

Keynote Abstracts
REVOLUTIONS CONFERENCE 2017

Julia Buxton

Venezuela: Was Another World Possible?

Under late President Hugo Chávez, Venezuela appeared to undergo a process of democratically legitimized radical transformation, in which the repressive and the ideological state apparatuses appeared to be overthrown in line with the progressive and participatory ambitions of Chávez's 'Bolivarian Revolution'. Through dramatic – and frequently conflictual presidential initiatives, the political, economic and cultural power was redistributed in a society that had been characterized by embedded class, gendered and racial inequalities. In the international realm, 'Bolivarianism' saw Venezuela's foreign relations pivot away from historically close bilateralism with the US and toward the construction of a multipolar world order of South-South ties, regional integration, the construction of collaborative regional blocs (ALBA, Petrocaribe) and resistance to free trade integration schemas and external aggression of sovereign states. This was underpinned by an anti-imperialist critique of the US role in the hemisphere and globally, and it was framed by a nationalist narrative of 'Bolivarianism' that drew on the aims and ideals of independence leader Simón Bolívar. Amid a regional 'Pink Tide' that saw progressive centre left governments assume power in other Latin American countries including Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador and Argentina in the 2000s, Venezuela sat at the helm of political and ideological changes that appeared to make violently suppressed ambitions of revolutionary change on the continent appear possible.

By Chávez's third term (2006-2012) dysfunction and contradiction in the ideological, institutional and organizational realms became evident, and as the government evolved its ideological and policy frame toward a loosely articulated model of 'Socialism of the Twenty First Century'. Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro (2013-), inherited unaddressed legacies of corruption, social violence and insecurity, a crippling dependence on oil export revenues, and unresolved ideological tensions between models of state or worker management, and between civilian and military elements of the ruling PSUV (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela) and government. This was in the context of a reversal of the political fortunes of the left on the continent and Venezuela's growing isolation.

However, any assessment must be provisional. The period of Chavismo did bring transformation – most particularly in relation to the participation of previously excluded sectors. At the same time, one must question the revolutionary character of Bolivarianism by highlighting the continuity of its structures with pre-Chávez historical phases, discussing and the new patterns of exclusion that developed, and its economic failures. Keeping all this in the balance, therefore, one must also wonder whether it is possible to be too pessimistic by assuming that all we can now expect is increasing regression and repression in defence of inchoate aims and objectives. Where is the hope for the future in the dramatic developments of the last two decades.

Xiaoqin Ding

The Worldwide and Historical Significance of the Russian Revolutions and the Chinese Revolution: A Reflection on the Scientific Socialism in the 21st Century

By analyzing the contradictions of capitalist society, Marx and Engels developed the theory of Scientific Socialism and expounded the basic framework of the new social system, which would replace capitalism. Lenin and other Russian revolutionaries combined Marxist theories with the specific situation of Russia, which led to the great victory of the October Revolution. In accordance with the fundamental principles of the Scientific Socialism, they established the socialist system for the first time in the world, which had a profound influence on the international socialist movement. Under the enlightenment of the Russian revolutions, the Communist Party of China adhered to the guidance of Marxism and found its road for revolution, construction and reform in China according to the Chinese conditions, which has consolidated, enriched and developed the Scientific Socialism in the practice of the socialism with Chinese characteristics. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international socialist movement came to a low ebb. However, contrary to many views prevalent in the West, China did not turn capitalist. Rather, it remained firmly committed to the road of the socialism with Chinese characteristics and, building on the foundations laid down during the Mao period, has stood up as an independent country, become a wealthy and powerful country under the great leadership of the Communist Party of China. China's economic and political systems have been continuously perfected, people's living standard improved, and the nation's international status enhanced. The positive significance of the socialism with Chinese characteristics has been acknowledged worldwide. Chinese road has provided practical experience for the modernization of developing countries and has provided significant reference for the revival of the Scientific Socialism in the 21st century.

Ruslan Dzarasov

Colours of a Revolution: Post-Communist Society, Global Capitalism and the Ukraine Crisis

Russian Revolution is a product of the law of Uneven and Combined Development (UCD). It reflects domination of the core capitalist countries over the periphery of the world capitalism. Lenin's theory of "overgrowth of a bourgeois-democratic revolution into the socialist one" and Trotsky's theory of a "permanent revolution" reflect the fact that in conditions of periphery capitalism, bourgeois-democratic transformation is inevitably thwarted, and society is compelled to move to changes, socialist in their character. Due to lack of alternative victorious socialist revolutions and elimination of the Bolshevik oppositions in the USSR, degeneration of the Soviet society had led to restoration of capitalism. As a result, all Post-Soviet societies moved to dependent development with certain important differences: Ukraine demonstrates classical features of a periphery, while Russia is closer to the semi-peripheral status.

Exploitation of labour determines core-periphery relations of capitalism during all its history. It shaped modern global capitalism and caused its deep crisis. Exacerbation of international conflicts became one of the most important corollaries of this crisis. From standpoint of survival of the core, semi-periphery of modern capitalism should play an auxiliary role imposing discipline on the periphery and compelling it to increase its services to the core. However, the pre-crisis enormous industrial development allowed semi-periphery to accumulate great economic strength partially converted in growth of military and political

power. Ukraine crisis was provoked by the West as a part of its strategy to strengthen its control over periphery.

‘Maidan’ protest as a version of ‘Coloured Revolution’ inspired and directed by the West exploited justified and essentially democratic protest of Ukrainian society against what is in fact nothing else than intrinsic features of a periphery capitalism. This bourgeois-democratic protest naturally failed to reach its proclaimed aims, facilitating violent takeover of power in Kiev by pro-Western and anti-Russian nationalistic forces. The new regime only entrenched peripheral nature of Ukrainian society. However, the abortive bourgeois-democratic movement sparked a genuine popular uprising in the South-East of the country. Being national-liberational in its immediate aims, it was fraught with socialist sentiments. However, its overgrowth in a genuine socialist movement was prevented by Russian ruling class.

Thus, the Law of UCD and the theory of a ‘Permanent revolution’ tell more about Ukraine crisis than class vision from the perspective of the ‘New Cold War’ or dogmatic ‘Two Imperialisms’ approach.

Peter Kulchyski

Bush/Revolution: Theses on Indigenous Challenges to Dominant Structures

Could a revolution happen un-noticed by the global left? What if, in the remaining lands of gathering and hunting peoples, a forceful challenge to the political economy of contemporary social hierarchy were being staged? What if that challenge had broader implications by resisting the exploitation of extractive resources demanded by the contemporary moment of capital accumulation? Influenced by and deploying the rhetorical strategy of Walter Benjamin in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ – but also drawing upon approaches to revolution in the work of British historians including Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, and E.P. Thompson, as well as anthropologist Eric Wolfe and a political philosophy tradition from Hegel and Marx to Lenin and Luxemburg -- this paper will argue that, from Pimicikamak in northern Manitoba to Mapuche in Chile, the social relations and political activism of bush people may have an oversized role to play in challenging the existing global structures of capitalist and patriarchal hierarchy.

Kees van der Pijl

From Permanent Revolution to Permanent Counterrevolution

The leaders of the Russian Revolution famously saw it as a permanent revolution—a social explosion of the contradictions of a pre-bourgeois society requiring it to go beyond democratic revolution towards socialism, preferably aided by simultaneous socialist transformation in Western Europe, or be defeated. Within a decade, not only were these hopes thwarted, a revolution from above transformed the USSR into a contender state confronting the capitalist West. By perfecting the mechanisms of accelerated modernization, mass mobilization and, it must be said, repression, the Soviet Union surpassed the previous, capitalist, contender efforts of France, Prussia-Germany, or Japan and became the model that inspired anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements from the 1920s to the 1970s as they sought to create equitable and productive societies.

However, the half-decade following 1917 proved anything but ‘the epoch of the transition from capitalism to socialism’, as Soviet doctrine had it. For, ever since the working class emerged as an autonomous political force in 1848, counterrevolution has, so far at least,

overdetermined revolution. We cannot understand the history of the past century cannot unless the notion of permanent revolution is complemented by that of *permanent counterrevolution* in a larger political, and geopolitical, dialectic. Capitalist ruling classes, beginning with Napoleon III and Bismarck, and by 1914, including all the ruling classes of Europe, resorted to war to mobilise their nations against others and decimate the labour movement, later even taking the form of fascism.

Furthermore, after its defeat in 1945, the US took over from Britain the role of ‘the rock on which the counterrevolution will build its church’ (Marx). The continuation of wars, coups and counterrevolution against the logic, weak but not extinguished, of permanent revolution worldwide has been the morbidly spectacular result. As long as the USSR and its bloc and allies held out, even in their stunted forms as state-socialist contenders, permanent counterrevolution was compelled to seek compromises at home and abroad. Since then, predatory forms of capitalist enrichment have gained the upper hand in the West but it appears capable of organizing little more than ecological exhaustion, proliferating violence and capitalism’s terminal decline. The Soviet legacy survives today not only in the contender posture being half-heartedly replicated by the BRICS countries and other emerging economies but also in historic achievements such as the defeat of Nazism in Europe and it is not without relevance in the great questions of social transformation that have become so urgent.