

Hope in Abandonment: Cuba, Detroit, and Earth-Scientific Socialism

By Paul Street, October 9, 2015

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In their historic 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, the great radical thinkers Karl Marx and Frederick Engels offered a curious dialectical celebration of rapacious industrial capitalism. To be sure, Marx and Engels had no illusions about the evil of that system. They observed that “the bourgeoisie” (the capitalist investors and manufacturers of the mid-19th century) undertook “the subjection of Nature’s forces to man” not to benefit humanity but to selfishly accumulate profits in accord with their soulless reduction of

“personal worth” to “exchange value.” The venal capitalists “left remaining no other nexus between man and man than callous ‘cash payment,’ ...drown[ing society and culture] ...in the icy water of egotistical calculation.” For economic exploitation “veiled” under feudalism “by religious and political illusions,” the founders of modern communism wrote, the bourgeois system “substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation...In place of the numerous infeasible chartered freedoms,” the profits system “set up that single unconscionable freedom – Free Trade.”

There was no freedom for working people behind and beyond factory walls, Marx and Engels knew. “As privates of the industrial army,” they wrote, wage-earners were “placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants. Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overlooker, and, above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself. The more openly this despotism proclaims gain to be its end and aim, the more petty, the more hateful and the more embittering it is.”

Still, the originators of “scientific socialism” were cheered by the emergence of a vast industrial laboring class toiling in the factories, shipyards, mines and mills that capitalism created. Competitively compelled to “constantly revolutioniz[e] the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production,” the *Manifesto* argued, capitalists generated their own gravediggers – the “embitter[ed]” proletariat, the natural agent of socialist and communist revolution. “Not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself [ultimately liberating forces of production too great to be channeled into bourgeois confines in Marx’s analysis]; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons — the modern working class – the proletarians.”

The Midwife of Socialism as Angle of Death

While Engels’ and above all Marx’s radical critique and analysis of capitalism remains

remarkably relevant in the current era, subsequent history has not been terribly kind to their dialectical romance with industrial capitalism or to their faith in the eventual emancipating power of modern industry. Socialism on Marx's radical-democratic model – or on any other kind – has not emerged out of working class movements in any of the most “advanced” industrial-capitalist nations of the world – in England, on the European continent, Japan, China, or in the United States. The industrial working class has joined and formed recurrent remarkable social and political movements in different times and places but it has not proved revolutionary in the sense anticipated with “scientific” certainty by the young Marx and Engels. The classic zones of bourgeois and industrial revolution have remained captive to capital and bourgeois rule, thanks in no small part to their privileged position atop the world capitalist and imperial state system.

Socialism of a kind very different from the radical and democratic sort embraced by Marx emerged during the last century not in the heartlands of capitalism, industrialism, and bourgeois revolution but in the mostly pre-industrialized, pre-capitalist, peasant-based, and autocratic nations of Russia and China. In the Soviet Union and empire, an authoritarian form of state socialism undertook the work of industrialization, reproducing Western capitalism's class-based corporate and top-down division and command of labor though (no small differences) without capitalists and private corporate for-profit ownership of leading economic institutions and with the state in charge of the economy and the provision of basic social goods.

At the same time, modern mass-production/mass-consumer industrialism has proven itself less the midwife of socialism (democratic or otherwise) than a cancerous threat to life on Earth. The two great industrial and superpower rivals of the second half of the 20th century – the state-capitalist United States and the bureaucratic-collectivist and state-socialist Soviet Union – both engaged in colossal assaults on livable ecology. The leading environment-and health-mauler has by far and away been the western, U.S.-led bourgeois system of mass consumption and built-in obsolescence, always far more technologically “productive” (and destructive) than the now defunct Soviet system. This planet-wrecking socioeconomic regime has expanded its reach like never before across the entire planet in the neoliberal and post-Cold War age. Still, the vanguard/command model of industrial state socialism that prevailed in Stalinist Russia and the Soviet empire for many decades also engaged in significant fossil-fueled ecological criminality to advance its own model of Nature-attacking hyper-accumulation. Mao's “communist” revolution ended up as the state-command dispossession, assembler, and discipliner of a giant industrial proletariat created for monumental world-capitalist exploitation and eco-cidal, fossil-fueled mass production directed largely by giant multinational US and other Western corporations in China's vast industrial frontier (the world's leading zone of capitalist surplus value creation and accumulation since the 1980s.)

Together, with Western and Japanese state capitalism far in the lead, the great industrial powers of the last century and the current have brought humanity to the precipice of true environmental catastrophe courtesy of the industrial Greenhouse Effect (discovered by French and British physicists during Marx's lifetime). Earth scientists today warn with increasing urgency and an army of terrible data that the modern, carbon-burning industrial civilization that Marx and Engels embraced in their own dialectical way in the mid-19th century (albeit **long before the full “Anthropocene”-defining environmental ravages of capital were remotely evident**) now raises the very real specter of human extinction. It is a curious climatological version of what *The Communist Manifesto* said befell societies where necessary revolutions failed to occur: “the common ruin of the contending classes.” (One plausible thesis holds that the remarkable growth

and productivity dividend that the heedless drilling and burning of oil, gas, and coal afforded the West in the last two centuries has been a critical factor permitting capital to avoid the working class revolution that the two young Communists prophesized.)

Teeming With Life

Hope for survival – for that is what is at stake – seems to reside in spaces abandoned by the great industrial capitalist and socialist powers of the last century. In a recent *Counterpunch* essay, journalist **Gary Leech** recounts how the island nation of Cuba has “redefined socialism” in the wake of the decline of its former protector the Soviet Union. Over the past two decades, Leech shows, Cuba has moved towards a more participatory system that also happens to be an outstanding model of environmentally sustainable and healthy, permaculturalist economics:

“In the 1980s, Cuba more closely reflected the state socialist model that ultimately failed in the Soviet Union....But with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the socialist trading bloc, Cuba had to become more creative if it was to survive both literally and figuratively as an island of socialism in an ocean of capitalism. And it was the creative survival strategies that emerged during the 1990s that have helped to redefine socialism in Cuba today....The collapse of the Soviet Union, in conjunction with a corresponding tightening of the five-decades-long US blockade, meant that Cuba could no longer import sufficient food or oil. The country responded to the shortage of petroleum-based pesticides and fertilizers by becoming the world’s leader in organic agriculture. It responded to the shortage of fuel by becoming a leader in urban agriculture to diminish the need to transport food great distances to markets. As a result, more than 80 percent of the country’s agricultural production is now organic... [and produced by] smaller worker-owned cooperatives. The new cooperatives not only increased production, they also constituted a shift away from state socialism by empowering workers who previously had little or no voice in the running of their workplaces....This emerging worker democracy through cooperatives not only existed in agricultural production, it also occurred in the selling of products...”

“The shift to a more ecologically sustainable agricultural production has resulted in healthy organic food being the most convenient and inexpensive food available to Cubans. Because of the US blockade, processed foods are more expensive and not readily available. This reality stands in stark contrast to that in wealthy capitalist nations such as the United States and Canada where heavily-subsidized agri-businesses flood the market with cheap, unhealthy processed foods while organic alternatives are expensive and more difficult to obtain. The consequence in the United States is high levels of obesity, diabetes and heart disease.”

Thanks in no small part to these remarkable innovations on an island abandoned by 20th century Soviet industrial socialism and embargoed by US-led 20th and 21st century state capitalism, Cuba stands out among all nations (rich and poor) in a critical way. The makers of the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) have found that Cuba is the only country on the planet to combine a standard of living and quality of life consistent with “high human development” with a globally sustainable carbon footprint. A report by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) includes a graph that shows two features for the nations of the world: the HDI (including measures of life expectancy, poverty, literacy, health care, and the like) and “ecological footprint” – the energy and resources consumed per person in each country. Only Cuba received a passing grade in both areas.

As the **University of British Columbia** notes,

“In 2006, the WWF declared Cuba to be the only sustainable nation based on ecological footprint and human development index. The majority of food grown in Cuba is produced without chemicals. Good bugs fight bad bugs in the fields. Their soils – like their communities – are teeming with life....Today, Cuba’s agricultural cooperatives provide 80 percent of the food produced in Cuba and her system of urban agriculture is a model for the world. Building on the success of her agricultural cooperatives, Cuba is now taking bold new steps to build a more cooperative, just and people-centred economy.”

Call it Earth Science-friendly socialism – or maybe even earth-scientific socialism.

Seeds of the New in the Shell of the Old

Meanwhile, up in the former industrial heartland of the North American superpower, something significantly similar has happened in Detroit – a city viciously disowned and discarded by capital in the world’s leading capitalist state. Over 20 square miles (a space nearly as big as Manhattan) of this former capital city of capitalist mass production (and of mass production unionism) now lay vacant – deserted by capital. On a recent trip to the onetime headquarters of the once dominant American auto industry – now home to concentrated and hyper-segregated mass Black poverty and joblessness on an epic scale – *teleSur English*’s **Maria Sitrin** found that “people in Detroit have been taking back their city...creating the new in the shell of the old.” Ordinary working people on the inner-city ground of capitalist abandonment have developed a health-nurturing urban farming and cooperative system that is planting the at once literal and figurative seeds of an alternative economic structure within the rotting urban residue of a profits system that turned Detroit into the ultimate Rustbelt city:

“people have been growing food in abandoned buildings, vacant lots, torn down structures and other cracks in the system. I learned... that the shell of abandoned buildings is good for keeping raised plant beds warm [and]of students – thousands of them – learning about community, health, care and cooperation in their schools through working in school gardens [and] ...of weekly fresh produce recipe swaps amongst dozens of seniors and regular neighborhood community potlucks [and that] ...one can buy carrots, tomatoes, and other fruits and vegetables outside gas station stores – organized by teens. Detroit is building the new in the cracks of the old.... Over the past ten years, as the economic crisis deepens and people’s abilities to survive are challenged even more, they are turning to one another and looking around at ways to survive. In this case, the around is on the thousands of vacant lots, often abandoned by business who have long taken the jobs elsewhere, or landowners no longer able to pay taxes or mortgages. Rather than leave the land abandoned and fallow, people have been coming together to make it productive. This is no small task, and with the cooperation of thousands of people the urban farms and gardens in Detroit produce 200 tons of produce each year. The number of urban gardens has gone from fewer than 100 before the year 2000 to over 2000 in 2015. What this means in human terms is that those people who work the gardens eat 2.5 more servings of fruits or vegetables than those who do not....These numbers are especially important considering Detroit is a ‘food desert’ meaning that there are no major food retail outlets selling fresh produce. Those smaller ones that do exist are few and far between, and the produce they have is often terrible... While there is an ever growing number of networks organized by urban farms and gardens with people teaching

others strategies for urban gardening, at the same time there are and continue to be many people who just learn themselves and teach one another in their neighborhoods.”

Socialism as the Basis for Sustainability

The synergy between Leech’s Cuba and Sitrin’s Detroit is undeniable and powerful. Faced with material, social, and political desertion (and embargo in Cuba’s case) by top-down, industrialized, and eco-cidal elites, the people themselves stepped in to craft new and healthy, environmentally sustainable bottom up strategies for survival. They have generated their own healthy, life-sustaining means of production and distribution at the most basic level – food. They have done so through methods that stand in harmonious and regenerative – rather than conflictual and extractivist – relations to the Earth we all share. Imagine.

This is not the path laid out in *The Communist Manifesto*. It’s not really about building on, or mimicking capital’s purported grand industrial triumph, understood as an ultimately welcome dialectical bridge to a world beyond exploitation, private profit, and the necessity of toil. It’s also not about the naïve bourgeois “utopian socialism” that Marx and Engels mocked in their historic document. It’s about people stepping naturally and organically outside of cancerous capitalism, in places abandoned and embargoed by capital, to engage in the hard but useful and cooperative work of building new modes of nourishing, life-upholding production and distribution from the Earthly bottom up.

There is of course an important difference between Cuba and Detroit, one that Marxists will appreciate. The Cuban example has taken place with the participation and encouragement of the Cuban government, consistent with the independent and truly radical-socialist impulses of the 1959 Cuban Revolution [1]. The Cuban permaculturalist Roberto Pérez tells Leech that Cuba laid the basis for an environmentally sustainable society “when the revolution gained sovereignty over the resources of the country, especially the land and the minerals... You cannot think about sustainability,” Perez explains, “if your resources are in the hands of a foreign country or in private hands. Even without knowing, we were creating the basis for sustainability.” This is a critical point. As the New York City-based Marxist writer **Louis Proyect** noted last May, “capitalism and capitalist politics have to be superseded if humanity and nature are to survive. Once we can eliminate the profit motive, the door is open to rational use of natural resources for the first time in human history. How we make use of such resources will naturally be informed by our understanding that reason governs the outcome and not quarterly earnings. The alternative,” Proyect reminds us, “to this is a descent into savagery, if not extinction.” (The savagery, for what it’s worth, is well underway in the U.S., home to 290 mass shootings in the first 270 days of 2015 and to a global military Empire that regularly murders innocents – most recently 22 patients and doctors at a Doctors Without Borders facility in Afghanistan – abroad on a mass scale). Ecosocialists: do not throw out the anti-capitalist baby with the industrialist bathwater!

The cooperative urban farming movement described by Sitrin in Detroit and in other zones of bourgeois, exchange value-driven capitalist abandonment across the U.S. is occurring in the urban shadows of a nation that remains captive to the world’s most powerful capitalist class and its hidden, unelected and interrelated dictatorships of money, empire, race, patriarchy, and eco-cide. Its geographic positioning, however, makes it in one sense more significant than the wonderful Cuban developments captured by Leech. Detroit, after all, rests in the belly of the

beast, the great capitalist and imperial state that continues to do the most by far to yoke the world to the deadly, exterminist, environmentally catastrophist “global treadmill” of mass production, mass consumption, and private, plutocratic accumulation. If we might turn the mass-production enthusiast **Leon Trotsky on his eco-industrial head and then set him back on his feet in the United States**, it is in this country above all where the duty of popular, permaculturalist and eco-socialist revolution is greatest and where the liberating potential of such revolution for humanity is most advanced

Paul Street’s latest book is *They Rule: The 1% v. Democracy* (Paradigm, 2014).

Endnote

[1]. Leech notes that Cuba’s shift towards a less statist and more participatory model of socialism through the formation of cooperatives has been misunderstood by U.S. media as a shift to capitalism. “Unlike in capitalist nations,” Leech explains, “Cuba has not simply laid off thousands of public sector workers and left them to fend for themselves as unemployed desperately seeking private sector jobs. The layoffs are a multi-year process and, due to the 2011 economic reforms, many workers will continue to perform the same job. For instance, in many sectors, such as stores, bars, restaurants and transportation, workers have been offered the opportunity to establish cooperatives and to take over their existing places of business....In one such case, five workers in a state-owned restaurant formed a cooperative and now lease the property from the state and run the business as their own. So while they are part of the downsizing of the public sector because they no longer work for the state, they continue to do the same job as previously. In the eyes of many, such a transition actually constitutes a strengthening of socialism rather than a shift towards capitalism because it is empowering workers who now have a meaningful voice in their workplace—something they didn’t have under state socialism and would not have under corporate capitalism...The establishment of small private enterprises constitutes a redefining of Cuban socialism because it liberates workers from the hierarchical structures of state socialism by allowing them to become their own bosses. Further evidence that allowing small businesses and cooperatives to emerge does not necessarily represent a shift to capitalism is the fact that it remains illegal to establish a corporation. Because an individual is only permitted to own one place of business, corporate chains that monopolize production and markets cannot be established so the overwhelming majority of businesses remain locally-owned and rooted in the community...What Cuba is attempting to avoid are the gross inequalities that inevitably result from monopoly corporate capitalism where workers have no meaningful voice in their daily work lives. So while many mainstream analysts in the United States view the shift to small private businesses as a move towards capitalism, such a view ignores the reality that small privately-owned businesses are not unique to capitalism, they existed in societies long before capitalist model came into existence.”

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