

Covid-19 calls the world to socialism



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By Charles McKelvey

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Many analysts of the Left see the Covid-19 pandemic as demonstrating the failure of neoliberalism as a societal model. Atilio Borón, for example, a well-known Argentinian intellectual, has written that “the first fatal victim of the Covid-19 pandemic was the neoliberal version of capitalism.” Similarly, the prominent North America intellectual Noam Chomsky has written that “The first lesson [of the pandemic] is that we are facing the massive and colossal failure of the neoliberal version of capitalism. If we do not learn that, the next time that something similar happens, it will be worse.” He observes that scientists knew following the SARS epidemic of 2003 that other pandemics would occur, probably of the coronavirus variety. It would have been possible to prepare, but it was not done. The pharmaceutical companies, Chomsky notes, are superrich, and they had the resources to prepare for a possible catastrophe, but they did not do it, because such preparations are not profitable. At the same time, states could not prepare, because neoliberalism had taken away the capacity of the state to act.

Like Boron and Chomsky, the Cuban intellectual Abel Prieto sees the Covid-19 pandemic as exposing the barbarity of neoliberalism. He writes, "All the sensible analysts coincide in saying that the coronavirus has brusquely withdrawn the veil of the supposed neoliberal bonanza in order to discover the barbarity and the abyss of injustice and inequality. The pandemic has functioned as a revealing instrument that crudely uncovers, unmask, and brings us face-to-face with reality." Prieto, however, sees barbarity not only in the neoliberal version of capitalism, but in capitalism itself. He declares, "Today the inhumane nature of capitalism and its version most obscene, neoliberalism, has been exposed by the coronavirus. Its Satanic face is fully visible, without mask or makeup. Very deep cracks have been opened in the illusions fabricated by the machinery of cultural and informational domination. Fidel repeated many times that capitalism and neoliberalism are leading the entire world to genocide."

Cuban scholars tend to see the Covid-19 pandemic as exposing the false assumptions and claims of not only neoliberalism, but also capitalism; and to see neoliberalism as the final, most barbaric phase of capitalism. Karima Oliva Bello asks, what structures of power are responsible for the humanitarian crisis? Capitalism, she responds, is responsible for the precariousness of the systems of public health. Accordingly, "It is necessary to defend in every possible space the alternative counterhegemony that the construction of socialism represents," and to explain the alternative concept of "the defense of the common good through socialism." Similarly, Carlos Luque, in an editorial entitled "Only socialism saves," maintains that today the most wise and the most committed to truth understand that the cause of the painful world scenario of an unstoppable pandemic is the capitalist economic system, the globalization of commercial interests, and the avarice of the elites that demand austerity of the peoples, claiming that the alternatives are impossible. The only immune system capable of neutralizing the pandemic is the socialist civilizing revolution, which now can be understood by the people, inasmuch as the notion of the superiority of private property and the market to respond to human needs is now exposed as a myth and a lie."

Luque sees Cuba as exemplifying the socialist civilizational project, as does his compatriot Marina Menéndez, who writes that Cuba, in its "confrontation of the pandemic is placing two models face-to-face, showing their limitations and their possibilities. One, ruled by capital and the market at the cost of non-existent social policies, with States that leave all in the hands of the owners of property; and another, with the capacity of the State to act, as a result of its conserving the management of resources in its hands, with human beings placed at the center."

But the pandemic's exposure of neoliberalism and capitalism as lies is not intuitively evident to the people. It must be explained to the people. Abel Prieto cites Lenin, who said that, "capitalism will not fall if there do not exist the social and political forces to make it fall." This implies the task to form a vanguard political party that has the duty to lead the people to the taking of political power from the hands of those whose agenda is to represent the interests of the moneyed classes who finance their electoral campaigns, to the detriment of the needs of nations and peoples.

There is a certain reticence among Cuban intellectuals with respect to their counterparts from the North. The role of intellectuals is to contribute to the construction of a just and democratic nation, a task that pertains primarily to their particular nation. You will not find Cuban intellectuals lifting up direct appeals to intellectuals of the North, calling them to raise the banner of socialism in their own lands. There is a respectful appreciation that intellectuals must find the discourse and political strategies appropriate for and adapted to the ideological conditions of their own nations. The words of a Noam Chomsky are reproduced in Cuba, in recognition of his influence in the North and of the validity and the excellence of his critique of neoliberalism, even if he does not arrive to promote and defend socialism. And his comments to the effect that Cuba is "the only country that has demonstrated genuine internationalism" is cited with appreciation and national pride. But you will not find Cuban intellectuals issuing a direct call to the North embrace the cause of socialism.

The call to socialism, not issued directly to the North by Cuban intellectuals, is made by the pandemic, combined with the example of Cuban scholars, who are interpreting the pandemic as signaling the death of capitalism. And here a limitation of intellectuals of the North can be found, rooted in hidden assumptions. There is a question that they do not ask. Namely, what is the foundation of the Cuban practice of solidarity or the Cuban development of a comprehensive, universal system of health? The question can be put it a different way. Is Cuba, in its example, indicating the necessary road for humanity? Is China? Is Nicaragua? Is Venezuela? Was Bolivia?

There is not, among intellectuals of the North, a sustained personal encounter with the socialist projects of the Third World plus China, seeking to understand the insights that have emerged from their experiences, and appropriating those insights, adapting them to the different conditions of the North.

Such a road of encounter with the Third World would lead to an awareness not only of the limitations of neoliberalism, but also of social democracy, the previous manifestation of capitalism. It would lead to a fuller understanding of capitalism, and to awareness that the global power elite turned to neoliberalism precisely because it was unable to respond to the contradictions of the capitalist world-economy in its social democratic stage. And that the limitations of neoliberalism are the culmination of the contradictions of capitalism itself; that the structural weakness of neoliberalism exposes the limitations of capitalism itself. The way of encounter would lead to appreciation that there cannot be a capitalism that responds to human needs, that the necessary road for humanity is the socialist road, and that socialist road is being taken in theory and practice by peoples who offer examples that we have the duty to carefully observe.

We have been speaking here of the understanding of the intellectuals, and the role of the intellectual, and the cultural limitations of intellectuals of the North. But what of the people? The leap of faith from the rejection of neoliberalism to the banner of socialism is being made by a not insignificant proportion of the peoples of the North, but without guidance, the guidance and direction that has to be provided by intellectuals. Perhaps this situation is behind Prieto's reminding us of Lenin, that "capitalism will not fall if there do not exist the social and political forces to make it fall."

The road toward socialism is not intuitively obvious to the people. It must be explained to the people. And who can explain it, other than those whose life-commitment to truth has led them to understanding, and whose attention to the cry of the poor and the oppressed has led them to seek a collective political solution to an unjust world?

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