfortable, including direct protagonists and faraway witnesses, technocrats and fortunetellers, big businessmen and workers, intellectuals and politicians, those with their noses to the grindstone and those with their heads in the clouds. The Right cannot believe so much happiness and the Left feels like the ground is shaking--registering 7.5 on the Richter Scale. The dizzying speed with which the world has consolidated to the right gives rise to a stupor, a stupor that inhibits sensible reflection. The situation is particularly confused because the necessity for innovations, alterations and readjustments may get confused with the hazards of its consequences--the courage of Gorbachev with the opportunism of Kohl; the shine in the eyes of the ex-communists with the true intentions of the West. The diagnosis, muddled and premature, permeates the gleeful headlines of the international press--"Communism Is Dead!" "Marxism Is Buried!" "An End to Utopias!" "The End of Ideology." Over this improvised graveyard is raised euphorically the end-of-the-century banner "Capitalism Has Won-Hallelujah!" Or rather...Help!

Capitalism (in its greatest manifestation--the United States) plundered and carried out invasions, economic blockades and other outrages even when it was opposed by an authentic and counterbalancing power like the USSR. What won't it do when, in the short term, and according to the projections and prophecies, it exercises hegemonic power in this transformed world at the end of the century? Despite the fact that the Warsaw Pact has fallen into the debris of the Berlin Wall, and even though no red menace now threatens the sacrosanct security of the West, no one is daring to predict the disappearance of NATO.

However, the U.S. is not running all by itself in this race. The European community itself, although it accepts the changes with some apprehension (that is, the imminent reunification of Germany), also looks at them with an unconcealed utilitarianism. More than the recuperation of the democratic process in the East, it is the rapid invasion of new available markets that seems to be motivating the West (perhaps beating out the Japanese by a headlength). According to the unexpected but candid statements of Spain's Foreign Minister, Francisco Fernandez Ordonez, in only 3 months the West has given Poland and Hungary as much economic aid as it gave out to all of Latin America in 10 years. Between business and solidarity, the capitalist countries rapidly overcome their hesitations and choose, without the least bit of vacillation, business, pure and simple. This might be news only to the uninformed, since capitalism has never suffered from solidarity fever. The U.S., for example, has always been generous to the L.A. dictatorships (at least, while they were of use). Lately, however, it has not been

so, even to its most significant messenger boys like that poor Guillermo Endara, its Panamanian quisling. He has carried on a fast of the shamefaced debtor--a protest that has not had such great results.

The present enthusiasm of the Eastern societies for the sugar-coated capitalist image is, if you will, the logical outcome of a wild anti-communism generated by the errors, repression and misdeeds committed by regimes which lacked internal democracy. It is also the foreseeable response to the clamorous publicity extolling the eventual benefits of the free market, way beyond their true worth. At any rate, it is not unlikely that, since everything is moving so quickly, the Eastern societies will notice that the capitalist realm is not only Mercedes Benz, luxury yachts, sumptuous homes in Beverly Hills, fascinating stock deals, "self-made men" who become little kings, or new face-lifts for the "jet-set." In its vast sphere of influence "true capitalism" develops some characteristics in which "true socialism" certainly does not specialize: the infamous poverty belts, chilling indexes of infant mortality, illiteracy, ecological disasters, an uncontrollable rise in drug addiction and drug traffic (the U.S. alone consumes 80% of all drugs produced world-wide), a spectacular increase in crime (in 1989 there were 1905 murders and 3254 rapes, in N.Y. alone), massive unemployment, etc.. This last, especially, will be the first to arrive in the East, since the adoption of market economies will cause a mere 10 million or so lay-offs and firings in the USSR alone (according to official Soviet forecasts). The alternatives provide little choice: a gerontocracy of the East or a gerontocracy of the West.

The end of Marxism? Not so long ago Marcelo Cohen (La Vanguardia, Barcelona, 2/23/90) invented a suggestive monologue in which things like these are said: "I am the uninterred voice of Marxism...I have a statement: I advise that, above all, only in some of my manifestations do I lie beneath the rubble of the Berlin Wall. Others are withdrawing before the Polish images of the Virgin. But spiritually speaking, I am everywhere...I am dispersed throughout the soggy marsh of the last century of history. I am a basic chemical element...I have provided words to describe what today continues to offend. I have nourished the energy, the proud rage, the critical sharpness...For the lovers of football, I am a fine centerfielder who plays an inexhaustible game. And nothing more. There will be continued debates with me. I will not be the cement of perverse constructions but rather mobility and suggestions; I predict new metamorphoses. Those who desire can receive me. And those who do not, let them fool themselves." I believe that synthesis, besides being imaginative, is certain. Who can deny the provocative, transforming, and (excuse the archaic term) revolutionary force that the doctrine which the philosopher of Treveris coined in the previous century has in this one? Who can argue that the arduous conquests by

the workers, worldwide, are not due in good part to the ideology and the urging of Marxism? And this is so even though Marx might have been wrong in some of his wise projections. Because Marx was not a prophet, but a philosopher.

Impulsive and rejoicing analysts may sign the death certificate of ideologies, but what does that mean? Does it mean that no one is ever going to struggle, in the future, for social justice, ecological preservation, for the elimination of infant mortality, for global literacy, for decent housing for the men and women of this world? What will that struggle be called? Communism? Socialism? Ecologism? Debray, Levy, Touraine and other French men of worth should not be worried; soon we will be able to tell. Capitalism has won a game, but not the championship.

Among the many articles that have now been published on this, I found a quote from Democritus: "Misfortune turns people into wisemen." I hope this axiom will be applicable to the new Europe, since, in the Third World, misfortune instead turns them into cadavers; and it is usually the survivors who (wise or simply daring) throw themselves into the struggle, in search of real changes.

The end of utopias? Nothing more disillusioning could be announced to humanity whose fundamental advances have almost always been due to the inventors of utopias. In my Latin American generation, there were many of us, who in different ways and at different levels fought for utopias; and it is clear that some were reached, others were not. Apparently we should regret these struggles, and beg pardon for having sheltered such hopes. For myself, such an act of contrition does not figure in my plans. With or without victory, solidarity has always been good intensive therapy for the body and the soul.

Utopias are not forecasts, data projections, the results of surveys, nor even omens; rather, they are flashes of the imagination, almost unbelievable inspirations that nevertheless carry within them the seed of the possible. A generation without utopias will end up being hamstrung (despite its obsession with speed), and immobilized (even though it never ceases making motions). Utopia does not compare with the religion of money or stinginess, since it is, in essence, an unequivocal sign of solidarity. Its most conspicuous adherents (e.g., Jesus, Marx, Freud) have tended to create better conditions for human beings and their brief, wretched lives.

The fact is that, beginning with the sudden changes in Europe, Latin America will be more alone than ever. The fall of the Berlin Wall will lead not only to an alarming German unity, but also to the old claim of Europeanism. Delighted with a continent that has NATO but no Warsaw Pact, (in Madrid the new Romanian prime minister just declared that today's Europe makes NATO seem like a scarecrow in the middle of winter), captivated by its pan-European navel, the Europeans are deciding that on the Old Continent they will be less and

less interested in foreign woes. This does not mean however, that they are not interested in their own. According to Cornelius Castoriadis, the renewal of the Western model is being checked out in the Eastern countries "as if the ideal were capitalism and oligarchy built on the base of misery" and he adds: "Democracy is not capitalism, contrary to what shoddy ideologues and journalists say." Let us remember explicitly that democracy is the government of the people and not of the owners and financiers. It is possible that the workers of the labor union Solidarity were playing with fire when making their posters. They wrote their demands not in Polish but in English.

Nevertheless, going against the grain of the non-history that they want to sell us, it is possible to risk making certain predictions. Until now, the target of all imperialism's attacks was the Left in its diverse forms and styles. However, the world has moved so far to the right that today the visible and more or less predominant Left form is social democracy. Despite its famous concessions, entrance into and or backing of NATO, or approval of American military bases in the respective territories, there still survive in its programs certain traces of socialist inspiration. And when social democrats become the government, although they usually retract their most radical slogans, they try nevertheless to keep up a facade of lukewarm social programs, if only to differentiate themselves vaguely from the Center and the Right. But anyway you look at it, the wide range of their merits will be insufficient when the hour arrives for capitalism to pinpoint (or simply invent) its very necessary "enemy." The greatest preoccupation of the most war-mongering sectors of the U.S. and Great Britain, for example, has to be the apparent future of peace that looms over their fruitful war industries, with a foreseeable reduction of dividends and influence. Therefore, the day will come when they will find it necessary to look for and find a visible and likely enemy which can justify, by its mere presence, the most interest-yielding of their enterprises--the business and industries of death. And so, there social democracy will be, capitalism's ally of yesterday, within range of its invective and its missiles. The contradictions have not totally disappeared, and it is not improbable that the social democrats will get to the point where they will long for the good old days when there was a tangible Left to be slapped around.

It is obvious that the Eastern bloc needed urgent adjustments, but it is not so certain that the proposed revision will be better than the original sonnet. It is the responsibility of the Left to come up with another model which would include the restoration and securing of democracy and liberties, but would not compel a submissive surrender to savage capitalism.

Latin America, which doesn't have a reason to bear the European "guilt" of Stalinism, must continue struggling, with aid, or (as is most likely) without it, not only against

bare-faced, literal imperialism but also against its masks; that of the foreign debt, the IMF and the World Bank, or rather, the imperialism of misery. The aggression against Panama, the blockade of Nicaragua and the consequent defeat of the Sandinistas, the ominous invasion of Cuba's airspace by the so-called TV-Marti are symptoms of the impunity and lack of fear with which the U.S. now moves in Latin America. However, responses have already begun to materialize; as yet indirect, but revealing. The surprising appearance and consolidation in Mexico of a critical voice, like Cuauhtemoc Cardenas; the unexpected advance of the Brazilian left (Lula-Brizola) which for the first time pulled together the possibility of a victory; the triumph, also for the first time, of the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) in Montevideo; and even the not-to-be-lightly-taken fact that the U.S. has lost, by a large margin several votes in the until recently U.S.-controlled OAS. These are all impending signs of the long awaited appropriation of sovereignty and dignity of the mestizo continent.

The consolidation of the world to the right will skip over, as always, the commonly accepted conventions. Given these highly unfavorable circumstances, Latin America's move to the left will be arduous, and in the best of cases, gradual. But ethics (political, social, simply human) will be the key word. However confusing and uncertain the present may be, and though we may have lost so many dreams, I hope that we do not commit the unpardonable foolishness of also losing our hope.

*translated by Marilyn Bonck*