

## Rethinking anti-imperialism today – Panagiotis Sotiris

*Recent developments from the election to Donald Trump to Brexit and the increased tension between the US on the one hand, Russia and China on the other, have been presented as evidence for a broader crisis of 'globalization' and a turning point in modern imperialism. Many have even talked about an 'end of globalization'. Moreover, these changes have been presented as a turn towards a nationalism or even isolation. In what follows I will try to offer my thoughts on these questions in an attempt to problematize them but also to suggest what these changes imply regarding radical left strategy. In particular I will insist on the need for a new anti-imperialism based upon a rethinking of the notions of the people and popular sovereignty.*

The question regarding some form of 'crisis of globalization' or even an 'end of globalization' is based on the assumption that there was indeed some form of globalized capitalism in the previous period. However, I think that globalization has been a misleading term since it suggested that we were moving towards some form of a unified system of social relations, a transnational social formation, with a transnational bourgeoisie.<sup>[1]</sup> In contrast, I insist that what we have witnessed has been a process of increased internationalization of capitalist production. This process has been instrumental regarding the reproduction and enhancement of aggressive forms of capitalist accumulation. Moreover, increased internationalization of production, in the form of increased capital flows, direct investment and trade, has been a mechanism of constant pressure for capitalist restructuring and for the expansion of neoliberalism as the dominant regime of accumulation. However, national capitalist formations and nation-states have remained the main *loci* of capitalist accumulation. By this I do not mean that there have not been important changes. In contrast, I would say that Poulantzas's original insight in the 1970s that the relations of forces in the imperialist chain are being interiorized in the power block of each national capitalist formation has been exacerbated in the past decades.<sup>[2]</sup> By this I do not simply refer to the role of 'foreign capital', a constant reference point of older dependency theories, but to the way imperatives for certain strategies of accumulation become dominant in each capitalist formation. The centrality of competitiveness as the main measure of success and the main justification and legitimacy for aggressive capitalist restructuring and neoliberal reform after the 1980s attests to this. Processes of regional integration such as European Integration, with their extensive forms not only of lowering barriers to trade and the free movement of capitals, but also of ceding of forms of sovereignty, have been the most aggressive cases of using the exposure to increased foreign competition as a pressure for capitalist restructuring.<sup>[3]</sup>

Such an approach suggests that we put aside the rhetoric of globalization and instead attempt to theorize an inherently contradictory process of capitalist internationalization. Such an approach can explain both the tendency towards increased liberalization of trade and capital flows but also the presence of increased antagonism. In this sense, what we are witnessing today is a tendency towards increased conflict and competition within this process of capitalist internationalization. However, before proceeding along this line, we must also see some other important aspects of modern imperialism.

If we are to keep something from what in a very schematic way has been presented as a Marxist or even Leninist theory of imperialism are two important insights. The first has to do with the way that the Marxist tradition, including Lenin revolutionized the theorization of international relations by giving priority not to interstate relations, but to class relations and strategies and their projection to the international plane. States' behavior is based in their internal class composition, accumulation strategies and the relation of forces in the class struggle. The second is that the hierarchy in the international plane, namely the complex interplay of interdependency and antagonism that the notion of the imperialist chain suggests, is not determined simply on the economic level, but also on the basis of political and even ideological relations of forces. The dominant social formation in the imperialist chain is not simply the most powerful in economic terms but also the one that can in a certain way guarantee the collective capitalist-imperialist interest of the entire imperialist chain, by having the political and military capacity to do so. Moreover, this also implies that modern capitalist imperialism has been fundamentally non-territorial having to do with the expansion of social relations of production, of social forms and of accumulation strategies and less with direct territorial domination, despite the importance of territorially based resources such as energy flows, minerals etc.<sup>[4]</sup>

To this classical 'Leninist' approach I would also like to add another important aspect. The antagonistic and hierarchical relations inside the imperialist chain also have to be treated as hegemonic relations. By this I am not referring to the traditional conception of hegemony one can find in the discourse of mainstream International Relations Theory, or even at classical Marxist texts on imperialism. I am using hegemony in its Gramscian conceptualization as a way to theorize the complex modalities of power in capitalist social formations and as a concept that refers not simply to 'consent' or 'intellectual leadership' but as the complex articulation of force, leadership and ideological appeal that indeed leads to a social class becoming not just ruling but the leading force of society. In such an approach the hegemonic force in the imperialist chain, or in a block of imperialist states is not just the most advanced in economic terms or the most powerful in terms of military force, however important these aspects are, but the one that can project a hegemonic project that 'links in the chain' would want to attach to. To give an obvious example, the United States became the hegemonic force of global capitalism after 1945 because they were the most advanced and productive capitalist economy, the only country that could match Soviet military capabilities but also a country that offered a hegemonic project. This hegemonic project combined the Fordist regime of intensified capitalist accumulation, 'Western' liberal-democratic

institutions, and a mass culture that comprised consumerist hedonism and individualism. The fact that for example the United States initially helped other social formations becoming more competitive in relation to the US as part of a strategy to strengthen the reproduction of capitalist social relations, is something that can be seen in the support given by the US to both European Integration and the capitalist development of Japan.<sup>[5]</sup>

Apart from these broader theoretical lines of demarcation, I would like to point to another important point. We are still in the aftermath of the capitalist crisis of 2007-2008. There is an impressive literature and an open debate regarding the actual causal mechanisms of this crisis, and in a certain way the discussion has not yet been concluded. However, we can say that what happened was neither a typical cyclical recession nor just a crisis of financialization. Also, it was not another manifestation of a prolonged crisis that started in the 1970s. What we witnessed was the combined crisis of an entire social paradigm that comprised the productive model based upon post-fordist capitalist restructuring, the over expansion of the financial sector, neoliberalism as a regime of accumulation and a certain form of international monetary, financial, productive architecture. The reduced dynamism of the post-2010 recovery, the absence of large gains in both productivity and profitability, the stagnation of the EU, the continuous problem of increased debt, both public and private, the crisis in public finances despite successive waves of austerity, and the inability to go ahead with the big interregional free trade agreements (long before Donald Trump's rise to power), all these attest to the structural and still unresolved character of this crisis. The reason is that what is needed is a new social and technological paradigm that has yet to emerge. Moreover, another important aspect is the uneven character of both the extent of the crisis and the responses to it. It is obvious that the crisis was deeper in the 'western' formations in the imperialist chain in contrast to the new competitors in the East and in particular China.

The economic crisis also created — especially in the US — certain cleavages inside the dominant power block. Although neoliberalism, deregulation and reduced taxation (along with the intervention of the FED towards keeping the banking system afloat) have been common elements, it is interesting to see the divergence between those sectors that were based upon globalized production and supply networks and those more based in the US, a fact that can account for different approaches towards international trade agreements and also different approaches towards the politics of Trump administration. However, it is interesting to underline the fact that so far the Trump administration has refrained from 'protectionist' measures and has mainly opted for aggressive attacks on social rights, such as the attack on Obamacare.

At the same time this economic crisis was combined with a deep political and in some sense hegemonic crisis in many formations. 2011 represents an important landmark in the sense of the opening of a broader global cycle of protest and contestation. There is growing widespread disillusionment with mainstream politics as a result of austerity policies, an authoritarian post-democratic turn (enhanced by the absence of any real difference between

centre-right and centre-left political parties) along with a broader tendency towards an insulation of the political scene against the demands and aspirations of the subaltern classes.

All these tendencies and developments in their articulation not only represent the effectivity of social antagonism, but also form the basis of the new wave of increased antagonisms in the imperialist chain. Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union it was obvious that the United States has opted for a strategy that aimed at maintaining that kind of military superiority that would guarantee their leading role in the imperialist chain, even in the sense of a “management of instability” that would always make a US intervention indispensable. Despite the setbacks that this strategy suffered, especially in the form of the Iraq debacle and the failure of the attempt to ‘export western-style democracy and market economy’ by military means, it remained dominant, exactly because it offered a means to maintain a leading role.<sup>[6]</sup>

However, at the same time the expansion of capitalist productive forms and shift regarding the poles of accumulation created new forms of antagonism. Especially China managed not only to expand its domestic economy but also to play an increasingly important role in the global economy, not only as the leading force in manufacturing or as attracting foreign investments but also as a major investor abroad. The rhetoric notwithstanding, the ‘one belt one road’ strategy indeed points towards China claiming an increased role in the internationalization of capital, also expressed in the fact that the Chinese leadership attempts to present itself as the leading force in favour of a globalization based on investment and not just financial transactions. At the same time the emerging alliance with Russia, which not only has advanced military capabilities but also an important productive and high technology base, suggests an attempt indeed to create an alternative pole in the global system. What is important is that this new model attempts to also have some form of ‘hegemonic projection’. The combination of neoliberalism with increased state intervention, the attempt towards a more ‘paternalistic’ approach to social inequality along with a more authoritarian version of a strong state, plus a more classical approach to international relations as balance of force and cooperation can indeed be considered a different hegemonic project, one that can have a certain appeal.

The response to this by the United States has been a preemptive attempt towards military confrontation, by means of attempting to turn regional crisis into forms of pressure towards Russia and China. From Ukraine and Syria to North Korea and the renewed attempt at aggression towards Iran, this has taken many forms in the past years with differing degrees of success (for example the Syria crisis ended up in a situation of increased Russian presence as an integral aspect of the attempt to solve the crisis). It is interesting that this strategy, which in certain aspects has the support of some of the leading ‘western’ formations — although not all of them (see for example European governments feeling uncomfortable with increased sanctions against Russia given the energy dependency of Western Europe) — in a certain way represents an element of continuity regarding US administrations (see for

example the fact how Trump was forced to distance himself from advisors and senior staff that had opted for a different strategy).

At the same time we are witnessing the deep crisis of European Integration, which also leads to the inability of the EU to play a leading role.<sup>[7]</sup> The crisis of European Integration is multifold. On the one hand we face the same problem as in the US of an inability to attain increases in productivity that would enable increased and sustainable profitability. The economic, institutional and financial architecture of the Euro as a single currency has exacerbated both regional differences but also indebtedness. Although designed as the most aggressive use of the ceding of sovereignty as a means to enhance capitalist restructuring it also led to increased divergences in competitiveness which in their turn also created conditions for increased private and public debt. Moreover, as a result of the German dominance in the EU combined with reluctance of German capital and the German political system to even think about redistributive policies or even some form of mutualisation of the debt (e.g. Euro-bonds), the tendency has been mainly towards automatic 'penal' mechanisms and even more austerity instead of a coordination of policies. One might say that Germany has been dominant but not hegemonic. At the same time the political crisis in Europe also comes as a result of an increased authoritarian, disciplinary turn, exemplified in the unprecedented social and political violence unleashed upon Greek society.<sup>[8]</sup> All this creates conditions towards an intensified crisis of representation, especially since what is at stake in Europe is not just "austerity" but a much more profound erosion of whatever aspects of the 'European Social Model' were still in place. The emergence of coalition governments or of new political hybrids such as the "movement of Emmanuel Macron" are evidence of this deeper crisis. At the same time the increased turn of countries that became part of the EU as part of the enlargement process, especially in Eastern Europe, towards a much more authoritarian and racist politics is also an element stressing the extent of the political crisis at traversing European integration.

All this points towards a period of transition and a period of increased conflict and antagonism within the imperialist chain. It is not the end of globalization, but rather a period of a more conflictual form of capitalist internationalization, a period in which it is open what hegemonic relations will emerge.

It is in light of the above tendencies that we can see the re-emergence of nationalist rhetoric and also of certain forms of the Far-Right. Especially the Far-Right usually manages to gain the political space left open by the combination of the crisis of systemic political forces and the inability or inexistence of radical left forces that could represent and at the same time transform growing sentiments of resentment from the part of the subaltern classes. At the same time, it is obvious that most far-right formations do not actually challenge the basic premises of both the dominant regime of accumulation and the core of the process of the internationalization of capital. In this sense, I would not present contemporary politics as a return of isolationism. We are still living in a world of increased interdependency, yet this is becoming a contested terrain. Moreover, as far as institutional racism and the politics of

increased barriers to migrants and refugees are concerned, it was the political mainstream that initiated a reactionary policy of border fences, 'discouraging' of migrants and refugees to arrive, and anti-migrant and anti-refugee policies all over Europe. This has been the hard reality of Fortress Europe.

The forms that the conflict in the imperialist chain will take along with the form of a new balance of forces or a new hierarchy, are not easy to discern. At the same time, one cannot rule out the possibility that in the end this struggle for hegemony in the imperialist chain will take a more open or even violent form, as it has been the case in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with two world wars! For the time being it seems that this conflict mainly fuels the tension and the violence in peripheral conflicts and the various forms of 'war by proxy' between opposing blocks.

I believe that in such a conjuncture anti-imperialism acquires a new meaning. First of all the very fact of a world with more conflicts is also a world with more ruptures and more openings which means that it is possible to suggest a strategy of de-linking from imperialist networks, on the economic, political and ideological level. However, this approach does not suggest simply taking advantage of cleavages in the sense of an attachment to one or the other pole in the international system. Opposing increased US aggression against Russia and to a certain degree China should not lead to thinking of Russia or China as potentially 'progressive' allies. Nor does it simply point towards the emergence of a different 'foreign policy'. Rather it points to the direction of the possibility of a broad alliance of the subaltern classes becoming hegemonic in a 'weak link of the chain' and initiating a process of profound social change and transformation which would also include a different approach to foreign relations and a new internationalism. The centrality of the de-linking is not linked to some form of isolationist utopia but to the fact that any process of social change must reduce its exposure to the pervasive influence of internationalized capitalism and the ways that competitive pressure induces the reproduction of capitalist social relations.

In this sense, any process of radical change today is in a certain sense a form of reclaiming of sovereignty. However, as always with questions of sovereignty the crucial question has to do with the subject of sovereignty, the subject that exercises sovereignty or the collective subjective of which sovereignty is exercised. To play a little with words I would like to suggest that we do not need some form of national sovereignty; rather we need to re-invent popular sovereignty.

There are two important points to be made here. The first one is whether such an approach towards an anti-imperialist de-linking runs the danger of nationalism. To take an example in the debates in the European Left regarding the question of the Euro and the European Union in general, advocates of a strategy of rupture and exit have often been accused of having the same position as the populist far-right. I believe that such criticisms make two mistakes. On the one hand they do not see that capitalist internationalisation is in fact the 'nationalism' of capital, in the sense that the European Integration is a class project of the European

bourgeoisies aiming at strengthening capitalist power and hegemony. Any anticapitalist strategy must necessarily include some form of rupture with these processes. There can be no socialism under the supervision of the European Central Bank and the European Commission. On the other hand, they underestimate the possibility that the demand for sovereignty can be articulated in a progressive, democratic, radically emancipatory fashion representing a broad alliance of the subaltern classes against not just the European Union but also capitalists. Such an alliance also makes possible to rethink internationalism. I do not think that it is possible to conceive of internationalism in the form – to take again the example of the European Union – of a pan-European movement that could coordinate movements of the subaltern classes in 27 different countries, with different languages, traditions, histories of struggle and relations of force. In contrast, I think that it is more probable to see the possibility of a sequence of ruptures, based upon the uneven development of class struggles. In such a sequence each rupture will induce destabilizing tendencies in other social formations along with offering examples of successful struggles. This can be the basis of a new internationalism. A movement reclaiming democracy and popular sovereignty is a movement that can more easily opt on ‘foreign relations’ based upon solidarity and cooperation instead of antagonism. States that have reclaimed sovereignty by means of movements that challenge imperialism but also capitalist social relations are more likely to find new forms of cooperation.

This reclaiming of sovereignty cannot be conceived in terms of a ‘national economic – capitalist– development’. Rather it would be a process of intensified class struggle around the possibility of a transition program that would represent a radical alternative in an anticapitalist direction. Processes of integration, such the European Union, have pervasive effects upon national economies and the forms of accumulation. ‘National’ bourgeoisies become attached to the processes of integration and the linkages with global capital. Consequently, it is no longer possible to think in terms of segments of capital supporting some form of reclaiming sovereignty. Even in those cases in which we saw fractions of capital supporting some form of rupture (such as Britain or Italy) these are internationalised fractions that feel that they could compete in the international plane better outside the contours of European Integration. In a country like Greece, where the measures imposed by the EU, the IMF and the ECB led to an economic depression without precedent,<sup>[9]</sup> the forces of capital remained loyal to the euro and insisted on Greece remaining inside the Eurozone.

The other important point concerns the very subject of sovereignty. This cannot be conceived in terms of the nation. It is here that the notion of the people acquires a new importance. In such an approach the people is not a discursive construction or a signifier waiting to be articulated as part of the antagonism of discourses as Laclau and the neo-populist current have suggested.<sup>[10]</sup> Instead, we should point towards a class-based analysis, which makes the people “a concept for strategy” as Poulantzas has suggested.<sup>[11]</sup> In this reading, ‘the people’ refers to a potential alliance of the subaltern classes under the hegemony of the working class, the ensemble of all those that are obliged, one way or the other, to sell their labour power in order to make ends meet. It is here that the question of a post-national and post-

colonial conception of the people acquires its significance. From refugee flows to mass migration, it is impossible to find societies where the subalterns have the same 'national origin'. Moreover, racism and what can only be termed as neo-colonialism create new divisions and new forms of increased exploitation and oppression among the subalterns. A post-national and post-colonial conception of the people as the ensemble of all those who live at the same state territory and share the same conditions of exploitation and oppression and also the same needs, aspirations and struggle, can help overcoming these divisions. This points to something more complex than the formation of the people by means of a process of signification that creates both a common identity and an opposition to a common 'enemy', however important such aspects for this re-emergence of the people as the collective agent of transformation and emancipation. When dealing with the particular problems posed by the need to create new forms of popular unity between the different segments of the subaltern classes and groups, divided as they are by ethnic or religious lines, but also by the institutional division between citizens and migrants and also undocumented migrants, more important than the common 'cultural referents' are the collective practices, demands, strategies, re-writings of histories, knowledges of each other, and –above all– common aspirations, that can indeed induce the common identification as people. This process also requires concrete struggles for the institutional forms that enable this convergence, especially full social and political rights, but also the forms of political organizing and mass political intellectuality that link this common condition to common hegemonic projects of transformation and emancipation and help the articulation of common struggles and alliances, in sum what Gramsci tried to define as the 'Modern Prince', the political form of a modern United Front. In this sense, following Deleuze we are talking about a people that is missing, a people that has to be produced, a people-to-come, '[n]ot the myth of a past people, but the story-telling of the people to come. The speech-act must create itself as a foreign language in a dominant language, precisely in order to express an impossibility of living under domination.'<sup>[12]</sup>

It is in light of the above that Antonio Gramsci's notion of the historical bloc can be useful in any attempt to rethink such questions. For Gramsci the historical bloc,<sup>[13]</sup> a complex conceptual elaboration that refers to the relation between structure and superstructures, is not simply a reference to the combination between an alliance of the subaltern classes, a transition program of social transformation and new forms of organization and political practice.<sup>[14]</sup> In such a perspective, the question of sovereignty as a part of a radical and emancipatory perspective requires exactly the formation of a new historical bloc, in the sense of a process of transformation and an alternative narrative for societies. In this sense, there is a dialectical correlation between anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism. The question of sovereignty becomes a stake in the class struggle, and only a socialist perspective can indeed point towards reclaiming popular sovereignty and reclaiming democracy. It is exactly the emergence of a new historical bloc that can actually give a different meaning to sovereignty, linking it to social transformation and emancipation, basing it upon a strategy to actually fight racism and neocolonialism and transforming into a form of a potentially



revolutionary 'general will', representing the democratic instance that is at the heart of communism as a material tendency.

*To conclude: a new anti-imperialism is today indispensable. Yet at the same time this implies the articulation of reclaiming sovereignty with crucial aspects of a contemporary socialist strategy and a project of profound social transformation. All these require a rethinking of the very notion of the people as the collective subject of this reclaimed form of popular sovereignty but also of a process of emancipation.*

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[1] For a critique of the notion of globalization see Sakellaropoulos 2009.

[2] On this approach see Poulantzas 1975.

[3] As Sotiropoulos, Milios and Lapatsioras point out, “if a capitalist country has entered into the phase of developed or developing capitalism, the route of exposure to international competition is the most appropriate strategy for organizing bourgeois power: *as a model for the continuing reorganization of labor and the elimination of non-competitive individual capitals to the benefit of overall social capital.*” (Sotiropoulos *et al.* 2013, p. 190)

[4] For an extended version of this argument see Sakellaropoulos and Sotiris 2015.

[5] On this see Sakellaropoulos and Sotiris 2008.

[6] On this see Sakellaropoulos and Sotiris 2008.

[7] On the crisis of the Eurozone see Lapavitsas *et al.* 2012 and Durand (ed.) 2013.

[8] On this see Sotiris 2017.

[9] On this see Sakellaropoulos and Sotiris 2014.

[10] See Laclau 2005 and Toscano 2015.

[11] ‘The articulation of the structural determination of classes and of class positions within a social formation, the locus of existence of conjunctures, requires particular concepts. I shall call these *concepts of strategy*, embracing in particular such phenomena as class polarization and class alliance. Among these, on the side of the dominant classes, is the concept of the ‘power bloc’, designating a specific alliance of dominant classes and fractions; also, on the side of the dominated classes, the concept of the ‘people’, designating a specific alliance of these classes and fractions.’ Poulantzas 1975, p. 24.

[12] Deleuze 1989, p. 223.

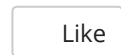
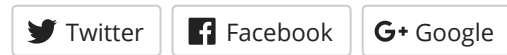
[13] ‘If the relationship between intellectuals and people-nation, between the leaders and the led, the rulers and the ruled, is provided by an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion

becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive), then and only then is the relationship one of representation. Only then can there take place an exchange of individual elements between the rulers and ruled, leaders [*dirigenti*] and led, and can the shared life be realised which alone is a social force with the creation of the “historical bloc” (Gramsci 1975, pp. 1505-1506; Gramsci 1971, p. 418 [Q11, §67])

[14] On this see Sotiris 2013 and Sotiris 2017.

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